

Deconstructing the Discourse of Models: The ‘Battle of Ideas’ over the Post-Revolutionary Middle East

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ABSTRACT *Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, the so-called ‘Turkish model’ has become a key ingredient of the discourse of democratization in the Middle East. In this study, first, the assumption of the necessity of a ‘model’ for the emerging democracies in the Middle East will be discussed. This will be followed by a comparative analysis of the Turkish and Iranian models because of their potential to affect the policies of emerging states in the region. The study will acknowledge the fact that the full application of the model may not be possible, however, I will conclude that the Turkish model is much more applicable to the emerging democracies in Tunisia and Egypt than the Iranian model and it has a lot to offer to those societies in terms of guidance in areas such as the state-religion relations, economic development, and democracy building.*

In recent years, Turkey and Iran, two non-Arab countries emerged as key actors in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region with their rising influence. The Arab Spring has intensified the ongoing discussions over the roles of Turkey and Iran within academic and scholarly literature. Hence, ‘neo-Ottomanism’ and the ‘Shi’a Crescent’ have become popular concepts associated with pro-active foreign policies of these regional powers.¹ Debates over the applicability of the ‘Turkish model’ and the ‘Iranian model’ have evolved in parallel to the aforementioned literature. Especially after Islamist-oriented parties, such as Ennahda and Freedom and Justice Party, emerged victorious from general elections and formed governments in post-revolutionary Tunisia and Egypt, the so-called rivalry between two different types of governance based in Turkey and Iran have gained wide attention, sparking the interest of media, academia and policy-makers in the MENA region and beyond. This article will start its analysis by questioning the necessity of a model for post-revolutionary societies. This is an overlooked but much needed discussion that can contribute to the rapidly expanding literature. Then, the discourse of models will be analyzed by defining what each type of governance refers to, as there

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seems to be confusion regarding the meaning of these concepts. Lastly, the relevance and applicability of Turkish and Iranian models will be examined by assessing the needs and demands of the Arab public in addition to ideas of policy-makers in post-revolutionary societies. It will be argued that the Turkish model is much more applicable to the emerging democracies in Tunisia and Egypt than the Iranian model and it has a lot to offer to those societies in terms of guidance in areas such as state-religion relations, economic development, and democracy building.

The Necessity of Models for Development

Modernization refers to a model of an evolutionary transition from 'traditional' to a 'modern' society. Over the years, modernity has been measured in terms of various indicators such as industrialization, education level, and urbanization. Measuring and assessing the concept of modernity remains a controversial issue within the literature of development as different schools of thought such as modernization theory, world-systems school, and dependency theorists have offered various methods and approaches to study this phenomenon. Historically, modernization entered the domain of policy-makers when technologically advanced European empires such as Britain and France began to encounter non-Western nations during their period of colonization.

As the non-Western nations lacked the technological tools to counter the territorial and economic claims of Western colonial empires, modernization or development had eventually become a key objective for these societies that lagged behind the rapidly developing West. For obvious reasons, the quickest way to shorten the development gap for non-Western societies was to learn from the example of European and North American nations.

Within the discourse of modernization, there are ongoing debates about whether developing countries follow similar paths to modernity in their transition periods. Clearly, each country's conditions greatly differ, therefore not all societies have followed the same trajectory of development, however all developing nations have, at some point, observed the experiences of more developed countries. During the 19th century, non-Western societies such as Japan, Turkey, Iran, and Egypt pursued series of reforms based on the scientific and political development of Western nations.

The early experiments of these non-Western countries with Western models demonstrated that modernization process could be controlled, accelerated, and shaped by policy-makers. The systematic modernization process direct-

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ed by Western-educated reforming bureaucrats in Japan throughout the latter half of the 19th century eventually led to the emergence of a society that stands as one of world's most technologically-advanced countries since the second half of the 20th century, merely a century after Western models were adopted.² Moreover, adoption of models proved its success over and over again as the Western-inspired economic and democratic reforms propelled Turkey into the position of world's 17th largest economy, a country whose economy was based on agricultural production until a few decades ago.³ Many other non-Western countries such as South Korea have undergone a similar transformation through the use of models while other developing nations such as China are now following suit.

