

The emergence of a new Arab world?

By Ibrahim Kalin

Events of historic proportions are happening in the Arab world. What began in Tunisia and Egypt is set to change the face of the Middle East forever. Many in the West are scrambling to understand exactly what is happening. It is similar to the *déjà vu* of the Iranian Revolution of 1979. How and why in the world have we not seen this coming?

And everybody is asking what will come next. This is a legitimate question. But it is also a misplaced one because it underestimates the significance of what has been happening in the Arab world. One cannot have a reliable forecast without understanding the socio-political dynamics of the Arab world that have led to the ousting of two autocrats and probably more.

A key dynamic is certainly the demand to end decades-long autocracies. Contrary to what some analysts claim, Arabs do not see autocratic regimes as a natural result of their culture, religion or history. They consider these regimes as puppets of powerful Western countries and out of touch with the realities of the Arab world. They have brought neither security, nor freedom or prosperity to their people. So why carry on with them?

This may sound unrealistic at the moment, but removing autocratic regimes in the Arab world and instead establishing democratic governments may open a new page for relations between the West and the Arab world. Working with democratic government as equals, the US may cease to be the protector of oppression and corruption in the Arab world. It may even seize the moment to be consistent in its domestic and foreign policy and defend, for instance, freedom and prosperity for every one anywhere in the world. The same holds true for a number of European countries that have heavy engagements in the Arab world.

The question is whether the US and European countries are ready for this?

In one way or another, a new political leadership will emerge in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and elsewhere. Countries like Yemen and Bahrain will also adjust themselves to meet popular demands for more representation and transparency. The key concern seems to be the composition and direction of this new leadership. Will the Nahda movement led by Rashid al-Ghannushi take over in Tunisia? Will the Muslim Brotherhood turn Egypt into a Shariah state with an anti-American, anti-Israeli policy? Will the new Arab political systems bring Arab societies closer to democracy?

It was these sorts of considerations that created and maintained the status quo in much of the Arab world. Autocrats frequently used several arguments. One was the fear of chaos: If and when I am gone, the country will descend into disorder. This is what Mubarak said only a day before he eventually exited. What he meant was clear: I am Egypt, Egypt is nothing without me! Everybody knows now how the Egyptians responded to this kind of “I am the country”’s paranoia.

The second argument, more effective in the West than in the Muslim world, has been the fear of an Islamist takeover. When the unpopular autocrat leaves, the Islamists take over the country, turn it into a theocracy, declare war on the West, etc. Israel’s security has its share in this calculation, too. The result: Israel, which claims to be the only democracy in the Middle East, lobbies for autocracies in the Arab world. (No surprise that the Israelis were making frantic calls to Mubarak not to leave power until the last minute).

This myth is still powerful in the Western halls of power. But it will eventually go away. Democracy will transform even the most radical movements, whether religious, socialist or nationalist. It is time to overcome the “what if” scenarios, and let the Arabs speak and decide for themselves.

This is the *Zeitgeist* for the Arab world now.

Is Turkey a model for the Arab world?

According to a recent survey published by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV), Turkey is perceived as a positive actor and a rising power among the peoples of the Middle East. Contrary to claims that Arabs are not happy about Turkey’s increasing role in the region, the survey suggests that Arabs want to see Turkey playing an even bigger role. Why?

The TESEV report on the perception of Turkey in the Middle East is based on interviews with 2,267 people in seven Arab countries (Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Saudi Arabia) and Iran. The interviewees asked about Turkey’s role in the Middle East, Turkey’s EU membership, Turkey as a model for other countries and perceptions of other countries, including the US, China and Israel.

Several results stand out. First of all, 75 percent view Turkey favourably. The questions covered a number of

areas, such as Turkish diplomacy in the region, the economy, tourism and democracy. Turkey is seen as playing a very positive role through its mediation efforts in the region. From the Palestinian issue to the Iranian nuclear program, many consider Turkey to be a problem-solving actor. What is even more interesting is that 78 percent believe that Turkey should play a bigger role in the region.

Besides Turkey's diplomacy and mediation role, Turkey is seen as a democratic country. This places Turkey above many of its neighbours in the region. Despite the heavy presence of the military in Arab perceptions of Turkey, Turkish democracy comes out as a distinctive feature that can inspire other countries. Moreover, 66 percent believe that Turkey can be a model for other countries, and the main reason mentioned (again 66 percent) is that Turkey has been able to reconcile Islam and democracy.

The third important factor for Turkey's favourable image in the region is its economy. Not many people realize that Turkey (\$800 billion) is the largest economy in the Muslim world ahead of Indonesia (\$700 billion), Saudi Arabia (\$450 billion) and Iran (\$350 billion). In the Arab Middle East, Saudi Arabia is still seen as the biggest economic power. But now this is changing, too. As Turkish companies and products become more visible and established in the Arab market, Turkey will soon be seen as the real economic giant in the region.

Democracy, Islam, the economy and foreign policy are the four main indicators that measure the current perceptions of Turkey in the Middle East. Do these elements make Turkey a model? Some think so. But the model debate is a slippery one and has many flaws. First of all, Turkey does not project itself as a model for anyone. President Abdullah Gül, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and other Justice and Development Party (AK Party) officials have said this on many occasions. They rightly avoid any patronizing language or attitude towards others.

Secondly, conceiving a model for Arab countries is a way of forcing change upon them and would not be very different from President Bush's failed "democracy and freedom agenda." What needs to be done in most Arab countries is clear: better governance, ending corruption, establishing institutions of democracy, free and fair elections and better economic policies. These are clear-cut goals and have become universal policies. Arab countries do not need Turkey or another country to implement these policies in their own countries.

There is another problem with the current model debate. Those who were very critical of Turkey until recently now present it as a model for the Arab world because they seem to establish a hierarchy of democracies. First, we have the autocratic Arab regimes. Second, there is the semi-democratic (and somewhat unruly) Turkey. And thirdly, we have the advanced democracies of the West. Since, the argument goes, Arabs cannot nourish and sustain the culture and institutions of democracy as they developed in advanced countries, they should imitate a country like Turkey.

This is a flawed analysis and far from grasping the realities of the Arab world. As we have seen in Tunisia and Egypt, the Arab public cares about both the culture and institutions of democracy and wants to see them implemented in their countries. Turkey may have served as a source of inspiration because of its democracy, growing economy and active foreign policy. But this does not mean that Arabs are clueless about what kind of a political system they should adopt and should therefore look to Turkey.

The TESEV survey shows that Turkey is likely to increase its profile in the Middle East as a constructive player. This should be a welcome development for everyone because the problems in the region require the presence of more positive and constructive players.

These articles were originally published by Turkish Press.com (Plymouth, Michigan) on February 24 2011. They are now reproduced with gratitude and a Chinese translation by special permission of their author.

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