

AKP and the Idea of the Turkish Model (2002-14): A Longitudinal Analysis

Dr Fatima Sajjad* and Dr Umbreen Javaid**

Abstract

This article examines the evolution of the idea of the Turkish model as constructed by academics from the West, the Muslim world and Turkey during the three consecutive terms of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) rule in Turkey. It focuses on the changing political landscape of Turkey, the Middle East and the world at large during post 9/11 years and the emerging issues and debates around the idea of this model. Based on a careful selection and examination of 145 academic articles on the model published during the extended rule of AKP in Turkey (2002-14), the study illustrates that the term ‘Turkish model’ has held disparate meanings and generated diverse debates overtime. The growing political unrest, suppression and violence in and around Turkey during the third phase of AKP rule (2012-14) has significantly undermined the idea which lately held great appeal in the West as well as the Muslim world.

Key words: Turkish Model, Secularism, Islam, West, Middle East, AKP.

Introduction

Turkey, given its unique geographical location and historical progression, has remained at the centre of academic debates on Islam/West relations. The term ‘Turkish model’ frequently appeared in the academic and media discourse post 9/11, generally representing Turkey as a model modern, democratic, economically vibrant Muslim state having close ties with the West as well as the Muslim world. The idea of a modern Muslim state capable of successfully blending Muslim traditions with

* The author is Lecturer in the Department of Political Science, University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan.

** The author is Chairperson, Department of Political Science, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

Western values was appealing in the years following 9/11 as it offered the possibility of peace between apparently conflicting civilisational entities.¹

The term first appeared in Western academia during the post-Cold War days when Turkey was projected as a model state for the newly independent Central Asian Republics. The Iranian influence in the region was a cause of concern for Western policymakers who advanced the idea of the Turkish model i.e. the idea of a modern secular Muslim state having old ties with Central Asia, as an alternative to the radical Iranian model. Turkey has come a long way since that time.

The *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP; in English, Justice and Development Party) first came to power in Turkey in 2002. The political, social and economic landscape of the country has undergone a phenomenal transformation under the extended AKP rule since then. This article examines the idea of the Turkish model as represented by academics from the West and the Muslim world including Turkey through various phases of the AKP rule. It describes how the debates around this model evolved with the changing international, regional and domestic political scenario in and around Turkey.

It draws on the interpretive, constructivist paradigm of International Relations. Stephen Walt in his seminal article on International Relations identifies the distinctive features of constructivist approaches, namely their emphasis on the impact of ideas and their close attention to the prevailing discourses in society.² Fierke's identification of key themes in constructivist approaches is also relevant to this article. One theme he identifies is constructivism's emphasis on 'differences across contexts' rather than regularities across time and space. Another key theme identified is the 'attention to human agency rather than structure' and the main argument that international politics is 'a world of our making' rather than an objective reality.³

In order to examine the model's evolution, a longitudinal study of the academic discourse on the idea was conducted. A careful selection of 145 academic articles was made using quota sampling for the period 2002-14 having three sections: the West (United States and Europe); the Muslim World (Middle East, North Africa (MENA), South and South East Asia); and Turkey. Most articles selected were from scholarly journals. However,

¹ Ömer Taşpınar, "Turkey: The New Model?" in *The Islamists Are Coming: Who They Really Are*, ed. Robin Wright (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute for Peace, 2012).

² Stephen M. Walt, "International Relations: One World, Many Theories," *Foreign Policy*, no. 110, Special Edition: *Frontiers of Knowledge* (1998): 29-46.

³ K. M. Fierke, "Constructivism," in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity* 3rd ed., eds. Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 188-189.

recent events in Turkey (2012-14) were not adequately covered in scholarly journals. In order to cover these developments of the AKP rule, newspaper articles and media reports written by academics were included in the data. The extended period of the AKP rule in Turkey was divided into three phases representing three consecutive terms: 2002-07 (first term of AKP); 2008-11 (second term of AKP); and 2012-14 (third term of AKP).

The Transformation of the Turkish Model (2002-14)

This section examines each phase of AKP's rule and the relationship between text and context by first describing the global, regional and domestic political context of Turkey; and then identifying key debates amongst academics around this concept.

The First Phase (2002-07)

9/11, 2001 marks a turning point in contemporary global history. The event shaped the global political order in the following decade. Immediately after the incident, the Bush administration in the White House declared a global War on Terror. During the initial days of this war, Turkey remained allied to the Western camp. It actively participated in the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, provided logistical and intelligence support as well as its airspace for U.S. military operations in the region. The U.S. invasion of Iraq, however, did not receive the approval of the Turkish Parliament and people. According to a survey, more than 90 per cent of Turkish citizens disapproved of the U.S. invasion. This disapproval was in line with strong opposition of the war from key European Union (EU) members like France and Germany.⁴ A striking feature of the post- 9/11 global context was the rift between the U.S. and Europe over ways to combat terrorism. The EU favoured a multilateral approach, while United States insisted on a unilateral and assertive approach. This division created a difficult situation for Turkey.⁵

Despite refusal to support the war in Iraq and partial deterioration of its relations with the U.S., Turkey remained significant for America's strategic concerns in the post 9/11 environment. It is argued that 9/11 added a new dimension to Turkey's global significance which had declined since the end of the Cold War. Turkey, according to Onis, is useful for U.S.