In the history of revolutionary movements, there have been numerous examples of how previous models impact new uprisings. Waves of revolutions often follow each other in close succession as demonstrated when the American, French, and Haitian revolutions of the late 18th century influenced South American revolutions of the early 19th century; the 1848 revolutions in European countries facilitated one another throughout most of the continent; and the early 20th century revolutionary movements in China, the Ottoman Empire, and Iran that occurred one after the other within three years.⁴ Huntington described the role models played on other movements as the 'demonstrative effect.'⁵ Building upon Huntington's concept, Kirişçi⁶ points to the importance of regional models, which are shown to be the most influential ones in shaping the direction of revolutions.

As societies clearly lagging behind their counterparts in other developing parts of the world such as East Asia and South America, post-revolutionary countries in the MENA can benefit from the experiences of more developed nations in terms of socio-economic and political development. In fact, the adoption of models is essential if policy-makers intend to create their own independent modernization models and success stories. All countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Turkey, which are now being portrayed as 'models,' had initially learned from other countries and experienced an accelerated modernization process intensified by Western-inspired reforms. Following the Arab Spring, countries such as Tunisia and Egypt desperately need to reformulate their political structures and increase the pace of economic growth to meet the ever-intensifying demands of their largely young and more educated citizens.

A combination of various factors has resulted in the rise of Turkey and Iran as potential models for the region. Economically, both countries possess key advantages, Turkey is a highly industrialized country in the region and currently stands as the 17th largest economy in the world while Iran is the world's fourth-largest producer of oil and second-largest producer of natural gas.⁷ An even more influential factor has been the largely positive images of both coun-

tries among MENA societies. Numerous opinion polls in Arab countries such as Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, UAE, and Saudi Arabia have produced strikingly similar results, placing Turkey and Iran to top and second positions respectively in terms of public affection. For example, a 2010 University of Maryland and Zogby International poll demonstrates that Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan is the most popular leader in the region by a substantial margin, while Iranian President Ahmedinejad takes the second position.⁸ A Qatar Foundation poll shows that 72 percent of respondents in the aforementioned Arab countries see Turkey as 'suitable role model' for the direction of their respective societies.⁹ Yet, today, there is a strong need to distinguish between the foreign

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policies of these two countries and their role as 'inspiration' or 'models' for the future direction of Middle Eastern societies. The discourse over the Turkish and Iranian models should be evaluated autonomously from the debates about the rising influence of Turkey and Iran. There might have been attempts by policy-makers to utilize the literature on the models to enhance their images and reach political goals, yet ultimately the factor that will be

critical for the fate of models in the MENA region will be the decisions of local policy-makers in post-revolutionary societies, not the foreign policies of Turkey and Iran. Before analyzing the approach of local policy-makers on the two models, the meaning of these concepts must be defined. So, what do these two models represent in terms of governance?

It must be noted that due to the highly subjective usage of the concept by observers, the meaning and scope of the Turkish model have become vague and abstract. A working definition of the model is required but there is great variety in the way the model has been conceptualized in the discourse. Due to the limits of space within this article, it is not possible to point to every understanding¹⁰ of the model. For the purposes of this study, the Turkish model will be defined as Turkey's modernization experience in terms of economic development, democracy-building, and state-religion relations. Over time, Turkey's modernization process has evolved from a state-led model based on Kemal Atatürk's ideas of modernity in terms of cultural Westernization and radical secularism to a democratic governance model that managed to come to terms with the rise of political Islam. The ever-intensifying democratization process that begun in 1980s has been accompanied by two parallel developments, namely rapid economic development and the transformation of the Islamic movement as Turkish Islamists had managed to develop a new Islamic

