The “Turkish Model” in Arab Islamism: Rejection or Emulation?

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The revolutionary transformations sweeping across the contemporary Arab world have already necessitated a fundamental reset of the analytical framework applied to understanding developments in the region. For the first time in many decades, Islamism is no longer the prominent form of oppositional political expression. Instead, from Morocco to Oman and Syria to Yemen, the political language of the protestors is imbued with universal rather than religious principles, and the slogans of the protest movements are calling for greater freedom, empowerment, and dignity, not the “Islamic solution.” This new political expression solemnly declares that it is the people—and not the dogmatic Sharia of the Islamists—who are sovereign and the source of political legitimacy and authority.

While Islamism had for many decades dominated Arab activist political discourse, the transformations underway have all exposed the underlying reality of Islamism’s inadequacy, including its basic unrepresentativeness of Arab societies and their aspirations. The potential for a fatal setback for Islamism is thus considerable. While they were surprised and overtaken by recent events, Islamist movements of all types—whether they were liberal, accommodationist, conservative, radical, or violent—are now actively engaging in efforts to reclaim the initiative by proclaiming their support for the protests and revolutions, by positioning themselves as participants in the social change, and by
revising their own history and ideological pronouncements so as to lay claim to the dramatic changes that are now taking place. As of now, non-Islamists still have the upper-hand. But should the Islamist movements succeed in their bid to outmaneuver their competitors in the new political landscape, the chances of an Islamist comeback and revolutionary takeover are indeed significant.

Islamism’s accommodationist stream, which is represented best by the regional constellation of groups affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, is the dominant school of Islamism in the Arab world and also the Islamist strain best situated to influence the ongoing political transformations of the region. This movement possesses a number of political tools and strategies in its arsenal for acquiring power and influence, though few are as valuable and as potent as what has been called the “Turkish model.” While Islamists have previously used the “Turkish model” with their Western interlocutors as a means to alleviate fears over the incompatibility between Islamism and democracy, the “Turkish model” has acquired a new importance in the developing conversation between Islamists and non-Islamists in newly free Arab societies. This is especially the case in those contexts where the preeminent tone of the political discussion has stressed the importance of constructing a civil, democratic, and non-sectarian political order. Islamists thus profess adherence to the “Turkish model” as an antidote to the suspicion among non-Islamists that the sole course Islamists follow is one premised on a fundamental incompatibility between Islamism and democracy.

An Elusive Definition

THE MAIN INTELLECTUAL ENERGIES OF MODERN ARAB ISLAMISM AND OF ISLAMISM more generally have not been devoted to the cultivation of theoretical or practical thinking about social, political, or economic affairs. Indeed, all of these areas of human thought and practice were underdeveloped in the Islamic scholastic tradition that Islamism appropriated for itself, and this has meant that modern Islamist intellectuals had very little to build upon. Instead, Arab Islamist political theory has focused its energies largely on identity construction and on the political reformulation of Islamic theology. While “Islam,” as understood by Islamists, is posited as the “Solution” to all that ails the Umma in the modern world, different Islamist movements, including the Muslim Brotherhood, have not produced a body of practical thinking about politics and economics that rises to Islamism’s utopian claims of comprehensiveness. While Islamists have incessantly disputed the best strategies and methods for acquiring political power, the topic of specifically governing has rarely been broached. The few attempts by civic-accommodationist Islamist thinkers, such as Hasan al-Turabi of Sudan and Rashid al-Ghanouchi of Tunisia, to formulate the outlines of a functional model of governance
have consistently been rejected by conservative and radical Islamists for their purported inconsistency with the undefined Islamist ideals of the Islamic State and Sharia.

Given the scholastic tradition’s lack of substantive precedents and the constant pressure from Islamism’s more ideologically intransigent ranks, Islamist thinkers who have sought to develop a theory and public discourse on democracy and modern governance have had limited options. Arab Islamism has therefore tended to look elsewhere for “success stories” and for workable models that could be replicated in the Arab context. Two models in particular have been most commonly referenced. The first is the “Malaysian model,” which has generally been disadvantaged in Arab Islamist circles due to Malaysia’s geographical and cultural remoteness, and the second is the “Turkish model.”

