

The Turkish model

A hard act to follow

In many ways Turkey's Islamists seem to have got things right. But it took them a long time to emerge from the country's army-guided secularism

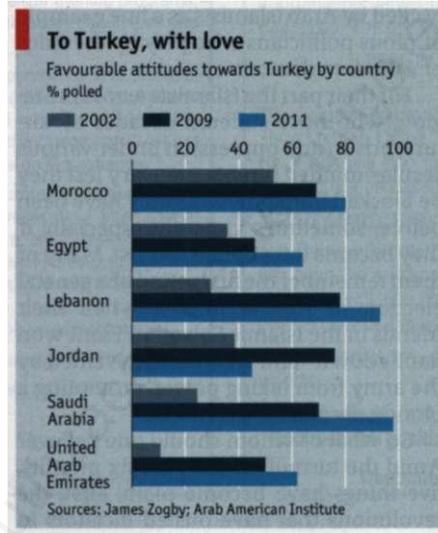
PALE, bespectacled and polite, Bekir Berat Ozipek, a young professor at Istanbul's Commerce University, is no street-fighter. But he was excited by the heady atmosphere he experienced on a recent trip to Egypt. He and two fellow Turkish scholars went to a conference at the University of Cairo where their ideas on civil-military relations were keenly gobbled up.

Then late one night, on the eve of a big

protest, they went to Tahrir Square, the heart of Egypt's uprising. They loved what they found: young people directing traffic, exuberant songs and slogans, a joker imitating ex-President Hosni Mubarak. Then they dived into a restaurant, where their chat about Egypt's political system was joined by youngsters at the next table, as well as the waiter. Mr Ozipek thought he was living in the era of Voltaire.

A few days earlier another Turkish-Arab encounter took place. Ahmet Davutoğlu, Turkey's foreign minister, was winding up a visit to rebel-controlled Libya when he decided, to his minders' alarm, to go to the central square of Benghazi, which like its Cairene counterpart is called Tahrir, or Liberation. As the crowd chanted "Erdoğan, Turkey, Muslim", he brought greetings from his prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and told them: "We have a common future and a history."

From North Africa to the Gulf, the region seems to be going through a Turkish moment. In years past Turkey's spotty democracy was often cited to prove a negative: the Turkish case (along with Indonesia's and Malaysia's, also with reservations) showed that Islam did not pose an insuperable barrier to multiparty democracy. But nothing much flowed from



• that observation—until the Arab spring. Turkey is now being studied by Arabs as a unique phenomenon: a movement of moderate Islamists, the Justice and Development (AK) party, has overseen an economic boom, boosted the country's standing and shown that the coming to power of pious people need not mean a dramatic rupture in ties with the West.

Whatever the flaws of the Turkish experiment, it is clearly true that Turkey under the AK party presents a more benign picture than many other versions—real and hypothetical—of Islamist rule. The country has gained influence in the Middle East by keeping cordial ties with Iran and standing up for the Palestinians. But there is no suggestion that it will leave NATO or cut diplomatic links, however strained, with Israel. Life has been made easier for pious Muslims in ways that secular Turks dislike; but so far, at least, Turkey is a long way from any Iranian-style enforcement of female dress, let alone a clerical class that has the final say in all big decisions.

For Western observers of the Middle East, an evolution in a Turkish direction—towards relative political and economic freedom—would be a happier outcome than many others. So is there any reason why the Arab countries, having passed through their current upheavals, should not live happily, and Turkishly, ever after?

In fact, there are many reasons to be cautious about expecting Arabs to follow Turks. Turkey's moderate Islamism did not evolve overnight. Its emergence, and taming, took a long time; it depended on many countervailing forces, including an army which was firm in its defence of a secular constitution, and was strong enough, at least until recently, to deter any imposition of Islamic rule (see page 42).