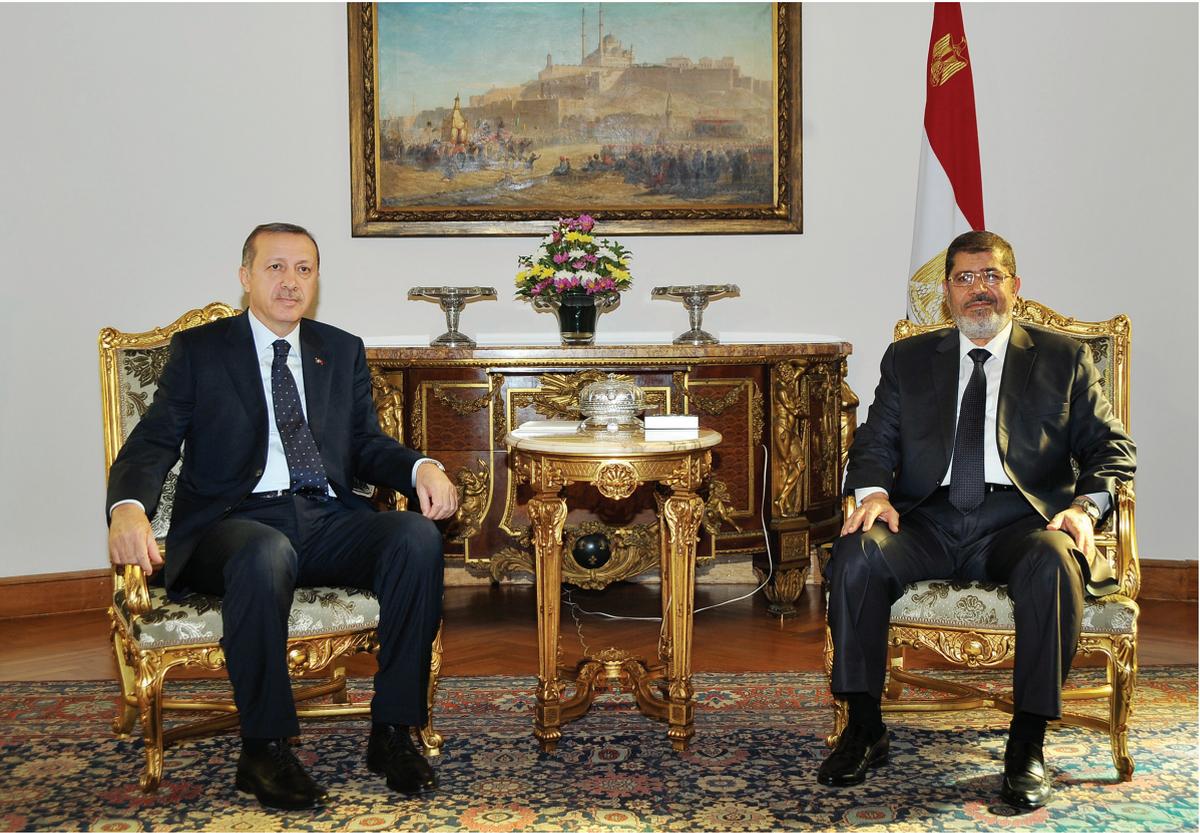
governance paradigm that recognizes the democratic and secular system while emphasizing mutual tolerance. The Iranian model, however, refers to the radical theocratic state structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran formed after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. In contrast with the pluralistic nature of Turkish Islamism, the Iranian model is based on the revolutionary takeover of the state by Islamists and the subsequent authoritarian implementation of Islamic rules and law onto the population from above. In light of the brief definitions given above, the study will now focus on assessing the applicability of the Turkish and Iranian models for the post-revolutionary MENA societies.

The Applicability of the Turkish and Iranian Models for post-Revolutionary MENA

Debates around the Turkish and Iranian models do not solely occur within the realms of media and academia. Public statements given by Iranian officials provide hints about the Iranian perception of the ideological clash between two models. Speeches of Ayatollah Hashemi Shahroudi and President Ahmedinejad indicate the popular Iranian belief that the Turkish model is backed by the Western powers to weaken the appeal of Iranian Islam.¹¹ From the outset, the Arab uprisings were interpreted by Iranian policy-makers as a “continuation of the 1979 Revolution,” a process that would result in the establishment of Iran-like theocratic governments.¹² As such, Supreme Leader Khamenei called for the establishment of regimes based on the ‘Iranian way’ when he publicly encouraged Egyptian clerics to preach an ‘Islamic Revolution’ in Friday prayers.¹³ However, these calls seem to have not found a response as major Islamic parties in post-revolutionary countries emphasize the notion of ‘civil state’ as the direction for their countries, not the Iranian model.