There is no consensus in Arab Islamist circles on the “Turkish model,” on its practical applicability within Arab societies, or even on its definition and essential characteristics. Instead, Arab Islamist discussion on the “Turkish model” has ranged widely, according both to the unique Arab locale where the model is invoked and also according to the Islamist movement that is referencing it. Because of the unfolding protests and revolutions across the region, the Arab Islamist discussion on the “Turkish model” can only be expected to undergo further alterations in the future. Still, in both Tunisia and in Egypt where actual revolutions have required a re-conceptualization of the social pact and political order, the “Turkish model” is already in currency and is already used to bolster and justify various positions—including conflicting ones.

In its most popular and clearly defined usage, Arab Islamists link the “Turkish model” with the rise to power and continued rule since 2002 of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, or AKP) in the democratic Republic of Turkey. The implicit idea in this Arab perspective is that AKP is at its core an Islamist movement that has managed to constitute itself as a modern party not only to acquire power but also to maintain its power and wield it effectively over time in a democratic political order. In this perspective, the “Turkish model” thus represents a form of Islamism that is compatible with the democratic process that is able to deliver and that is granted due recognition and legitimacy both in Turkey and internationally.

Arab Islamists also see AKP as a model for the project of Islamization. Since AKP is heir to a chain of religiously conservative as well as Islamist Turkish political parties, Arab Islamists often view Turkey’s ruling party as being engaged in the initial stages of a long-term “stealth” project whose purpose is to reclaim Turkish society and bring it back to Islam. Of course, AKP itself rejects this characterization, insisting that it is not an Islamist movement but an economically liberal and socially conservative center-right party that is, in important ways, modeled on the modern Christian democratic parties that emerged in twentieth century Europe. Since AKP’s rise has occurred within Kemalist Turkey and against the backdrop of a long history of official and institutional hostility to Islamic politics, Arab Islamists are generally not persuaded by AKP’s claims. Instead,
they have understood AKP’s silence on matters of concern to Islamists, and also AKP’s sporadic pronouncements about its character as a non-Islamist political party, as temporary political necessities designed to conceal the party’s true identity and intentions. Meanwhile, the dramatic social and semiotic rehabilitation of Islam in Turkey since AKP came to power (particularly through the normalization of the veil), as well as what has been widely regarded as Turkey’s gradual but unmistakable political realignment away from its traditional allies, the United States, Europe, and Israel, and toward states like Iran and Syria, are sufficient proof for Arab Islamists that AKP’s “stealth project” is indeed underway.

In such assessments of the “Turkish model,” Arab Islamists are effectively in agreement with secular Kemalist critics of AKP who also accuse the party of concealing a hidden Islamist agenda. In its regular engagements with Arab audiences, AKP’s leadership frequently maintains a fine line between its actions and statements that helps to nurture the popular impression of its crypto-Islamism. Through this outreach, AKP has arguably sought to secure its Islamist constituencies at home and enhance Turkish soft power abroad in Arab and Islamist circles, all the while maintaining a level of plausible deniability with respect to the accusations leveled against the party by its critics.

A Utilitarian Character

Today, but also prior to the dramatic changes underway in Arab politics, AKP’s success in repeating its electoral victories, overcoming legal and constitutional challenges, and securing persistent economic growth, the recourse to the “Turkish model” in Arab Islamism is primarily a utilitarian and tactical action—not a strategic one.

Arab Islamism often presumes itself to be superior to and far more advanced than its Turkish counterpart. The secularizing initiatives of Arab socialism had largely dissipated because of the discrediting of the Arab revolutionary regimes in the 1970s, and secularism as a whole lost its appeal for many who were trapped under the subsequently dismal rule of increasingly autocratic and kleptocratic Arab governments—whether monarchical, revolutionary, military, or “republican.” Whether in Iraq, where considerable legal gains for women were reversed by the Saddam Hussein regime following its rediscovery of the formidable power of religious totalitarianism, or in Tunisia, where the combination of forcibly secularist ideology and political repression obfuscated the native social foundations of the secular tradition, Islamists were soon able to dominate the oppositional discourse by injecting it with their ideological assertion that secularism is a Western import that is inconsistent with Muslim mores, values, and principles. Irrespective of the validity of the convictions, Arab Islamists claimed for their cultures and societies an essential
religious character in ways that were simply unattainable by their Turkish counterparts. In the Turkish setting, AKP went to considerable lengths to distance itself from any religious labeling, lest the deeply rooted secular Kemalist state disenfranchise it (as had happened to the Islamic parties that preceded AKP). In the Arab setting, the religious label was solemnly proclaimed by Islamist movements, and the regimes, partly in response to their Islamist opposition, strived to assert their own religious credentials and authority. In the Turkish setting, a woman wearing the veil was under pressure and scrutiny from the state and dominant culture; in Arab societies, women not wearing the veil felt increasingly intimidated.

