Center for American Progress

The Turkish Model

The History of a Misleading Idea

By Dov Friedman August 25, 2015

To discuss any notion of Turkey as a model country in 2015 is passé. The government's aggressive crackdown on the summer 2013 Gezi Park protests and the December 2013 revelations of high-level corruption in the Justice and Development Party, or AKP, government quieted any lingering optimism about Turkey's democracy.[1] In truth, authoritarianism in Turkey had been on the rise for years under the rule of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

The June parliamentary elections temporarily halted President Erdoğan's ambitions, representing only a small step toward democratic strengthening in Turkey. Much of the English-language analysis hailed the rejection of Erdoğan's personal ambition and praised the Kurdish-supported Peoples' Democratic Party, or HDP, as a mark of resurgent liberalism in Turkey.[2] Yet within two months, the caretaker AKP government had renewed hostilities with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, and launched a political inquisition against the HDP—despite the party's consistent rejection of violence.[3]

This burst of American enthusiasm about Turkey—followed by its swift tempering—is a recurring theme that can be traced to the beginning of the Cold War at the conclusion of World War II, when Turkey exemplified American hopes for—and consternation regarding—Western influence in the Middle East. Turkey was deemed a so-called model country—a concept that, once born, proved difficult to bury. The model became a Rorschach inkblot—interpreted and applied in numerous ways, often revealing more about U.S. anxieties in periods of geopolitical turmoil than about Turkey itself.

Each iteration of the so-called Turkish model was eventually abandoned as it proved ineffectual or disconnected from regional dynamics. But before being rejected, each of these models enabled many policymakers to avoid grappling with Turkey's complexity and infused U.S. perceptions of Turkey's democracy with unwarranted optimism. As a corollary, the model conception made the United States reluctant to criticize Turkey or use leverage against it, lest the model be seen as a failure. Turkey's recent parliamentary elections seemed to provide an opportunity for Turkish politicians to counter President Erdoğan's autocratic aspirations. In order to support this process, U.S. policy should eschew simplistic enthusiasm—including about Turkey's role in the campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS—and instead work to strengthen democratic institutions and the rule of law in Turkey.

From post-World War II to the post-Soviet era

The origins of the Turkish model can be traced to the immediate aftermath of World War II. Hoping to secure economic relief alongside the Marshall Plan—which focused exclusively on rebuilding Europe—then-President İsmet İnönü's government conjured the first Turkish model, presenting Turkey as a Middle East state firmly allied against Soviet communism and eager to facilitate Western diplomacy in a volatile region.[4] Facing political uncertainty in the Middle East, the Truman administration found the notion of a Turkish example for the region appealing. Then-U.S. Ambassador George McGhee began to see Turkey as a country others in the region can "hope to emulate."[5] U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson told Turkish Ambassador to the United States Feridun Erkin that NATO "recognized [the] importance [of] Turkey's role in [the] free world and vital Near East area."[6] Turkey had oversold its commitment and anti-communist capabilities, but American enthusiasm was enough to give birth to the Turkish model.

The concept ebbed and flowed over the years, roughly tracking U.S. anxiety about political change in the Middle East. By 1991, a new model was needed, and Turkey was ready. Turkey began actively shopping a new vision of a secular but majority-Muslim state with a Western orientation and a successful track record of market-based economic development. Then-Turkish Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel promoted Turkey as "a model of democracy, secularism, and free-market economy" and sought Western support for his vision of a Turkish model for the region.[7]

The George H.W. Bush administration—struggling to make sense of the newly independent Central Asian states and uneasy about regional volatility—supported Turkey's efforts to influence the region and adopted the Turkish model as an important formulation in its regional diplomacy. In early 1992, then-Secretary of State James Baker visited each of the Central Asian states, encouraging them to look to Turkey for "strategic orientation."[8] As it turned out, these conceptions underestimated Russia's continuing influence on the region. As Central Asia's post-Soviet politics took shape, talk of the Turkish model for the region—promoted by the Turkish government and endorsed by the first Bush administration—receded once again from the U.S. foreign policy discourse.

The post-September 11th Turkish model

The notion of a Turkish model reemerged after the September 11th attacks with renewed purpose. While the George W. Bush administration prosecuted the war in Afghanistan and planned the Iraq invasion, it sought to hold Turkey up as an example for the Middle East. The Turkish model was able to survive yet another change in meaning because it benefited both the United States and Turkey. The United States was able to point to Turkey as a way of separating the War on Terror from any perceived war on Islam, while Turkey earned U.S. support for its bid to join the European Union and elevated its international stature as a key U.S. partner in—and example to—the Middle East.