The civil state can be defined as a mix of pluralism, respect for democratic principles, and the recognition of all citizens’ right to practice their religious beliefs.¹⁴ The calls for a civil state reflects the desire of Islamist movements such as the *Ikhwan* (Muslim Brotherhood) and its political affiliates to form a state structure inspired by Islamic values but based on mutual tolerance and minority rights, rather than dictatorial implementation of the ‘majority will’ as seen in the Iranian model.¹⁵ It seems that the emerging regimes in Tunisia and Egypt signal the rise of moderate Islamism, which has been adopted by Ennahda leader Ghannouchi in Tunisia and Freedom and Justice Party leaders such as Saad el-Katatni as both politicians make constant references to civil state in their speeches.¹⁶

Even though many policy-makers in Iran seem convinced that the 2011 Arab Spring has similarities with the 1979 Iranian Revolution, there are many reasons to believe otherwise. First, the uprisings that had occurred in Egypt,



Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan (L) meeting with Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi at the presidential palace in Cairo on November 17, 2012. AFP

Libya, and Tunisia have different characteristics from each other, even though all movements resulted in the overthrow of authoritarian regimes. Thus, it would be an over-simplification to argue that all uprisings were inspired by Islamic values akin to the 1979 Revolution. Furthermore, there is an obvious difference between the nature of social life in Iran and MENA countries that had experienced the Arab Spring. All these Arab countries (except Bahrain which had an unsuccessful revolution attempt) have predominantly Sunni populations, unlike Iran and its predominantly Shi'a citizens whose religious beliefs are rooted in a completely different theological and socio-political background.

Another key difference between the 2011 uprisings and the 1979 Revolution, most emphasized in the literature is the absence of a 'charismatic leadership' among the revolutionary countries.¹⁷ Unlike the Arab Spring, the 1979 Iranian Revolution gradually came under the control of the clergy, which, under the 'messianic' leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, had a clearly-defined, radical agenda to transform the state in the aftermath of the revolution. The only exception of the Arab Spring could be Rachid Ghannouchi in Tunisia,

who initially seemed to fill the role of charismatic leader, but ultimately did not emerge as the sole leader of a new authoritarian regime. In addition to the absence of charismatic leadership during the Arab Spring, there were no references to totalitarian concepts such as the 'Rule of the Jurist' formulated by Khomeini which had formed the basis of the new authoritarian regime in post-1979 Iran.¹⁸ As mentioned above, the only noteworthy concept that emerged with the Arab Spring is the 'civil state,' which stands in stark contrast to the authoritarian 'Rule of the Jurist' with its messages of tolerance and civil liberties. By contrast, the concept of civil state is in line with the Turkish model. The Turkish model and the concept of civil state acknowledge the rights of both the believers and non-believers in the society, as the state strictly abstains from attempting to regulate personal liberties. Akin to the Turkish model that emerged with the rule of the conservative AK Party (Justice and Development Party) after 2002, the civil state implies that moderate political Islam, which is respectful of democracy, can exist in a pluralistic and open society.