While Arab Islamism in the modern era has exhibited an array of expressions—ranging from accommodation to irredentism and from populism to elitism—not a single Arab Islamist movement or formulation has ever advocated for a reduction of the place of religion in Arab society and culture. In the Islamist assessment, Arab societies may indeed be deficient in their embrace and practice of “Islam” (as understood by Islamism). Nonetheless, from an Islamist perspective, the place and status of the religion in Arab life remains far more “advanced” than in the hostile, secularist conditions Islam faces in the Turkish context, even with AKP in power. Thus, when Arab Islamists invoke the “Turkish model,” they do not posit it as an object of emulation in its entirety. It is primarily the adaptability of AKP to adverse conditions and its ability to survive and sustain its position of power in the context of hostile state structures and political culture that serve as a model. A crucial difference, from the Arab Islamists’ own assessment, is that the hostility to Islamism in Arab contexts stems from autocratic rulers propped-up by foreign powers and not—as it is in the Turkish case—from the local societies and culture.

The character of the protests that spread through the region beginning in December 2010 should have shaken people of this conviction altogether. Movements sprang up that appeared to be leaderless, largely spontaneous, and that championed principles that were decidedly non-Islamist, including freedom, empowerment, dignity, “people power,” national pride, and inter-religious community. The non-Islamist character of these protests caught the Islamists, together with all established political forces, by utter surprise. The absence in the protests of the familiar Islamist themes—such as “Islam as the Solution,” anti-Americanism, or the Palestinian cause—has spurred some Islamists to reappraise their societies and political cultures, as well as their positions as Islamists within them. At this early stage, the Islamists’ reassessments have displayed a considerable degree of adaptation to the new realities and politics of the Arab world through the embrace of the protests and their slogans. As of yet, however, these reappraisals do not contain any substantive explanation why Islamism’s prior dawa efforts to indoctrinate the population appear to have failed.

In fact, Arab Islamists have skirted the problem of their contemporary failure altogether. Just as they assume that AKP (despite the party’s claims to the contrary) is an
Islamist movement that is concealing a hidden agenda, the Islamist re-readings of the Arab protests likewise imply that these social movements are, at root, secretly Islamist but that these populations are engaged in a collective dissimulation of their ideological character. The crucial question as to why the Arab protest movements are currently hiding their true ideological bent—or for that matter, how a decentralized, if not leaderless, mass movement could implement and enforce such dissimulation in the first place—have remained conveniently sidelined in Arab Islamist discourse.

On the face of it, the belief that the Arab movements are hiding their true ideological and political ambitions reflects a degree of denial or self-deception about the reality of the political changes that are occurring in Arab societies. It may also be understood as an effort by the Islamists to avoid publicly embarrassing and internally weakening debate over why the Islamist movement has not been the primary author of this political change. Moreover, it also appears to be a deliberate effort to avoid outright conflict in the presently fluid situation, so as to best place Islamists in positions where they can usher still unfolding and malleable developments in directions consistent with the Islamist vision.

Indeed, a multitude of actors in the Islamic world and also in the West have already claimed credit for the Arab protests and revolutions, with the clear hope of shaping the future tenor of this overall political transformation. According to the leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the 1979 Iranian revolution served as the model and inspiration for the current Arab protests, which are signs of a widespread “Islamic Awakening.” The Iranian opposition, meanwhile, saw them as an echo of its own mass demonstrations in 2009 against the Islamic Republic’s harsh rule. In fractured Lebanon, the two feuding political coalitions have also claimed paternity for the protest movements. The Arab uprisings are thus either a continuation of the pro-liberation and democratic 2005 Cedar Revolution, or they are a manifestation of a sense of empowerment engendered by Hezbollah’s battle with Israel in 2006.

In the U.S., conservatives have argued that the protests are a vindication of the Bush Administration’s pro-democracy agenda, while liberals credit the words of President Obama for having been a motivation and inspiration. Google, Facebook, Twitter, WikiLeaks, and the writings of non-violence advocate, Gene Sharp, have all been proposed as instrumental.

