

## Analysis

May 5, 2011

**Summary:** Since the Arab Spring dawned, Turkey's potential value as an inspiration for and facilitator of reform in the Middle East and North Africa has been a heated topic of discussion. Turkish civil society — which has played an important role in Turkey's transformation — may be able to play a more consistent and active role than official Ankara in helping neighbors along the long-term path of building a culture of democracy. For this to materialize, there is a need for synergy between Turkish and European counterparts, as well as an informed demand from Turkey's respective neighbors. The continuation of Turkey's Europeanization journey will also be important for Turkey's far-reaching contribution to positive change in the joint neighborhood of Turkey and the EU.

## Europe's Neighborhood: Can Turkey Inspire?

by Diba Nigar Göksel

Since the Arab Spring dawned, Turkey's potential value as an inspiration for and facilitator of reform in the Middle East and North Africa has been a heated topic of discussion. Critics have been concerned that this debate would both work against Turkey's EU integration by distracting intellectual and political attention and complicate domestic political dynamics through overemphasis on Turkey's Muslim identity — in essence making Turkey more *Middle Eastern* rather than spreading reform and open society. Though Turkey's intensified engagement in the MENA region is inevitable, the shape of Turkey's influence is not predetermined. The concentration of the debate should already be on how to make Turkey's influence a positive one, while mitigating potential risks.

Recalling the significant role that interaction between Turkish and European civil society played in driving Turkey's positive change raises the question of whether Turkey's civil society development and related institutional transition experiences are transposable to the EU's southern neighborhood. Looking more closely at the concrete example of Turkey's experiences in adapting European approaches to women's rights can shed light on the feasibility of this notion.

Given vested interests and strategic limitations, Turkey's official approach to democratization in the region is expected to involve contradictions and may on occasion strain relations with the Western alliance as well as with counterparts in the neighborhood. Ankara's diplomatic efforts to counsel democratic reform in the region (with an initiative ongoing in Syria currently) have so far yielded little or no results. In contrast, Turkish civil society may be able to play a more consistent and active role in assisting neighbors who venture on the long-term endeavor of building a culture of democracy. For this to materialize, there is a need for synergy between Turkish and European counterparts, as well as an informed demand from Turkey's respective neighbors. The continuation of Turkey's Europeanization journey will also be important for Turkey's far-reaching contribution to positive change among its neighbors.

### Turkey's Not-so-Unique Formula

The freedoms and opportunities enjoyed in Turkey that set it apart in Europe's neighborhood have largely been a function of Turkey's Europeanization. Over recent decades, Western literature and interaction with European counterparts played an important

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role in building awareness among Turkish journalists, activists, and intellectuals. Benchmarking of European standards by NGOs and EU leverage — particularly after candidacy was achieved in 1999 — played a central role. This was distinctly the case in bringing about revolutionary legal reform progressive state policies towards gender equality.<sup>1</sup> Though these European influences have taken on a life of their own in Turkey, some of the most challenging steps lie ahead.

Turkey and the Muslim Middle East share traditions and structural economic challenges that obstruct women's equal standing in public life and trap women in controlling social networks. Social services and public administration fall short of compensating for these socioeconomic realities. These problems do not mean Turkey is regressing. In fact, many of today's challenges can be characterized as transition pains. Breaking through the current plateau in women's empowerment requires holistic policy design, political will, and continued socioeconomic change

Just as the problems are not Muslim, neither are the solutions. The wheel needs neither to be re-invented, nor adapted to a Muslim context. Spain, also traditionally patriarchal, lagged behind Europe in gender equality and violence until recently. It has, over the past two decades, not only caught up, but surpassed most other European countries in terms of gender parity — with relevant legislation, strengthening of law enforcement institutions, and allocation of resources to this end. To the extent that Turkey takes Spain as a model, so can a country like Egypt take Turkey as one. In short, for more effective regional democracy inspira-

tion and assistance, Turkey needs to deepen and consolidate its Europeanization journey, not stall mid-stream.

#### Dissecting Soft Power — The Place of Islam

Turkey's potential influence in the Arab world is a function, among other things, of shared religion and the related cultural affinity. The Turkish Prime Minister's high-profile defiance of Israel, and his defending various controversial Muslim leaders on Western platforms arguably compounded Turkey's popularity on the Arab street. In fact, Turkey's secularism and good relations with the West are seen as *obstacles* to Turkey serving as a model in the Middle East by a sizeable proportion of Arab societies.<sup>2</sup> Should we conclude that it is mutually exclusive for Turkey to intensify its Eastern and Western engagement? Not necessarily.

The kind of engagement that empowering intellectuals in the Arab world calls for is not the same kind of populist engagement that arousing the Arab street involves. Turkey's having a seat at Euro-Atlantic tables and raising its democratic and development levels are important pillars of its traction in the neighborhood.