⁴ Ozlem Kayhan and Dan Lindley, "The Iraq War and the Troubled U.S.–Turkish Alliance: Some Conclusions for Europe," in *Turkey and the European Union: Internal Dynamics, External Challenges*, ed. Joseph S. Joseph (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006): 211-232; 6.

⁵ Ziya Öniş, "Turkey and the Middle East after September 11: The Importance of the EU Dimension," *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (2003): 83-92; 6.

interests because it can play a positive role in the Middle East as a model country and a benign regional power.⁶ The militant Islamist threat from the Muslim world became the key target of the U.S. War on Terror. Taspınar warned that autocratic Arab regimes are a threat to U.S. security as they tend to promote militancy.⁷ He urged the U.S. to support democratic regimes in the Middle East in order to ensure its own security. Turkey was seen as a reliable partner of the West in a highly unstable region which stretched from the Middle East to Central Asia.⁸

Turkey's significance was also enhanced due to the new developments inside the country since 2002. A new party with an Islamist background called Justice and Development Party, came to power in Turkey in November 2002. The new party called itself 'conservative' rather than Islamist, and consciously distanced itself from Islamism, adopted a pro-West, pro-EU approach, introduced liberal economic and political reforms and thus, signified the softening of political Islam in Turkey. Moreover, Turkey had been steadily progressing towards achieving its long-time goal of becoming an EU member since 1999. In December 2002 at Copenhagen, the European Council decided to open negotiations on Turkey's accession to EU provided it met the political criteria set by the EU. As a potential member of the European Union, Turkey's ability to play a constructive role in the Middle East would be enhanced. Turkey's improved ties with the Middle East under AKP were an additional reason for its greater influence in the region. It was in this context that the idea of the Turkish model was advanced from the West post 9/11.

Dominant Issues and Debates

Model or Not?

An early debate identified by Altunisik was on the very idea of a Turkish model for the Middle East.⁹ The idea initially advanced from the West, led to a debate in Turkey about its meaning and implications. There were concerns that the idea was not only being imposed on Turkey by the West, but that it was being used to undermine the secular character of the country. Another concern expressed was its implications for Turkish identity. Some thought that it may situate Turkey in the Middle East rather than in Europe.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ömer Taşpınar, *An Uneven Fit?: The 'Turkish Model' and the Arab World* (analysis paper no. 5, Saban Center for Middle East Policy, Brookings Institution, Washington, D. C., 2003).

⁸ Öniş, "Turkey and the Middle East after September 11."

⁹ Meliha Benli Altunisik, "The Turkish Model and Democratization in the Middle East," *Arab Studies Quarterly* (2005): 45-63.

Accession to the European Union

One of the most dominant issues during the first phase was the question of Turkey's accession to the EU. Various academics from the West, the Muslim world and Turkey wrote extensively on the subject. Fuller points out the irony of the new situation in Turkey where an Islamist party (AKP) was pushing for EU membership in the most insistent and convincing manner.¹⁰ The accession to the EU is described as one issue where all divergent sections of Turkish society, including the liberals, the Islamists and the conservatives, agreed. It is this agreement, which made the democratisation reforms in the country possible. Phillips expresses similar ideas while writing about 'Turkey's dream for accession'.¹¹ Onis argues that the transformation of Turkish Islamism and accession to the EU, are a closely related phenomenon.¹² Islamists had begun to see the advantage of the EU accession process for their own protection and consolidation. While the criteria requires basic freedoms for all, including Islamists, the latter also realised the need to give up fundamentalism in order to make use of the EU advantage. The result was the softening of Turkish Islamism and more freedom for its conservative citizens.

Growing Polarisation and Critique on Kemalism

A number of authors point towards the changing social and political dynamics of Turkey. Kemalism, which was the unquestionable state ideology for decades, increasingly came under attack. The divide between the conservative and secular/liberal class of Turkey seemed to widen as a result of greater political freedom in the country. Jenkins writes that in an effort to create Turkish national consciousness, Mustafa Kemal Pasha suppressed the multiethnic composition of the Turkish nation.¹³ After his death, his ideas were adopted as a strict state ideology, which was religiously followed. In effect, instead of removing religion from public sphere, Kemalist secularism replaced one dogma with another.

Fuller explains that Kemalist secularism was based on the French version of secularism rooted in the French Revolution. French secularism despises religion, perceiving it as a sign of backwardness and superstition.¹⁴ Early Kemalist reforms treated Islam in the same manner and the religion of

¹⁰ Grahamuller E. Fuller, "Turkey's Strategic Model: Myths and Realities," *Washington Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (2004): 51-64.

¹¹ David L. Phillips, "Turkey's Dreams of Accession," *Foreign Affairs* 83, no. 5 (2004): 86-97.

¹² Öniş, "Turkey and the Middle East after September 11."

¹³ Gareth Jenkins, "Muslim Democrats in Turkey?" *Survival* 45, no. 1 (2003): 45-66.