The uprisings in MENA countries had not only been devoid of any charismatic leader with widespread recognition, but the revolutionary movements were also characterized by the absence of any uniting ideology. The movements consisted of ideologically diverse groups, only united in their common struggle against authoritarian regimes. Moreover, unlike the 1979 Revolution, which had a variety of radical movements such as the Marxist-Leninist *Tudeh Party* and urban guerrilla group *Fada'iyan-i Khalq*, militancy was absent during the Arab Spring.¹⁹ All these factors lead us to define the Arab Spring movements as a 'post-ideological phenomenon' that has more in common with 'Orange movements' that had spread to a number of post-Soviet states such as Ukraine and Georgia in 2004 and 2005, not with an old-style ideological revolution such as the 1979 Revolution, which had happened within the bipolarizing ideological environment of the Cold War.²⁰

As it should still be considered a recent event, we should not assume to fully know the reasons behind the Arab Spring, yet the current literature sheds some light over this complex phenomenon. Coll emphasizes liberal values such as freedom of speech and equality of opportunity as objectives espoused by the revolutionary youth that led the movements in 2011.²¹ Even though there appears to be a consensus within the discourse about the essential role played by the demand for political freedom, there are still scholars such as Bozkurt who argue that this emphasis on political factors may be overstated as economics might have played a bigger role.²² Malik and Awadallah point out that the 2011 uprisings were, to a large extent, caused by economic problems



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such as poverty, unemployment, lack of social mobility, and insufficient economic opportunities.²³ Saif and Rumman also focus on economic factors such as low productivity and low-level integration with the global economy, as they argue that these ongoing deficiencies had prevented the authoritarian regimes from increasing the living standards of their citizens.²⁴ Dalacoura analyzes a broader set of issues and argues that a combination of socio-economic and political demands had been driving the revolutionary movements, underlining that poverty alone cannot explain the rationale behind the uprisings as average living standards in Tunisia and Libya were quite high compared to some other Arab countries that have not experienced any dissent so far.²⁵ In its analysis of the needs and demands of the public in post-revolutionary countries, this study demonstrates that political demands, such as accountable governance and an open society, should be accompanied by economic factors, such as high unemployment rates (particularly among the more educated youth) and corruption, to effectively provide the reasons behind the recent events in MENA.

In terms of economic structures and conditions, the post-revolutionary societies of Tunisia and Egypt contrast markedly with Iran. While Iran has an economy based on one of the world's richest natural reserves in terms of oil and natural gas, which generate enough revenues to sustain itself even under the Western-imposed trade embargo and sanctions, Tunisia and Egypt lack such a unique ability to survive autonomously from the global economy. Tourism is a key sector for the Tunisian economy, one that requires a positive image and a relatively open society to attract foreign tourists, whereas Egypt is largely dependent on financial aid and Suez Channel revenues, two factors making up two-thirds of all its foreign exchange revenues.²⁶ Furthermore, 80 percent of Tunisia's trade is conducted with the European Union countries and most tourists it receives are also from Europe.²⁷ Thus, policy-makers in Tunisia and Egypt cannot hope to antagonize the developed countries and the new governments in Tunis and Cairo seem to be aware of this situation. The pragmatism of the Islamist-led governments is apparent as one of Ennahda leaders Hamadi Jebali (who was also the prime minister of Tunisia between December 2011-February 2013) had indicated that Ennahda has no intention to ban "bikinis and wine."²⁸ Ennahda leaders have repeatedly stated their support for free-market principles and emphasized the importance of their economic ties with Europe for the Tunisian economy. Akin to Jebali, another key Ennahda leader and party chairman, Ghannouchi has also indicated that Ennahda would not force women to wear headscarves, implement Shari'a law, and ban alcohol.²⁹ The same level of pragmatism can be seen in the economic policies formulated by Ennahda in Tunisia and the Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt. Rather than dismantling the system to develop an ideological Islamic economy, the policies offered by the two parties focus on improving the management of the economy through a series of measures such as cooperation with the private sector, ensuring good governance, fighting corruption and supporting small

and medium-sized enterprises.³⁰ Moreover, the party policies state that Islamic finance will not be imposed, it will merely coexist alongside the conventional finance sector while much emphasis is put on reassuring the Western tourists about their security and freedom.³¹ Demands such as political freedom, increased living standards, and ending corruption have been at the foreground of discussions since the Arab Spring and the political Islamists have, so far, displayed a high level of awareness and responsiveness towards the needs of the public in these matters.