AKP, which has strived to put their own mark on regional affairs, has itself not been able to resist the temptation of laying claim to the upheavals in the Arab world. According to the Turkish Prime Minister and leader of AKP, Recep Tayip Erdogan, the inspiration was evidently Turkey and its “advanced democracy.” The use of the AKP claim in internal Turkish politics notwithstanding, Islamists of various persuasions have instrumentalized the numerous opportunities in the Arab context. However, the Turkish claim in particular may have a special impact on intra-Arab discussions, and it may be integrated into the current Arab Islamist narrative about Turkey and the “Turkish model.”
A Conflicted Narrative

Islamism is the productive grand narrative that has dominated the political discourse of Arab opposition movements since the late 1970s. It traces its immediate origins to the fusion of two currents of Islamic thought. The first of these currents is the political theology of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, which emphasizes activism (in the form of dawa, education, or jihad) over pietism as the main characteristic and obligation of truly Islamic life. The second tendency is the Saudi Wahhabi-Salafist stipulation that political legitimacy resides exclusively in a fixed Islamic framework. In this stream, political sovereignty belongs only and indivisibly to God; all modern forms of government, whether formed on the basis of popular will or tyranny, are thus un-Islamic and illegitimate. The fusion of the Brotherhood activism imperative and the Salafist teaching on exclusive legitimacy has manifested in many variants with different emphasis. Over time, some of these Islamist formulations have proven more stable and durable than others.

In the 1970s, Islamism was propelled to the fore of Arab political discourse through the defeat and retreat of secular Arab nationalism and socialism. The Arab nationalist project emphasized an historical periodization that allocated the centuries of Ottoman rule to an era of decline; this was preceded by an Arab “Golden Age” and was ostensibly followed in the post-colonial modern era by an Arab Renaissance. The denigration of the Ottoman past was an essential component of Arab nationalist efforts to build up new national identities; it was required especially for the transition from the Ottoman-era conceit of a collective Islamic Umma—which included Turks, Persians, Muslims, and Muslim Arabs, but which excluded Christians, Jews, and other non-Muslims—to an Arab national Umma—which reversed the previous pattern of exclusion and inclusion, with non-Arabs out and non-Muslim Arabs in. Naturally, this politically-driven denigration of the Ottoman past was most pronounced in Arab locales where religious diversity was more manifest, particularly in the Levant but also in Egypt and Iraq. In contrast, in the religiously, mostly homogeneous Maghreb, the transition was superfluous; Arab and Muslim identity labels were and remained largely interchangeable (until the more recent emergence of assertive Amazigh, or Berber, nationalism).

With the decline in the latter part of the 20th Century of Arab nationalism and the concomitant rise of Islamist political discourse, the rehabilitation of the Ottoman episode in Arab history might have been expected. However, the renewed political importance in Arab Islamist discourse of things Ottoman—including the conceit of the transnational Islamic Umma—was hampered by two complicating factors, both of which were tied to Arab Islamist perceptions of modern Turkey. First, prior to the successive rise
in the 1980s of the Turkish Welfare and Virtue parties (both precursors of AKP), Turkey was widely viewed as the embodiment of aggressive secularism, and this of course was anathema to Arab Islamism. Second, the institutional veneration within Turkey of the modern republic’s founder, Kemal Ataturk, was widely understood to be the aspiration of secular Arab autocrats, Arab Islamism’s declared enemies. Since a rehabilitation of the Ottoman legacy would reflect positively on modern Turkey, and since this would help to validate potentially counter-productive elements, Arab Islamism was certainly not inclined to appropriate the Ottoman legacy wholesale.

The Arab nationalists’ dissociation between Arab and Turkish history and identity thus preserved its value for Islamists, albeit for different political ends. Furthermore, despite Islamist assertions to the contrary, Islamist doctrine has never been devoid of nationalist influences. Both 19th century Egypt and the Saudi-Wahhabi Kingdom in the 18th and 19th centuries had entered into bitter conflicts with the Ottoman Sultanate. The enmities these historical conflicts engendered were subsequently exploited by 20th century nationalists (who explained these historical rivalries as evidence of proto-nationalist stands) to reinforce the distinction between Arab and Turk. This originally nationalist formulation further fed the emergence of provincial and parochial identities and ultimately outlived its nationalist authors.