Both in Turkey and Egypt veterans of political Islam have seen a mixture of repression and limited participation in politics—but in Egypt the repression was harsher and the opportunities to practise democracy fewer. Albeit with fits and starts, Turkey's Islamists had already learned some political lessons when they took power in 2002. And compared with many other politically active armies, Turkey's has played a disinterested role. After taking power in 1980, the army moved fairly soon to restart multiparty politics and launch a free-market experiment. It did give a sop to Islam by introducing religion in schools; but that was a modest concession, made from a position of strength.

Compared with its Arab counterparts, Turkey's secular order has deep roots, going back to the creation of a republic by Mustafa Kemal in 1923. Modern Turkey's defining event—the defeat of a Greek expeditionary force dispatched with Western backing—was also the starting-point of a ruthless reform effort whose declared aims included "fighting religion" and end-

ing the theocratic backwardness of the Ottomans. For decades afterwards, memory of this victorious moment was enough to fill secular nationalists with confidence, and put pious forces on the defensive.

As a largely devout Muslim nation, Turkey never ceased to produce charismatic religious leaders, but they had to adapt to the realities of a secular republic or else face prison or exile. To this day Turkey's political and legal system bears the marks of years of army-guided secularism. Even Turkey's Islamists remain "children of the republic", says Berna Turam, a scholar at Boston's Northeastern University.

Guidance from Fethullah Gulen

These days the religious teacher who wields most influence over the Turks is Fethullah Gulen, who lives in America and forms the apex of a huge conglomerate that includes NGOs, firms, newspapers and college dormitories in Turkey, plus schools across the world. Whatever the ultimate aim of Mr Gulen, his talk is Western-friendly: he mixes the vocabulary of Sufism with language that is broadly pro-business and pro-democracy.

In contrast to many Arab Islamists he tries to please Christians and Jews. Turkish sceptics say the Gulen movement is more fundamentalist, and less liberal, at its hard core than its benign external face would suggest. The fate of several journalists who have tried probing it, and found themselves prosecuted or jailed, lends weight to that belief. People who criticise the movement can face nasty smear campaigns.

But followers of Mr Gulen claim that meetings they held in the 1990s had a huge influence on Mr Erdogan, persuading him to abandon the idea of an Islamic state. Mr Gulen made an unusual break with the government after last year's killing of nine Turks by Israeli commandos who swooped on a ship taking supplies to Gaza.

He said it was partly the Turkish side's fault: the flotilla should not have defied Israel. Thus, when Mr Erdogan faces pressure from pious mentors, it is not to be more radical but rather the opposite.

Another feature of Turkish Islamism is the number of thriving businesses with ties to the Gulen movement. Among the drivers of Turkey's expansion—the country's GDP per head is three times that of Egypt, with a similar population—are provincial entrepreneurs. It is now commonplace to stress the AK party's roots in the new Anatolian bourgeoisie, and its appeal to the consumers of the country's new-found wealth: people who mix Muslim piety with a taste for expensive cars. These groups set limits to the AK party's ambitions; like most rich folk they favour stability. In the Arab world there are middle-class Muslims who look with envy at the confidence of their Turkish counterparts.

Ibrahim Kalin, an adviser to Mr Erdogan, posits another difference between AK and political Islam as it emerged in Egypt and Pakistan in the 20th century. Even when pretending not to, the latter movements always dreamed of a powerful Islamic government, using the tools of modern statehood, like universal education, to impose a Muslim order, AK, by contrast, lives comfortably in a world of "lighter" states, where other agencies, including NGOs, the private sector and academia can play a bigger role.

In AK circles it is common to hear such postmodern talk mixed with nostalgia for the Ottoman era, when each faith ran its own system of education and personal law. Ali Bulac, a columnist, argues that citizens with civil disputes should consider Muslim arbitration: he says that could be combined with retaining the secular penal code, a cornerstone of the republic. Muslim democracy *alla turca* is already an unusual creature, and is still mutating.



Advice from Erdogan (right) for Mustafa Abdul Jalil, chairman of Libya's rebel council