The actions of major Islamist parties in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt clearly point to the importance given to the Turkish model in the minds of these policy-makers: The leader of Ennahda, Ghannouchi, has repeatedly emphasized the similarity between the ruling conservative AK Party government in Turkey and Ennahda in Tunisia by stating that both movements represent a 'new brand of political Islam,' one that synthesizes Islam and modernity at the same time.³² The Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt has explicitly refused to form a coalition government with the radical Islamist *Al-Nour* Party though it must be noted that this has hardly alleviated the fears of the largely secular and liberal opposition about the commitment of the Freedom and Justice Party to democracy. The local *Ikhwan* branch in Libya founded its political party with the exact same name of the Turkish AK Party, 'Justice and Development Party' declaring that the party is 'inspired by principles of Islam' but it would lead the re-construction of Libya on the basis of a democratic system. Since the Arab Spring, the popularity and appeal of the Turkish model has rapidly increased while the Iranian model seems to be losing ground. The decreasing appeal of the Iranian model vis-à-vis the Turkish model should be attributed to the perceptions and policies of new governments in post-revolutionary countries, led by moderate Islamist parties. Leaders of these movements have voiced their support for the Turkish model and this tendency is not only limited to politicians, as public opinion is also leaning towards the Turkish model. For example, the TESEV survey conducted in post-revolutionary MENA countries shows that 61 percent of respondents see Turkey as a model because "it is at once Muslim, democratic, open and prosperous."³³

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The applicability of the Turkish model for post-revolutionary MENA is most apparent in the field of economic development whereas this is the area the Iranian model fails to provide solutions for the problems of these societies

whereas this is the area the Iranian model fails to provide solutions for the problems of these societies. It has been argued that the Islamist parties won elections not due to a widespread public demand for a theocratic regime but because of their aforementioned party programs based on social welfare, fighting corruption, and increasing economic prosperity, all pointing to socio-economic issues.³⁴ Compared to the Iranian model, the Turkish model is better suited to provide solutions for new governments to meet these public demands. Despite its vast natural reserves, the Iranian economy has serious problems such as high unemployment and inflation levels, constituting a failure in economic development.³⁵ In terms of delivering a better life and increasing living stan-

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dards, the Iranian regime is seen as a failure as the radical theocratic regime has caused the greatest brain drain in history in addition to a severe capital flight since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Iran ranks first in terms of the displacement of citizens with advanced education and technical

know-how.³⁶ Furthermore, the same analysis shows that the total wealth of the Iranian diaspora is estimated to be around 400 billion USD, assets that could have been invested in the Iranian economy if not for the 1979 Islamic Revolution. In developed economies, the percentage of the agricultural sector within the total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) stands around 5 percent while it still represents more than 10 percent in the Iranian economy today. Another key indicator of development is the portion of services sector within the GDP; in Iran it is 46.8 percent while in Turkey it is more than 60 percent, clearly demonstrating that the latter is in a much more developed state, closer to Western economies in its economic indicators.³⁷ In addition, it is important to note that Turkey's per capita income rose from 1.300 USD in 1985 to more than 11.000 USD in 2008³⁸ while Iran's per capita income has stalled around 4.500 USD for most of the last decade due some extent to the heavy economic sanctions imposed on the country's exports by the US and its Western allies.³⁹

A distinguished expert of the region, Fawaz Gerges indicates that Iran is a 'failed model' due to the inability of its regime to build a functioning, prosperous economy while Turkey has been fairly successful in that field.⁴⁰ Another factor that reduces the applicability of the Iranian model for MENA is the international position and state structure of Iran, as it remains a highly isolated state under heavy economic sanctions and its policy-making mechanisms are extremely complex, based on the particular historical evolution of Shi'a religious thought and political institutions, entirely unique to Iran. All these factors bring us to the conclusion that Iran's economic development

is not relevant for the post-revolutionary MENA countries of Tunisia and Egypt.