The first post-September 11th Turkish model promoted Turkey's secular, democratic character in a Muslim-majority country. Concerned about the influence of radical Islamic movements, American leaders viewed Turkey as an alternative path for Middle Eastern states. Hugh Pope—at the time, a Turkey-based correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal*—wrote that Turkish Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit's January 2002 visit to Washington, D.C., "crowns the rediscovery of the strategic value of Turkey"—with the use of Incirlik Air Base and overflight rights providing crucial logistical support for the war in Afghanistan.[9] Ecevit's government readily promoted the Turkish model language, using it to secure U.S. financial support during Turkey's economic crisis. By early 2002, *The Wall Street Journal* referred to Turkey as a "model of progress."[10]

The focus on secularism and democracy in a Muslim country meant that the first post-September 11th model promoted Turkey's unabashed laicism as an effective way to combat Islamic radicalism. "Turkey is being understood as a good model for that part of the world," said then-Democratic Left Party Member of Parliament Tayyibe Gülek. "Lawmakers enforce such a strict separation of religion and politics that they even banned a female legislator from wearing a head scarf in parliament."[11]

When then-Prime Minister Erdoğan's AKP came to power in November 2002, the Turkish model subtly shifted meaning once again to encompass a secular democracy upheld by a government led by devout Muslims. After the AKP victory, the George W. Bush administration used the Turkish model to highlight Turkey's moderately Islamist—or Muslim democrat in then-President Abdullah Gül's preferred framing—government.[12] President Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell redoubled their efforts to help Turkey commence EU accession talks. *Financial Times* reported that the Bush administration "has much invested in the success of Turkey's new government, which it is holding up to other countries around the Muslim world as a model of Islamic administration in a secular democracy."[13] Marc Grossman, under secretary of state for political affairs at the time and a former ambassador to Turkey, affirmed this U.S. vision for Turkey—that it "become what it wishes to be: democratic, secular, and Islamic."[14]

The revised Turkish model permeated the highest levels of U.S. defense policymaking as well. In a December 2002 speech at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, or IISS, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz devoted much of his speech to Turkey. "Modern Turkey demonstrates that a democratic system is indeed compatible with Islam," Wolfowitz said. "People who share the values of freedom and democracy that grew out of European civilization are seeing increasingly that these are not just Western values or European values. They are Muslim and Asian values, as well." Wolfowitz concluded that the United States had to demonstrate "to those who might be recruited to [the enemy] cause that there's a better way, a better alternative."[15] The newly elected AKP government, led by devout Muslims, played a central role in that demonstration.

U.S. support for the Turkish model also tied into its planning for the March 2003 invasion of Iraq. The United States pressed Turkey to promise use of its bases, overflight rights, and other logistical support for the Iraq War—just as Turkey had done during the 1991 Gulf War.[16] Not only was Turkish support important for the prosecution of the war itself, but the political message it would send could help legitimize the George W. Bush administration's policy. Although the AKP government initially promised Turkish logistical support, it reversed the decision in response to widespread opposition from both the public and parliament.[17] The reversal dealt a significant blow to U.S.-Turkey relations. As U.S. involvement in Iraq deepened and opposition to the war became increasingly bitter, talk of a Turkish model subsided once more.

The Turkish model after the Arab uprisings

Following the Arab uprisings, Tunisian and Egyptian Islamists repurposed the Turkish model as a way to signal to the West that their vision of political Islam was as anodyne as that of the AKP. Several other factors facilitated the concept's reemergence. Journalists in U.S. and Arab outlets saturated coverage of the uprisings and their aftermath with links to Turkey. The Turkish government—eager to expand its regional influence under Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu—promoted its experience as a model for Arab neighbors. The AKP highlighted its record of stability, economic management, and modernity, while also promoting space for religious expression, Islamic education, and social conservatism in the public sphere. The U.S. government, as in previous eras, reverted to portraying Turkey as an essential regional example—but without specifying exactly what Arab revolutionaries might learn from the Turkish experience.

In the Western media, the Turkish model meant different things to different writers: "wedding democratic freedoms with religion"; coexistence between political Islam and a secular, NATO-aligned military; and reserved prerogatives for the military within a democratic system. It mattered little that none of these models appropriately addressed the complexity of Turkey's political climate and democratic development.[18] As before, some in the United States saw what they wanted to see in Turkey—an easy answer to regional uncertainty.

In Tunisia, Islamist Ennahda's leader Rachid Ghannouchi offered Turkey's AKP as the appropriate model for his party's vision of marrying Islamist politics with secular democracy.[19] Recognition in Tunisia and from Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood helped Turkey advance the model concept. While then-Prime Minister Erdoğan toured North Africa and underscored President Obama's off-the-cuff "model partnership" comments from 2009,[20] Foreign Minister Davutoğlu touted the model more subtly. He claimed "Turkey remains ready to share her own democratic experience with all interested countries."[21] Although Davutoğlu avoided the specific term, the concept was still that Turkey hoped to leverage its experience to gain international influence.