¹⁴ Fuller, "Turkey's Strategic Model."

majority Turks was consciously marginalised. The forceful suppression of religious power and prestige left deep psychological scars on Turkish society, which has been gradually healing for many decades with religious expression eventually returning. The electoral success of AKP is described as an indication of a renewed confidence of Turkey's conservative religious class. Cagaptay explains the success of AKP as a result of the growing middle class discontent with the old secular forces which tend to be inefficient and corrupt.¹⁵ Yavuz opines that the modern history of Turkey is marked by a confrontation between Kemalist secularism and societal Islam.¹⁶

New Turkish Islamism

AKP's entry into Turkish politics is largely seen as a development, which indicates the decline of 'old political Islam'¹⁷ and rise of 'a new form of Islamism', which has changed its anti-West, anti-secular stance and made a move towards reconciliation with both.¹⁸ Toprak highlights the transformation of political Islam in Turkey.¹⁹ According to her, Turkish political Islam after a long battle with secular democracy eventually discovered the virtues of democracy. The AKP is a pragmatic political party which has learnt from the experience of previous Islamist struggles and evolved as a different force. Its program is far more impressive than that of the previous Islamist parties.

A prominent debate in Turkey since the AKP arrival in politics has been the headscarf issue which has frequently made headlines across the world. Smith observes that Turkey's Kemalists have always categorised women as either the 'new Turkish woman' or the 'backward Islamic woman.' The rise of Islamism in Turkey during the 1980s created a new category, the 'enlightened Muslim woman.' The 'new veiling' movement involved women who adopted the veil by choice and not as a tradition. The new category did not fit in the old Kemalist structure and was seen as a

¹⁵ Soner Cagaptay, "The November 2002 Elections and Turkey's New Political Era," *Middle East* 6, no. 4 (2002): 43.

¹⁶ M. Hakan Yavuz, "Is There a Turkish Islam? The Emergence of Convergence and Consensus," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 24, no. 2 (2004): 213-232.

¹⁷ According to the Stanford Journal of International Relations 'Political Islam (also known as Islamism) can be defined as a developing world ideology of mobilisation and legitimacy like Marxism or socialism... political Islam in the latter half of the Twentieth Century was born as a response to the cultural imperialism and failure of Western political thought to be relevant to the Islamic world.' In Turkey, a series of Islamic political parties led by Necmettin Erbakan are termed as old political Islam.

¹⁸ Rainer Hermann, "Political Islam in Secular Turkey," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 14, no. 3 (2003): 265-276.

¹⁹ Binnaz Toprak, "Islam and Democracy in Turkey," *Turkish Studies* 6, no. 2 (2005): 167-186.

threat to the secular system.²⁰ Hunter proclaims that there has been discrimination against religious women in Turkey in matters of education and employment. Women in headscarves cannot enter universities and public offices. The secular elite seem to block the progress of Turkey's emerging conservative middle class.²¹

The AKP was able to win the votes of a broad spectrum of Turkish society in 2002 elections because it became a symbol of opposition against the old order,²² even though the party's main support base remains the religiously conservative class. But despite its links to religious groups, there is little evidence to suggest that AKP has an Islamist agenda when compared with the earlier Islamist parties.²³ The AKP has successfully rebuilt the coalition of various segments of Turkish politics which was earlier achieved during the Ozal era. The party has brought together centre Islamists, centre nationalists and even some segments of the former centre left. It represents a new centre-oriented middle class in Turkey; and the party is clearly distinguishable from the old Islamist parties as it signifies the evolution of Turkish Islamism.

The Second Phase (2007-11)

The War on Terror waged by the United States continued during the second phase of AKP rule. The continuing presence of American troops in the region remained a source of conflict. However, in 2008, the global economy was hit by one of the worst financial crisis in history which was a setback for the war effort. In the same year, there was a change of government in the United States. President Obama replaced George W. Bush and his agenda focused on economic recovery rather than the war. He visited Turkey in 2009 and expressed the desire to improve relations with the Muslim world.

Despite AKPs efforts to meet the European criteria and introduce key political reforms, France and Austria did not support the idea of Turkey's inclusion in Europe. The lingering Cyprus issue and Turkey's rapidly deteriorating relations with Israel following the 2008-09 Gaza War, continued to block the progress of EU accession talks. In May 2010,

²⁰ Thomas W. Smith, "Between Allah and Atatürk: Liberal Islam in Turkey," *The International Journal of Human Rights* 9, no. 3 (2005): 307-325.

²¹ Shireen Hunter, "Islam, Secularism and the Turkish Presidential Elections," Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Georgetown University, accessed May 18, 2015, <https://acmcu.georgetown.edu/islam-secularism>.

²² Jenkins, "Muslim Democrats in Turkey?"

²³ Ergun Özbudun, "From Political Islam to Conservative Democracy: The Case of the Justice and Development Party in Turkey," *South European Society & Politics* 11, no. 3-4 (2006): 543-557.