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Informed choices by opinion leaders and politicians of the respective recipient neighboring countries will determine which aspects of the Turkish experience are utilized. Ultimately, the liberal young political activists of Tunisia who are cautious about alienating conservative voters can, for example, point to the legal framework in Turkey while advocating that equal rights for women does not mean a split from Islamic conviction. In their long struggle lobbying conservative parliamentarians for progressive

<sup>1</sup> ESI report: Sex and Power in Turkey. Feminism, Islam and the Maturing of Turkish Democracy (2 June 2007), [www.esiweb.org](http://www.esiweb.org)

<sup>2</sup> The Perception of Turkey in the Middle East 2010, TESEV, 2 February 2011



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reform, Turkish women's movement activists have in the past also justified their demands by drawing on examples from other Muslim countries. Developing the relatively weak ties between Turkish human rights advocates, journalists, dissidents, youth movements, women's civil society organizations, and civil society organizations in the common neighborhood of Turkey and the EU is important.

### Over-rating the role of Islam in solutions to basic problems that require strong institutions, civic participation, and economic development would be a mistake.

Turkey's experiment with using faith to promote progressive change may also be relevant for some Muslim reform advocates. For example, in order to promote girls' education, besides infrastructure development, monetary incentives, and penalties for families that withhold their daughters from school, Turkish Imams have been tasked with delivering supportive messages in Friday prayers across the country.<sup>3</sup> Another case in point is the ongoing scholarly review of hadiths (sayings and traditions attributed to Prophet Muhammad), with a view to weed out the suggestions of women's secondary status. Promoting progressive interpretation of religion can arguably empower women's struggle against discrimination in conservative environments. However, such initiatives can not replace, but only supplement, law, effective enforcement, protection mechanisms, civic mobilization, and political will. Over-rating the role of Islam in solutions to basic problems that require strong institutions, civic participation, and economic development would be a mistake. Along the same lines, while Turkey's Muslim culture can reinforce its inspirational strength, substantiating this influence will require more concrete engagement with the needs of the people.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.ungei.org/gaproject/turkey\\_422.html](http://www.ungei.org/gaproject/turkey_422.html)

### Seeking Synergy

There is no clean-cut model for the winds of change in the neighborhood stretching from North Africa to Central Eurasia. Not only is each society in the region very different from the other, but they are also presented with a wide range of competing examples. Given how polarized Turkey is domestically, it should come as no surprise that different groups from Turkey itself attempt to export disparate so-called Turkey-models to prospective recipients. One need only look at Azerbaijan, to which ethnic nationalist networks and Muslim brotherhood networks from Turkey have been advocating contrasting visions for two decades. From that example, one can conclude that if there is a risk, it is that the West-oriented liberal democrats in Turkey — who have played the biggest role in Turkey's own transformation — risk falling behind in the race to influence neighbors. Neighbors motivated by the liberalization phase of Turkey's complex evolution need to play a proactive role to engage these segments of Turkish society.

While Turkish women's NGOs have experience working in social settings defined by tribal structures in Eastern Turkey, European women's NGOs have valuable experience gained by East European EU accession. On issues such as utilizing social media, the transmission may very well be reversed; Turkish social movements have much to learn from some of their neighbors' more active use of such Internet resources. The United States may be most influential in spreading values and activism through education, while Georgia has the most recent example of radical reform of police force.

Rather than assuming Turkey possesses an upper hand on the basis of popularity among neighboring masses, more modesty is called for to find synergy. To get plugged into the causes of reformists in the region and to play a more active role in their affairs, Turkish civil society and media is already benefitting from the language skills, sources, experiences, and funding of their Western counterparts.

Until recently, those in Turkey with a Western-oriented outlook largely neglected Eurasia and the Middle East; vice versa, Turkish groups with networks and advocacy among Eastern neighbors were not plugged in to the Western policy community. This is slowly changing but to find synergy between Turkish and European civil society in a more substantial and lasting way, adaptation of visions, resources, and structures will be important.



### Conclusion

The argument that Turkey does not need Europe because it possesses stand-alone regional power is misplaced, but it has been seeping into the Turkish mainstream. Turkey's EU vocation is still critical not only for strategic reasons but also for more effective use of soft power and to be a stronger role model. Turkey is yet to prove that it can sustainably overcome some of the major problems it shares with its Eastern neighbors. How Turkey deals with the challenges ahead will also be critical in determining whether Turkey can continue to inspire its neighbors — Muslim or otherwise.

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Though Turkey's transformation itself is a work in progress, it is precisely because similar problems with its neighbors still exist that Turkey's example is perceived to be "within reach." That being said, Turkey needs to be *moving forward* on the challenging fronts in order for this element of *inspiration* to be sustained. Even though Turkey's progress can be seen as a sign that a Muslim country can overcome these hurdles, the flipside is that a stalling or regression on the part of Turkey can perpetuate perceived civilizational divides.

### About the Author

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