The Obama administration promoted the Turkish model less zealously than the George W. Bush administration, yet the concept regained some purchase. Then-Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton alluded to Turkey as a leader and a model during her July 2011 visit there. In a joint press conference with Foreign Minister Davutoğlu, Clinton expressed that the administration "welcomes Turkey's rise … as a leader in the region and beyond, and as a valued ally on the most pressing global challenges."[22] Clinton was pressed specifically on the notion of Turkey as a model democracy in an interview with CNN Türk during the same visit. "On balance," Clinton responded, "Turkish democracy is a model because of where you came from and where you are."[23] At an annual conference on U.S.-Turkey relations in October of that year, Secretary Clinton said, "We know that Turkey has a unique opportunity in this time of great historic change … to demonstrate the power of an inclusive democracy and responsible regional leadership."[24]

Amid Middle East turmoil, the Obama administration hoped to emphasize Turkey's democratic development as a regional point of reference. Yet the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's rejection of Turkish guidance revealed the stark absence of Turkish regional influence and the Arab revolutionaries' opportunistic use of Turkey to assuage American fears.[25] Meanwhile, the United States' optimism required it to overlook politically motivated trials that ensnared the AKP government's political enemies, a crackdown on the Turkish press, and efforts to undermine institutional checks on then-Prime Minister Erdoğan's power. By 2013, the Gezi Park protests and revelations of high-level corruption in the Turkish government brought into stark relief the AKP's rejection of democratic reforms and the rule of law. By 2014, the Obama administration had distanced itself from a Turkish government that had once seemed one of the United States' closest regional allies and shifted to a strictly transactional relationship. Once again, U.S. hopes for Turkey's regional role necessitated ignoring major adverse developments for Turkish democracy.

Conclusions and recommendations

Repeatedly, the United States has disengaged from Turkey when the country has fallen short of the model ascribed to it. With Turkey in the eye of Middle East upheaval and engrossed in a fragile domestic political moment, U.S. withdrawal from the relationship would prove debilitating to both Turkey and U.S. interests. At the same time, the United States must carefully consider the manner in which it engages Turkey. A key lesson of the model fallacy is that problems arise when the United States assumes that alignment with Turkey is a strategic development that will markedly improve episodes of geopolitical instability. If the United States stopped expecting Turkey to unlock the Middle East for U.S. foreign policy, it could better engage the Turkey that exists in reality to advance policy cooperation that is beneficial to both countries.

The developing U.S.-Turkey agreement regarding Incirlik Air Base[26] demonstrates that while the model terminology may be dead, the modes of thought that produced it are very much alive. The Obama administration views Turkey as an essential addition to the anti-ISIS coalition—one that lends strength to the fight in Syria. Turkey has ramped up efforts to keep ISIS fighters out of Syria, and it began rooting out ISIS influences embedded within Turkish communities.[27] Incirlik also offers a more economical and logistically sensible point of origin for strikes against ISIS than Jordan, Iraq, or the Gulf.

However, Turkey has used the agreement as cover to renew hostilities with the PKK, launch criminal investigations of the HDP, and embroil the Kurdish regions of both Iraq and Syria in its air campaign. The PKK has responded to the airstrikes with attacks against both the Turkish police and Turkey's pipeline network, but the PKK has also expressed a desire to return to the ceasefire arrangement.[28] President Erdoğan rejected the PKK's overture, promising to continue the fight until terrorism is eliminated from Turkey. This complicates U.S. strategy in Syria, as the United States has countered ISIS through close air support for the PYD, or Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party, a PKK-affiliated group.[29]

U.S. acquiescence to Turkey's broad anti-Kurdish campaign would be a grievous mistake. Focusing predominantly on Turkey's new measures in support of the coalition overlooks the potential damage to the greater anti-ISIS effort and to Turkey's domestic political stability. The Obama administration should play an active diplomatic role to dampen the new Turkey-PKK conflagration. Although the United States traditionally defers to Turkey on domestic terrorism, in this case, those efforts are destabilizing key U.S. partners in the PYD and the Kurdistan Regional Government, or KRG, in Iraq.

At the same time, the politically motivated investigations into the HDP risk setting Turkey's peace process back indefinitely and precipitating Kurdish citizens' rejection of national democratic politics. The Obama administration must not stand by as these investigations proceed; it must be prepared to walk away from any deal with Turkey should they continue. Finally, coalition negotiations between the AKP and the main opposition Republican People's Party, or CHP, have failed.[30] The Obama administration should use intensive diplomacy with both parties to encourage the formation of a stable coalition despite their bitter relations and deep policy divergences.

As the PYD will play a critical role in any stable Syrian future, Turkey's full participation in the anti-ISIS coalition does not obviate the U.S. need to support the PYD on the ground in Syria. The United States should also begin devising strategies to promote a long-term Turkey-PYD rapprochement—similar to the relationship Turkey and the KRG have developed in recent years. Until such a relationship takes root, the United States must broker a modus vivendi between the groups to prevent direct Turkey-PYD conflict and to benefit the fight against ISIS.

Beyond military cooperation, the United States neglects other important types of engagement with Turkey. With nearly 2 million Syrians inside its borders, Turkey harbors more refugees of the conflict than any other nation. Neither the United States nor its European allies have advanced any plan to address the human suffering caused by the conflict—though it was Turkey's own decision to go it alone in the early stages of the Syrian civil war. Prospective military coordination should lead to a broader conversation about the human costs of war, recognition of the lives Turkey has saved, and a multinational plan to aid and resettle refugees. This diplomatic work is no less important than the coalition's military objectives in the war against ISIS.

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