Erdogan attempted to call the world's attention to Israel's naval blockade of Gaza by sending six vessels containing humanitarian supplies. Israeli authorities responded aggressively to this humanitarian initiative, killed nine passengers on board and captured the rest. Turkey's relations with the EU were affected by this incident.

It was under such circumstances that the Arab Spring arrived in the region. Erdogan's anti-Israel stance may have made Turkey's Western allies skeptical, but it greatly enhanced Turkish popularity amongst its Eastern neighbours. The term 'Turkish model' became a catchphrase in the Middle East. A number of academics began to examine the idea and its implications for the Middle East. Europe, in the meanwhile, faced acute financial troubles and the Eurozone crisis engulfed the region putting the future of the Union at stake. The economic growth of Turkey remained impressive during this phase, but it too began to face serious economic troubles.

Dominant Issues and Debates

Which Model: AKP or Kemalist?

The AKP phenomenon brought fundamental changes in Turkey's politics, economy, society and foreign policy. The Turkish model of a staunchly secular Muslim state, proposed by the Western camp prior to the development of the AKP phenomenon, became obsolete as a result. During the second phase of AKP rule, the debate over the type of desirable model continued in academic circles.

Dede asks 'which Turkey can be regarded as a model' for the Arabs. Could the old, authoritarian, Kemalist Turkey be declared a model for the Arabs who are already weary of authoritarian regimes? Praising the AKP model, the scholar opines that the (new) Turkish model has shown that democracy can function in a Muslim majority state and conservative Muslims can become active advocates of democratic values and economic growth. The Turkish model is more meaningful to the Arab states as it disproves the notion of incompatibility of Islam and democracy.²⁴

Critique on Kemalism

Akyol argues that during the past twenty five years, the ordinary Turkish people have realised that the West is better than the Westernisers because the former provide religious freedom to citizens which are denied by the

²⁴ Alper Y. Dede, "The Arab Uprisings: Debating the Turkish Model," *Insight Turkey* 13, no. 2 (2011): 23-32.

latter.²⁵ In fact, Turkey's illiberal secularism is not found anywhere in the West. Turk citizens realised that the problem lay with the Kemalist elite in Ankara and not with the West. This new realisation changed the track of Turkey's struggle for freedom: instead of trying to Islamise the state, they sought to liberalise it. This explains why AKP actively sought political reforms required by the EU, while the Kemalist elite opposed them.

Shobokshi,²⁶ Ramadan,²⁷ Nasr²⁸ and Ayoob²⁹ point towards the utility of the AKP Turkish model for the Middle East. The authors argue that the AKP has not only successfully reconciled Islam and democracy, but also adopted an independent foreign policy. Moreover, the economic performance of Turkey boosted by the conservative middle class has set a good example for the Muslim world to follow.

Islamophobia in the West

Some Muslim academics have expressed concern about the growing Islamophobia in the West, especially evident in case of Turkey. Ramadan observed that in Europe, the political parties that take a narrow view of the European identity have been gaining strength.³⁰ They tend to promote a strictly Judeo-Christian view of European history and a mistrust of Islam. According to him, any argument which excludes Turkey from European history cannot withstand analysis; and urges European nations to overcome their fear of Islam in order to move forward. The question of Turkey's membership to the EU should not be turned into a 'cultural battleground.'³¹

Ayoob made similar observations about the Western media's paranoia about Islam. According to him, the news reports expressing fear of AKP's return to power in the June 2011 elections revealed the Islamophobic tendency of Western media. He observed that Western journalists and even some academics use the term 'neo-Ottomanism' to describe AKP's foreign

²⁵ Mustafa Akyol, "Turkey's Liberal Islam and How It Came to Be," *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (2008).

²⁶ Hussein Ali Shobokshi, "The Middle East is Burning," *Al Sharq Al Awsat*, December 20, 2011.

²⁷ Tariq Ramadan, "Democratic Turkey is the Template for Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood," *Huffington Post*, August 2, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tariq-ramadan/post_1690_b_820366.html.

²⁸ Vali Nasr, *Forces of Fortune: The Rise of the New Muslim Middle Class and What it Will Mean for Our World* (New York: Free Press, 2009).

²⁹ Mohammad Ayoob, "What Iran Must Learn from Turkey?" *openDemocracy.net*, June 29, 2011, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/mohammed-ayoob/what-iran-must-learn-from-turkey>.

³⁰ Tariq Ramadan, "Turkey is Part of Europe. Fear Keeps it out of the EU," *Guardian*, August 6, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/aug/06/turkey-eu-membership>.

³¹ Ibid.

policy initiatives.³² Many neutral observers, however, reject such terminology as a grave exaggeration of facts based on naïve fears and a distorted view of history. The reforms introduced by AKP are deemed necessary for democratic consolidation in the country.

European Rejection and Turkey's Transformation

The delay in Turkey's EU accession, the deadlock in accession negotiations and Turkey's growing ties with the Middle East prompted various academics to analyse the new situation. Turkey has been a candidate for European Union membership for a long time and has faced rejection from Europe.³³ This prolonged rejection, however, has brought fundamental changes inside Turkey. Its human rights record has markedly improved and the civil-military relations have relatively normalised. There is an ironic twist in the tale as well. The southern European countries which entered the EU when Turkey faced rejection are now facing acute economic troubles, while the Turkish economy enjoys unprecedented growth.³⁴ The traditional dynamics of Turkey-EU relations have shifted dramatically.