These parochial cultures and identities were subsequently inserted into and also camouflaged by Arab Islamist doctrinal propositions. To many Salafis, for example, who were socialized in the Saudi-Wahhabi heritage, aversion to things Ottoman and Turkish expressed itself through the rejection and hatred of Sufism, which had flourished in Ottoman times. In Egyptian Islamist discourse, the corruption of the Ottoman State, its pro-Western economic and political orientation in its latter days, and the empire’s almost willing subjugation by European powers justified the continued denigration of the Ottoman era and Kemalist republic.13

Modern Arab Islamism, like the Arab nationalist movement before it, has also utilized a tripartite periodization of Islamic history—dividing it into a Golden Age, an era of humiliating weakness and decline, and a contemporary reemergence or revival. Islamism has, however, produced two versions of political historiography—one minimalistic and one maximalistic. In the minimalist version, the Golden Age extended only for a few decades after the death of the Prophet, and it was followed by a protracted, millennium-long corruption of the original Islamic state and religion. Corrective actions, the Islamists maintained, were thus undertaken in the modern era by the Islamic revival movement. In the maximalist version, the Golden Age lasted for the near totality of worldwide Islamic history, which ended only in 1924 when Kemal Ataturk abolished the Caliphate and created the modern Turkish Republic. In this telling of history, the Islamist movement is the restorative force that emerged to put an end to the original aberration and injustice of western-imposed modernity.
Liberal and accommodationist Islamists are generally in agreement with the maximalist version of Islamic history, while most radical Islamists lean towards the minimalist version. While the Salafist movement, the main expression of radical Islamism, has consistently sought to stifle what it deems as deviance in ideology and historical understanding and thus adheres to the minimalist version, the embrace of the maximalist version by al-Qaeda, the principal violent Salafi network, may have been intended to defuse futile disputes about history that were dividing the jihad movement and to re-focus the energy on broad mobilization. The by-product of this, however, was the removal of an obstacle within Arab Islamist discourse to sympathetic assessments of the Ottoman Empire.

As a consequence, the full rehabilitation of the Ottoman legacy in the eyes of the Arab Islamist movement and its incorporation into the Islamist narrative took place over several decades. The gradual ascendancy to political rule of an indigenous Turkish strain of Islamism (as seen in the succession of the Welfare and Virtue Parties, followed by AKP), combined with the ideological assault on this movement by Kemalist and other political rivals who regarded it as a threat to secularism and to the republic as a whole, helped to instigate a new narrative about Turkey in Arab Islamist discourse. With the rise to power of AKP in 2002, modern Turkey no longer embodied the ever-present danger of a secular and successful counter-model to all that Islamism was and all that it strived to achieve. Instead, the emergence of AKP’s Turkey was, from the Arab Islamist point of view, clearly and undeniably a demonstration of Islamism’s inevitable and unstoppable rise to worldwide prominence and influence.

Another main reason for the rise of AKP’s Turkey as a model for Arab Islamists was the lack of alternatives. The Hosni Mubarak regime in Egypt and the Saudi monarchy had actively suppressed Islamist movements within their realms and maintained an unwavering strategic alliance with the United States. This alliance effectively excluded Egypt and Arabia as a referential home base for Islamism. Alternatives in the Arab world proved elusive. Sudan lacked the infrastructure for such a role, and its experimentation with Islamism (1989-1999) degenerated into chaos and autocracy. Algeria’s Islamization was interrupted by the military voiding a putative Islamist electoral victory at the cost of plunging the country into civil war. Arab Islamists had to seek alternatives outside of the Arab world. Afghanistan may have been an attractive destination and incubator for militant radical Islamists, but its remoteness and its backward and harsh political culture made it unsuitable as a reference and as a model, especially for accommodationist Islamists. Sunni Arab Islamists’ temptation to adopt the Islamic Republic of Iran as a patron and a model survived the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, which pitted Shiite and Persian Iran against the pseudo-nationalist regime of Saddam Hussein (and also helped to slow the demise of Arab nationalism and Sunni Islamism’s subsequent ascendancy). It was, however, complicated by the emergence of Sunni-Shiite tensions across the region.
benefits that a Sunni Arab movement derived from an alliance with Iran had to be urgent, necessary, and able to be satisfied nowhere else in order to counter-balance the negative effects of an alliance with a regional power increasingly perceived as a threat to both the Sunni and Arab identities. Only Hamas, in its declared need to combat Israel and its near isolation in the Arab context, could afford an open alliance with Iran. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, on the other hand, has been forced to engage in multiple balancing acts to explain its relationship with Iran, which has often seemed to be more of a liability than an asset.