In contrast, the Turkish model offers some helpful insights in terms of economic development that can be utilized by these post-revolutionary countries to develop solutions for their economic problems. A key problem that the Turkish model can help to solve is how to undo the ongoing crony capitalism and ameliorate inefficient public sectors in Tunisia and Egypt. The state remains the most important economic actor in Egypt and Tunisia but due to rampant corruption and *clientelist* networks, it is a sector that works for the benefit of a very small elite, not the majority of citizens.⁴¹ So far, the neoliberal reforms that were initiated in 1970s and 1980s have not been successful in reducing these problems. Malik and Awadallah explain the current state of economy in post-revolutionary MENA: "Recent events in the region provide an apt reminder that the prevailing development model has outlived its usefulness...The region needs a new social and economic paradigm that is based on a competitive, entrepreneurial, and inclusive private sector."⁴²

These issues lay at the very heart of the success of the Turkish model. Turkey's own neoliberal experiment launched in early 1980s produced the rapid economic development that now constitutes a key pillar of the Turkish model. The export drive, waves of privatization and Turkey's integration with the global production and market network led to the emergence of an expanding middle class and new entrepreneurs even in formerly-rural areas of Central Turkey, as the country has gone through rapid urbanization and industrialization. Turkey is the only Muslim country in the region that has managed to create a self-sustainable and free-market economy that is not based on natural reserves compared to the economies of rentier states such as Saudi Arabia and Iran but on modern production sectors such as automotive, textiles, and 'white goods.' The Turkish model offers valuable lessons of transitioning to a market economy, integrating into the global market, having an economic growth rate that is higher than the population growth, reducing unemployment, and ensuring efficient governance.

Conclusion

This study has argued that the post-revolutionary countries in MENA, such as Tunisia and Egypt, need to learn from the experiences of other countries by analyzing their modernization models, so that their policy-makers can develop policies that can respond to the socio-economic and political demands of their citizens in the era following the Arab Spring. Throughout this study, the emerging concept of the civil state, ideas of Islamist parties in Tunisia and Egypt, and the demands of the public have been analyzed to assess the appli-

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capability of two models of governance for post-revolutionary MENA. In conclusion, compared with the Iranian model, the Turkish model is much more applicable for these societies, as the particular experience of Turkey in the area of economic development and the nature of its Islamist movements is more relevant for the current circumstances of these post-revolutionary societies. Yet, it is important to note that this work does not attempt to suggest that through completely following the example of Turkey, Tunisia and Egypt can achieve success in all fields related to modernization. The Turkish model is merely one model among many development strategies that can be utilized to solve problems. In addition to the Turkish model, it might be useful

for policy-makers in MENA to look at other examples such as the Malaysian model. The Turkish model should not be referred as 'a perfect formula' for development, as no model can be fully applicable to every setting. However the Turkish model is certainly more useful than the Iranian experience, a country that had a very different social, political, and economic trajectory compared to the MENA societies of Tunisia and Egypt and one that is yet to demonstrate considerable success in development.

It is important to note that the role of the Turkish model in Egypt will be directly affected by the outcome of the sudden political events that were still unfolding in Egypt while this work was being written. In the aftermath of the military coup that has toppled President Morsi and the Freedom and Justice Party, political stability of the country seems shakier than ever as supporters of President Morsi and many members of *Ikhwan* have clashed with security forces, resulting in the death of many Egyptians. The future of Egypt is the question of a number of speculations and simulations at the moment, making it extremely difficult to assess the ultimate role that the Turkish model could play in shaping the modernization experience of the country. Yet, the coup against Morsi may be a turning point for the evolution of the Egyptian Islamist movement. As shown above, before the coup, President Morsi and the Freedom and Justice Party had a largely positive view of the Turkish model which was seen as a 'proof' that Islam and democracy can co-exist. If *Ikhwan* and its political affiliates becomes the subject of a new wave of repression akin to the policy of the authoritarian Mubarak regime before the Arab Spring, Egypt may face a militarized, marginalized and radicalized Islamist movement that would not necessarily look to the example of the Turkish AK Party but elsewhere, possibly to the experience of Iranian Revolution. It is clear that in the forthcoming period, the topic of 'models' will continue to attract the interest of many observers and the political struggle in Egypt will shape the nature of this discourse.

Endnotes

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