The Arab Spring

The idea of the Turkish model took centre stage in the academic discussions after the Arab Spring. Academics from the West and the Muslim world took different positions on the notion whether Turkey is a model for the post-revolution Arab states. The various positions taken by academics on the issue have been discussed separately in the following section.

- **Turkey Should be a Model:**

A panel discussion at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace described the key factors that make Turkey a desirable model for the Arab states.³⁵ According to the discussants, certain areas may be identified where Arab states can follow Turkish style reforms. Turkey's popularity in the Arab world is another reason for proposing

³² Mohammed Ayoob, "Misplaced Fears about the Upcoming Turkish Election," *ForeignPolicy.com*, June 6, 2011.

³³ Robert Siegel, "Turkish Democracy: A Model for Other Countries?" on *All Things Considered*, NPR, April 14, 2011, podcast, <http://www.npr.org/2011/04/14/135407687/turkish-democracy-a-model-for-other-countries>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Sinan Ülgen, Marwan Muasher and Thomas de Waal, "Can the Turkish Model Gain Traction in the New Middle East?" (transcript, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Federal News Service, Washington, D.C., 2011), http://carnegieendowment.org/files/122111_transcript_TurkishModel1.pdf.

Turkey as a model state for the region. Peterson comments in the *Christian Science Monitor* about the benefits and attractiveness of the model for Egypt: Turkey's successful struggle against military domination; its strong blend of Islam and democracy; and its robust economy. However, the model cannot be replicated in the Arab world, because the country has a unique historical context quite different from the Arabs.³⁶ The domestic transformation of Turkey in recent years does have a significant impact on the region and if care is taken, the Arab world can learn very useful lessons from the Turkish experience.³⁷

There are a number of factors that have contributed to the Turkish appeal for the Arab world: the agenda of the AKP which tends to be moderately conservative and pragmatic rather than militant Islamist; capitalist economic system; and Sufi Islamic traditions.³⁸ Recognising the differences between the Arab and Turk political context, many aspects of the Turkish model are relevant for the Arab transformation towards democracy.³⁹

- **Turkey Should Not be a Model:**

Some weak areas of the AKP which are generally ignored in the Turkish model discourse. The AKP record in promoting freedom of speech, minority rights and women rights is far from satisfactory and most certainly cannot be a model for Arab states struggling to achieve these basic rights and freedoms in their countries.⁴⁰ A report in *The Economist* argued that despite Turkey's immense popularity in the Middle East, one needs to be cautious about expecting Arabs to follow Turks.⁴¹ Moderate Islam in Turkey has taken a lot of time to evolve, and it was dependent on many conflicting forces including the military's guardianship of secularism. With its secularism so firmly

³⁶ Sinan Ülgen, *From Inspiration to Aspiration: Turkey in the New Middle East*, The Carnegie Papers (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011), http://carnegieendowment.org/files/turkey_mid_east.pdf.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ömer Taşpınar, "The Turkish Model and its Applicability," *Turkey and the Arab Spring: Implications for Turkish Foreign Policy from a Transatlantic Perspective*, (Mediterranean Paper Series, German Marshall Fund of the United States, Washington, D.C., 2011), <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/turkey-and-arab-spring-implications-turkish-foreign-policy-transatlantic-perspective>.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Juliana DeVries, "Turkey's AKP: A Model for the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood?" *Dissent*, April 12, 2011, <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/turkeys-akp-a-model-for-the-egyptian-muslim-brotherhood>.

⁴¹ "The Turkish Model: A Hard Act to Follow," *Economist*, August 6, 2011, <http://www.economist.com/node/21525408>.

rooted in its history, it would be hard for the Arab world to follow Turkey's example because the former's historical context is completely different.⁴²

The Third Phase (2012-14)

This period is marked by major changes in the Middle East and Turkish politics. President Obama won a second term as U.S. President expressing his resolve to put an end to the decade of war. But the problems in the Middle East post-Arab Spring continued to multiply. With the exception of Tunisia, almost all revolutionary states-Syria, Egypt, and Libya turned more brutal. The civil war in Syria has been especially troublesome for neighbouring Turkey. Turkey chose to support the pro-democracy forces in Syria which resulted in deterioration of its relations not only with Syria, but also Iran which supported Bashar al-Assad.⁴³ The prolonged war in this country and Turkey's direct involvement created difficulties for its internal stability.

The rise of the Islamic State (IS) was another source of unrest in the region. The extremist militant group was able to take hold of territories in Iraq and Syria and establish a self-proclaimed Caliphate in the former Ottoman lands. Turkey did not directly participate in the U.S. airstrikes on the IS, but was directly affected by the conflict.

Another major development on the global scene was the return of Russia as a major player. Russia, under Putin, has shown assertiveness on a number of issues including the U.S. plan to attack Syria because of its use of chemical weapons. The AKP government established good relations with this powerful regional player despite their historical rivalry.