While the “Turkish model” was for many Arab Islamists weak in its lack of Islamic assertiveness and thus unconvincing, it ultimately emerged as one of a few viable options for a concrete proposition in Islamist discourse. The “Neo-Ottoman” ambitions of AKP-ruled Turkey, which have been manifested in Turkey’s dramatically enhanced economic and political role in the Arab Middle East, offered many Islamists the promise of a Sunni alternative to Iran. The attractiveness of this promise was undeterred by the de facto preference of the Turkish government to seek alliances with and patronage of counterparts in Arab governments, even when these government partners or clients were hostile to Islamists within their own countries—such as Assad’s Syria and Qaddafi’s Libya. When assessed in Ankara’s own terms, Turkish actions have been entirely consistent with the aspirations of a rising and newly affluent regional superpower—and not the result of any new ideologically-motivated agenda. The sense of despair and malaise resulting from decades of autocratic repression and marginalization had led many accommodationist Islamists to value even symbolic gestures. Thus, the “open door” policy that Turkey, as both a government and civil society, had adopted towards the Muslim Brotherhood and other accommodationist Arab Islamist leaders—in the form of invitations to political and cultural events—kept the promise of Turkey’s emergence as a benefactor of Arab Islamism alive. For many Syrian Islamists, including the leadership of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in exile, the solidifying relations between Ankara and Damascus were assessed positively as potentially providing the Syrian autocratic regime with the confidence and impetus to adopt some measure of political openness. In Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine, accommodationist Islamists persisted in their hopes that AKP’s Turkey would emerge as a champion for their respective causes. The verbal rebuke of Israeli President Shimon Peres by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayip Erdogan in Davos in January 2009 and the death of nine Turkish activists in an Israeli commando raid on an unauthorized attempt by an aid flotilla to approach the Gaza Strip in May 2010 provided further proof of a concrete possibility of patronage from Ankara for Arab Islamists.

Irrespective of the intentions or convictions of AKP’s leadership, the promise of a Neo-Ottoman clientelism in Arab societies served as a vector for projecting Turkish soft power. The introduction of Arabic-language media to both television broadcast (with the Turkish government network, TRT, adding an Arabic channel to its line-up) and web-based
portals—both imbued with the deliberate ambiguity of suggesting affinity to Arab Islamism while maintaining plausible deniability—is clearly aimed at consolidating this soft power.

Hybridity in a Changing Landscape

With the demise of the Mubarak regime in Egypt and of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, the elements making the “Turkish model” attractive had already changed. Poised to benefit from the end of political repression in Egypt, the newly organized political party of the Muslim Brotherhood has continued to seek ties and potentially a deeper alliance with Turkish AKP. In a post-Mubarak Egypt, this alliance might develop on the basis of affinity and general interests. However, the Muslim Brotherhood no longer benefits from establishing relations with AKP the way it might have under autocratic rule. Instead, whether the Muslim Brotherhood emerges as the dominant force in the next parliamentary elections, slated for September 2011, or merely as an important minority bloc in parliament, the primary task that Arab Islamists expect of the Egyptian Brotherhood is the restoration of its status as a patron and as a model for other Islamist formations. Even with the severe restrictions imposed on it during the Mubarak regime, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood prided itself on having been the inspiration and intellectual weight behind the emergence of Islamist movements across the Muslim world, including Turkey. An emboldened Muslim Brotherhood might not have the structural power to serve as a patron for AKP, but the Brotherhood now is unlikely to engage Ankara as a client.

Over time, the affinity between the Egyptian Brotherhood and AKP may net a cordial but rather formal relationship. But the new Egyptian political scene will generate further diverging assessments of the AKP experience and the “Turkey model.” From the Salafi perspective, the “Turkey model” merely has an Islamic veneer; its actual content is derived from the Western political experience, and it is thus rejected as a false illusion and a bridgehead of liberal thought into the Islamist realm. At the other end of the Egyptian Islamist spectrum, accommodationist Islamists, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood who have organized as the New Center Party (Hizb al-Wasat al-Jadid, headed by Abu al-Ala Madi Abu al-Ala),15 have appropriated the “Turkish model” in a novel and substantive way, which may conform to the Salafi characterization of “bridgehead.” Presently, the direction to which this “bridgehead” will ultimately be pointed remains unresolved. The New Center Party may still opt to sharpen its Islamist message in the new and more open atmosphere of Egyptian politics; indications are emerging that this may indeed be the case, with a more explicit Islamist agenda being professed. However, the current platform of the New Center Party, including its futile attempt to satisfy the
debilitating demands of the Mubarak regime’s political party supervisory body, adopts AKP-like ambiguity in its formulation of its position.