Owing to the growing financial troubles of the EU after the Eurozone crisis and continuing economic prosperity in Turkey, the support for EU membership amongst Turkish people declined during this phase. The accession negotiations continued to prolong and the contending issues could not be effectively resolved.

Inside Turkey, the third phase of the AKP rule, brought some tough political challenges for the party despite its success in effectively eliminating the military's role in politics. There had been corruption charges against close associates of Erdogan. Instead of facilitating a free enquiry into the matter, he used his power to manipulate the investigations. The newspapers that criticised his authoritarian approach were also

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Editor's Note: Bashar Hafez al-Assad is the current President of Syria, holding the office since July 17, 2000.

victimised. Erdogan blamed the influential Gülen movement,⁴⁴ which had earlier supported AKP's rise to power, for trying to defame him. The former allies became staunch enemies. In May 2013, a protest against an urban construction project was violently dealt with by the government. The incident sparked wider protests and strikes demanding freedom of press and expression. This powerful anti-government protest was one of the biggest political challenges for Erdogan's government. His political troubles only grew in the following months.⁴⁵

Dominant Issues and Debates

The growing criticism against the AKP government during its third term in power is aptly reflected in how academics from the West and the Muslim world describe the troubles with the Turkish model during this period, with many announcing its demise:

Illiberal Democracy

There have been changes in the AKP government over time.⁴⁶ The restrictions on freedom of speech, victimisation of opposition and growing Islamism are described as indications of the changing character of Turkish democracy that undermine the democratic credentials of AKP.⁴⁷ During a decade of his rule, Erdogan has established a textbook case of illiberal democracy: a case where the ruler is elected through elections, but does not care for civil liberties and is not bound by the law.⁴⁸ Erdogan's understanding of democracy is based on a populist and simplistic notion of winning elections.⁴⁹ Individual rights and liberties do not fit well in this majoritarian notion of democracy. The hegemonic style of his leadership has turned the

⁴⁴ Editor's Note: The Gülen movement is an Islamic transnational religious and social movement led by Fethullah Gülen who has been living in the United States since 1999.

⁴⁵ Editor's Note: Demonstrations and civil unrest that began on May 28, 2013, initially to contest the urban development plan for Istanbul's Taksim Gezi Park. The protests occurred due to the violent eviction of a peaceful sit-in at the park protesting the plan.

⁴⁶ Anthony Rusonik, "Turkey: East, West or Erdogan?" *Geopolitical Monitor*, May 16, 2012, <http://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/turkey-east-west-or-erdogan-4677/>.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Mustafa Akyol, "McCarthyism comes to Turkey," *New York Times*, March 19, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/20/opinion/akyol-mccarthyism-comes-to-turkey.html?_r=0.

⁴⁹ Ömer Taspinar, "New Turkey and its Paradox," *Today's Zaman*, April, 2014, http://www.todayszaman.com/columnist/omer-taspinar/new-turkey-and-its-paradox-1_344556.html.

old authoritarian Kemalist structure into a new system which may well be termed as the tyranny of the majority.⁵⁰

Restrictions on the Freedom of Press

The original impression of Erdogan in the U.S. as a most promising ally, has rapidly changed due to his recent actions.⁵¹ The Taksim Gezi Park protests discussed earlier where police were sent to crush the protestors; efforts to influence investigations against the government's corruption scandal; and imposition of a ban on social media, have put serious doubts on Turkey's credentials as a model state.⁵² For several months, the Turkish political scene was caught up in a tense battle. The corruption scandal against the government; the voices of opposition; and the latter's reaction has initiated a political war in Turkey.⁵³ Erdogan's counter allegations and excessive use of force against the opposition have disrupted the smooth road AKP has had so far.

Corruption Scandals

A report published in *The Economist* observes that Erdogan's stable decade long rule in Turkey began to show signs of trouble when corruption scandals against his close associates and family erupted in 2013. Instead of facilitating a free enquiry, Erdogan initiated measures to take greater control of the judiciary. The corruption scandal has turned out to be just the beginning of a series of incidents that have threatened the political stability of the country.⁵⁴

Authoritarianism

Erdogan has an authoritarian streak and is unwilling to let go of power.⁵⁵ Leaders who see themselves as infallible and who are not restrained by

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Robert Fisk, "Has Recep Tayyip Erdogan Gone from Model Middle East 'Strongman' to Tin-Pot Dictator?" *Independent*, April 10, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/has-recep-tayyip-erdogan-gone-from-model-middle-east-strongman-to-tinpot-dictator-9252366.html>.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Akyol, "McCarthyism comes to Turkey."

⁵⁴ "Erdogan on Top: It would be Better for Turkey if the Presidency remained mainly Ceremonial," *Economist*, August 16, 2014, <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21612154-it-would-be-better-turkey-if-presidency-remained-mainly-ceremonial-erdogan-top>.

⁵⁵ Brent E. Sasley, "How Erdogan has Reshaped Turkish Politics, and What it Means for Current Corruption Scandal," *Washington Post*, December 27, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2013/12/27/how-erdogan-has-reshaped-turkish-politics-and-what-it-means-for-current-corruption-scandal/>.

institutional checks tend to stick to power even if they are elected democratically. During Erdogan's reign, the traditional institutional constraints on executive power have weakened, with power now concentrated in the office of the Prime Minister.⁵⁶ Turkish politicians tend to view compromise as cowardice. They bitterly lack civilised political language and consensus building skills. These qualities are, however, becoming increasingly visible in Tunisia, which should be a model for others, instead of Turkey.⁵⁷

Political Polarisation and Conflict with Gülen

Faced with corruption charges against his government, Erdogan adopted the policy of 'divide and rule'. He separated the country into two camps labelled as 'loyalists' and 'traitors'.⁵⁸ He passed laws that weakened constitutional checks on the executive branch and used his power to purge the police and judiciary. The movement of Fethullah Gülen was especially targeted by the administration who repeatedly branded it as 'a parallel state' supported by 'outside forces' trying to weaken his government.⁵⁹ Erdogan's authoritarian and polarising style of leadership has caused concern amongst his critics about his future plans to hold on to power. There were fears that Erdogan could crack down against the pro-Gülen newspaper *Daily Zaman* which also happens to be a tough critic of his policies.^{60,61}

Erdogan has been vehemently criticized for strategy to defame his political opponents, in particular, the Gulen movement.⁶² His allegation that the movement has established 'a parallel state' in Turkey has been accompanied by replacing hundreds of policemen and prosecutors who initiated the corruption probe against him. The pro-Erdogan media depicts the Gulen movement as 'neo-cons' and 'Zionists' discrediting and alienating their vast support base in the country.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Mustafa Akyol, "Tunisia should be Turkey's Model," *Hurriyet Daily News*, October 29, 2014, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/tunisia-should-be-turkeys-model.aspx?pageID=449&nID=73581&NewsCatID=411>.

⁵⁸ Constanze Letsch, "Turkish Opposition Fears Power Grab as Erdoğan Stands for Presidency," *Guardian*, July 1, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/01/turkish-opposition-fears-power-grab-erdogan-stands-presidency>.

⁵⁹ Fisk, "Has Recep Tayyip Erdogan Gone from Model Middle East 'Strongman' to Tin-Pot Dictator?"

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Editor's Note: The newspaper was officially taken over by the authorities in March 2016. "Zaman Newspaper: Seized Turkish Daily 'Now Pro-Government,'" *BBC News*, March 6, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35739547>.

⁶² Akyol, "Tunisia should be Turkey's Model."

The Turkish Model: What Has Gone Wrong?

This section examines how academics from the West, the Muslim world and Turkey have explained the failure of the Turkish model; and identified reasons for its collapse:

The Ottoman Legacy

The Ottoman legacy of Turkey must be considered in order to understand Erdogan's ambitions. According to him, Erdogan aims to reverse the Kemalist revolution of Turkey, bring the military to heel and return Turkey to an Ottoman like domestic order and global standing. This long-term ambition has been successful until now as he has sidelined the military with surprising ease. After subjugating it, Erdogan has begun to defame his domestic rivals, in particular the Gülen movement. He has also shown arrogance abroad which has not been taken well by the international community although it may have won him some praise at home.⁶³

Rise of Islamist Business Class and AKP Roots in Islamist Parties

The rise of the Islamist business class from rural areas brought the AKP to power in Turkey. Although capitalism brought more democracy in the West, in some Eastern countries like China, post-Soviet Russia and Turkey, it did just the opposite.⁶⁴ It has been highlighted that the AKP has its roots in the Millî Görüş party which was famous for its anti-Western stance and conspiratorial attitude. Erdogan's recent actions reveal that he has not changed this basic outlook.⁶⁵

On the Wrong Side in the Arab Spring

Turkey's isolation on the international front began during the Arab Spring when the country placed the wrong bets choosing to support the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the rebels in Syria. Now Ankara has no ambassador in Cairo as Turkey denounced the military regime which overthrew Morsi.⁶⁶ The foreign *jihadis* moving to Syria have been allowed to use Turkey's borders which has brought more instability in the region.

⁶³ Daniel Pipes, "How Turkey Went Bad," *Weekly Standard*, October 13, 2014, <http://www.danielpipes.org/14988/how-turkey-went-bad>.

⁶⁴ Stephen Schwartz, "The Failure of the 'Turkish Model,'" review of *Islam without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty*, by Mustafa Akyol, *Middle East Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (2014), <http://www.meforum.org/3840/turkey-akp-akyol>.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Editor's Note: Mohamed Morsi was the fifth President of Egypt from June 2012 to July 2013. He was removed following the June 2013 uprising in Egypt.