The New Center Party has thus emerged as a hybrid entity, unique in the Islamist universe, that displays civil forms and an underlying Islamist content. The internal cohesion of the hybrid proposition is almost irrelevant to its function. Hybridity may serve as a conduit, a virtual purgatory, for a presently largely undecided public to use as a future bridge to move from one ideological orientation to another. The direction of the flow will largely be dependent upon the ideological composition of the particular population and upon the character of the dominant mode of ideological discourse. Thus, in an environment saturated with Islamist assertions and exposed to an ascendant liberal discourse, hybridity could plausibly help to transit individuals invested in Islamism towards liberalism. Alternatively, in an environment with established liberal convictions subjected to a crisis in democracy and a re-assertive Islamism, hybridity could perform the opposite role, serving as a temporary container that would expunge liberal ideas and prepare individuals to embrace Islamism again. Hybridity may be a two-way street in all cases; it is however biased towards serving the dominant ideological proposition.

The situation of Egypt’s January 25th revolution and its immediate aftermath is consistent with the first scenario. Islamism may have dominated the protest scene prior to the revolution, but it has been stunned and overtaken by events that are driven largely by secular, non-Islamist aspirations. Hybridity, in the short term, may work to deplete Islamism while siphoning away supporters and preparing them for liberal thinking. However, once the revolutionary euphoria is affected by the inevitable disappointments and once an Islamist plan of counter-action is put into place, the second scenario may materialize with hybridity operating to reclaim non-committed or disillusioned populations for Islamism. May we expect that the Islamist-to-civil democracy conduit will gather together a critical mass that is capable of competing with and fending off assorted Islamist efforts at reclaiming the initiative? Or does hybridity constitute instead an ultimately unnecessary and potentially counterproductive delay in the confirmation of secular and civil democratic values in a public that, even when religiously devout and conservative, has not previously displayed an attachment to Islamism? These important questions will eventually be answered by still unfolding events, which will ultimately reveal whose prognosis amongst the Islamist and secular critics of the New Center Party is correct. Of course, these questions and concerns parallel those raised in regard to AKP in Turkey. Is AKP a manifestation of a democratic process of inclusion that has incorporated a conservative and religious population into a polity that is fundamentally and irrevocably democratic and secular? Or is AKP a corrosive force that will either inadvertently or deliberately weaken the civil and secular foundations of modern Turkey and that will prepare the country for Islamism?

The Egyptian New Center Party presents itself as a civil and democratic movement
that embraces and operates within an Islamic frame of reference. The party thus claims absolute values to be reified and implemented as a function of relative conditions. Its understanding of the place of Islam in public and social life is based on a distinction made between Islamic absolutes, which are beyond the realm of questioning and inquiry, and social relatives, which are subject to human judgment. The centrist position, one that acknowledges the absolutes and engages in the exploration of the relatives, is mid-way between the rationalist dismantling of absolutes and the radical Islamist virtual elimination of the relatives. The party presents its platform and agenda in contradiction to the Muslim Brotherhood’s withdrawn and rejectionist tendencies, and even more to the Salafists, who engage in “absolutizing the relative.” The party also defines itself in opposition to what it claims are “Western” political ideologies that reject the notion of absolute values altogether. As noted earlier, the New Center Party may be able to win recruits and mobilize voters regardless of its ideological cohesiveness (an arguably attainable standard for any party). Over the longer term, however, the party’s ability to defend its agenda of absolute values and relative implementations against the massive Islamist output that has limited the space of relativity remains its Achilles heel. In an environment still saturated with Islamist discourse, the New Center Party may appear to be an attractive vehicle for liberal ideas. But to invoke one further Homeric metaphor, it is also fair to ask whether the party’s Islamic frame of reference is an Islamist Trojan horse.

The position of the Nahdah party in Tunisia may be characterized as being midway between that of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and that of the New Center Party. Nahdah is more assertive with its Islamism than the New Center but even more accommodationist with respect to liberal principles than the Muslim Brotherhood, which has yet to revise its negative stance on the assumption of positions of leadership by women and non-Muslims. However, in Tunisia, just as it is in modern Turkey, the dominant and institutional form of political discourse is avowedly secularist. While the heavy-handed and often anti-religious practices of the Ben Ali regime had eroded some of the country’s native attachments to secularism, the revolution of January 8th has reinvigorated secular, liberal voices and they have begun to reassert the indigenous character of their convictions. In response to this, Nahdah and other Islamists have proposed a distinction between “secularity” (ilmaniyah) and “secularism” (la’ikiyyah, from the French laïcité), the former being native to Tunisia and inclusive and the latter being imposed from the outside or by a political authority and restrictive. The Nahdah’s stated aim is thus to widen the political space and to bring into the political fold those Islamist and religious individuals who were previously excluded by the regime and who may seek radical formulations in response to their alienation. Nahdah is also an expression of hybridity. But will it ultimately serve Islamization or the advance of a more inclusive, representational, and secular (as opposed to secularist) political order? Both the role and controversy
surrounding the place and function of the Nahdah party in Tunisian society bear considerable resemblance to those affecting AKP in Turkey.

In the two Arab societies that have embarked upon regime change by toppling autocrats—Tunisia and Egypt—the “Turkish model” is currently being applied. The model in question, however, is not one of synthesis and development, but it is rather one of ambiguity and hybridity. The “Turkish model” is in fact being emulated by hybrid political groups positioned at a presumed intersection of civil democracy and Islamism. Unfortunately, previous experimentations with such hybrid formulations involving Islamism across the globe (Iran, Sudan, and Gaza) have suggested that stricter expressions of Islamism ultimately prevail. This may be less due to procedural and operational aspects of hybridity than to the homogenizing resilience of Islamism as an ideology. Will the proposed hybrid formulations succeed in creating lasting alternatives to conventional Islamism? While not readily promising, in the hard-won reality of free expression, ideologies ought to live and die in the marketplace of ideas. Egypt and Tunisia have therefore newly emerged as locales where the “Turkish model” is being emulated and tested and thus where the model will either be vindicated or rejected as long as the choice is really free.

NOTES

1. An illustrative portal for the Egyptian revolution, reflecting its multitude of voices and displaying its diverse slogans is http://egypt-revolution.info/ar.
2. Compare, for example, the consistent prior rejection by Abu Yahya al-Libi for any action undertaken outside of the leadership of radical Islamist jihad and his current endorsement of the Libyan revolution as expressing the will of the people. See http://www.archive.org/download/Libya_ABO_YAHYA/Message.To.The.People.of.Libya.WMV.
3. For an example of radical Islamist brainstorming on the lessons learned from the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, and a discussion of next steps to undertake, see al-munis bi-fawaid wa-ibar intifadatay Misr wa-Tunis (the companion to the lessons of the uprisings of Egypt and Tunis), serialized by Hamzah b. Muhammad al-Bassam and diffused in Islamist forums.
4. For an assessment on the official Muslim Brotherhood website of the Turkish reception of the Malaysian model, see http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.asp?ArtID=31241&SecID=341 [in Arabic].
5. For an overview of internal Islamist debates on the Turkish model, see http://www.assafir.com/MulhakArticle.aspx?EditionId=1778&MulhakArticleId=83439&MulhakId=1340 [in Arabic].
6. An example is provided by the Iraqi newspaper al-Mada (http://almadapaper.net/news.php?action=view&id=37773) quoting Erdogan in his March 28th, 2011 address to the Iraqi parliament urging Iraqi unity: “Everyone is following your news, in Istanbul, Kabul, Darfur, Gaza, Ramallah, and Jericho; the more you are united, the more everyone is united.”
7. A compendium of the slogans of the Egyptian revolutions is provided and endorsed on the Muslim Brotherhood site at http://www.ikhwanonline.com/new/Article.aspx?ArtID=79108&SecID=0.
8. An example of an assessment of the “overlooked role” of islamist activists is provided by a participant at http://shabelikwan.net/ib/index.php?showtopic=24368. Their relative absence, in his opinion, is reflective of a Mubarak regime campaign of harassment and arrests, and of a subsequent anti-Islamist media effort.
12. http://www.economist.com/blogs/newsbook/2011/03/turkey_and_its_region: “Recep Tayip Erdogan, thinks he can take credit for the wave of protests sweeping the Arab world. ‘Which country were they inspired by?’ he asked the Turkish parliament recently. He answered his own question: Turkey, with its ‘advanced democracy’.”
14. See for example the al-Qaeda video release, Ayman al-Zawahiri’s “Message to the Turkish Muslim People” (August 2010) in which the Ottoman State is rehabilitated as a manifestation of the Caliphate.