Turkey's ties with other regional players like Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia have also weakened.⁶⁷

Erdogan

Many academics from the West, the Muslim world and Turkey have held Erdogan responsible for the fate of the Turkish model. He used to be one of the most trusted ally of U.S. President Obama. But his recent authoritarianism has put the idea of the Turkish model at stake. Corruption scandals and his reckless reaction to it have tarnished the international image of the country.⁶⁸ By fending off challenges to his rule and sidelining institutional constraints to his authority, the shape of Turkish politics has altered.⁶⁹ It has been speculated that Erdogan's understanding of democracy is based on the simplistic notion of winning elections. However, his populist and majoritarian understanding of democracy comes at the expense of liberalism and pluralism. This electoral autocracy does not allow freedom of speech, rule of law and separation of power.⁷⁰

Turkey is an example of extraordinary achievements and profound warning - both negative and positive aspects of the Turkish experience have a name: Recep Tayyip Erdogan. A lot can be learnt from the Turkish example, especially from various aspects of his leadership and recent troubles.⁷¹ He is a leader who deliberately adopted the 'divide and rule' strategy to ward off political opposition against him. His harsh allegations against the opposition have led to the division of Turkey into two contending, conflicting political camps.⁷²

Why does Erdogan keep Winning Elections?

Most middle class conservatives support him because they share his ideological vision. Many also buy his allegations against the opposition and the Gülen movement.⁷³ However, a major reason for his electoral victories is the economy which matters more to the common man in Turkey. The middle class Turks make up the largest segment of Turkish voters. For

⁶⁷ Mark Lowen, "Erdogan's 'New Turkey' Drifts towards Isolation," *BBC News*, November 20, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30111043>.

⁶⁸ Fisk, "Has Recep Tayyip Erdogan Gone from Model Middle East 'Strongman' to Tin-Pot Dictator?"

⁶⁹ Sasley, "How Erdogan has Reshaped Turkish Politics."

⁷⁰ Taşpınar, "New Turkey and its Paradox."

⁷¹ B. Wicaksono, "What can we Learn from Turkey, *Untuk Indonesia*, accessed April 9, 2015, <http://www.untukindonesia.id/what-can-we-learn-from-turkey/>.

⁷² Letsch, "Turkish Opposition Fears Power Grab as Erdogan Stands for Presidency."

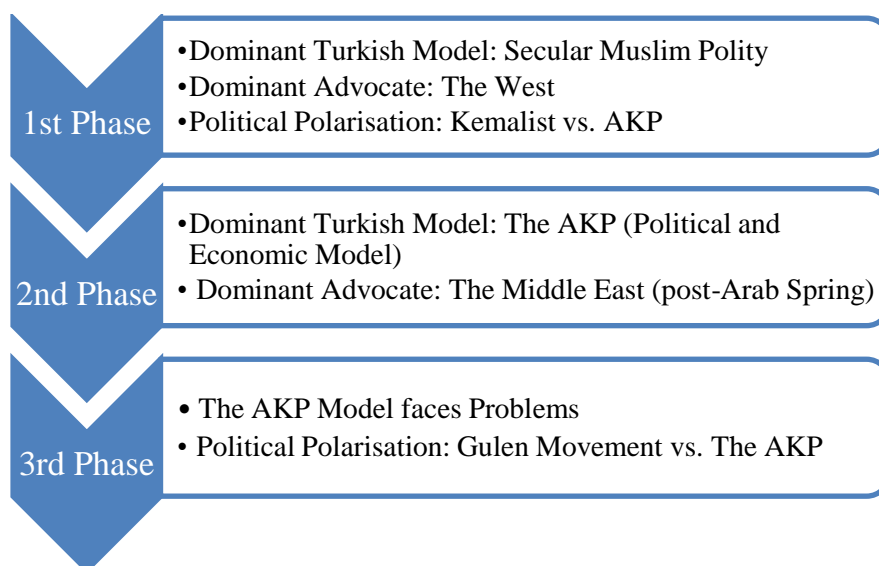
⁷³ Akyol, "McCarthyism comes to Turkey."

them, bread and butter take precedence over the political debates on Twitter and Facebook.⁷⁴

Conclusion

This brief overview of the Turkish model, as constructed by academics from the West and the Muslim world during the three consecutive terms of the AKP rule in Turkey, reveals fundamental variations in the way the idea has been understood and projected overtime. The following flow chart briefly summarises its evolution in Turkey:

Figure-1
Evolution of the Turkish Model (2002-14)



Source: Authors' own.

The initial idea of a secular Muslim state advocated by the West was transformed in the second phase as the AKP strengthened its position inside Turkey, brought an economic revolution and adopted an independent foreign policy. The model began to represent reconciliation of Western democracy and Islamic tradition at a time when the world was being shaped by an Islam/West confrontation in the form of the War on Terror. The idea gained currency mainly due to the phenomenal economic growth of Turkey and its ability to blend modernity and tradition. It became a catchphrase in the Arab and the Western media during the Arab Spring in the Middle East.

⁷⁴ Taşpınar, "New Turkey and its Paradox."

In the third phase of AKP rule, however, Erdogan's government faced tough political opposition, consequently, the idea of the model was also threatened. Its shape was significantly altered by the end of the third phase as the crisis in Syria engulfed the region and the AKP government struggled to keep its grip on power.

This model, given its potential to build bridges across Islam and the West, provides hope for peacebuilding efforts on both sides of the divide. The AKP government should strive to revive its positive aspects to counter the influence of radical militant ideas which are plaguing the region. ■