

Conflicting Reactions in the Middle East towards the Coup Attempt in Turkey: Between Opposing and Welcoming

AHMED YOUSEF*

ABSTRACT *Reactions in the Arab world to the July 15 coup attempt in Turkey varied between opposing and acclaiming it. Remarkably, some of the most authoritarian Arab regimes were amongst those clearly expressing their jubilation in the early stages of the coup attempt. As for Arab public opinion, particularly Islamists and those loyal to them in the whole region, they decidedly condemned the coup attempt. Furthermore they expressed a sincere satisfaction for the victory of the Turkish people and the strong unity they demonstrated in their combative defiance of the coup.*

On 15 July 2016, a military coup was attempted in Turkey against state institutions including, but not limited to, the government and President Erdoğan. Reactions to the event were largely against the coup attempt, both domestically and internationally. This commentary tries to shed light on the different positions taken in the Arab world. I also assert that some of these positions are primarily due to the stance and policy preferences of some Arab regimes towards Turkey's current President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Additionally, reactions are closely related with the stance of the Arab peoples and their positive perception of Turkey's current lead-

ership, namely Erdoğan. This positive stance of the Arab populace stems from considering President Erdoğan as the champion of the oppressed segments within the Middle East on the one hand and on the other hand praising the successful experience of good democratic governance in Turkey, a situation Islamists in the Arab world like to eulogize.

Initially, I aim to discuss the intellectual versus popular positions – Islamists versus Secularists. Following this, the official positions of some countries in the region, governments and regimes, are explored in detail. Finally the Arab media where objectivity is currently absent to a large

* Writer on the Middle East and on Political Thought and Movements, Palestine

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People gather at the city center in İzmir to condemn the coup attempt and also to protect and confirm their ownership of democracy in the country.

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extent with some outlets patently siding with the coup plotters, will be examined. I also discuss the other Arab media which covered the events fairly with high professionalism and neutrality, and consequently earned the respect of their audience.

Popular Positions towards the Coup Attempt in Turkey

Despite the variety of reactions in the Arab street, the vast majority sided with the Turkish people's strong will and their firm defiance of the coup by thronging the squares and streets until its failure.

In Palestine, where people's hearts have been passionately supportive of Turkey's Erdoğan, especially since AK Party came to power in 2002, people spent all-night apprehensive following up the media coverage

of the bloody July 15 coup attempt. Furthermore, they were concerned about the possibility that if the government was overthrown, it would have meant the return of Turkey into Israel's arms and the loss of the Palestinians most important strategic ally in the region. Thus, when the new day dawned with the news of the coup's failure, thousands came out to the mosques and squares celebrating and distributing candy. For them, it was a memorable day and a salient page of their history.

In Libya, where there is still internal conflict and a state of political polarization, the street appeared to be divided between supporters and opponents of the coup and this volatile situation dominated the gatherings in popular cafes. Social media was sparked with supportive reactions in favor of the Turkish army's move and then lamenting the failure of this

attempt; many other Libyans tweeted their firm opposition against military coups and military rule.¹

In general, most of the segments of society, in the Arab countries of Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco and Mauritania condemned the failed coup

It was evident that the Libyan disunity standoff was fueled by differences in-house between the anti-Islamist military leader Gen. Khalifa Haftar's secularist and loyalist attitudes. Libyans are, by default, not fond of the rule of the army as they have suffered from it for a long time. However Haftar, who is backed by the Egyptian regime, embraced the official position of Egypt toward Erdoğan.

However, to justify the coup attempt, Mahmoud Khalaf, professor of political science in Libya, wrote: "The repeated coup attempts in Turkey reflect the fragility of the democratic experience, and the lack of success of the Turkish political system to neutralize the military establishment."²

In Somalia, where the government has closer political and economic relations with the current government in Turkey, the capital Mogadishu witnessed huge masses coming

out onto the streets expressing their pleasure about the failure of the coup as did the Islamic movements in Somalia and many Arab countries who also held various activities in celebration.

In general, most of the segments of society, in the Arab countries of Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco and Mauritania condemned the failed coup. Furthermore, they were keenly monitoring developments in Turkey until the early hours of the morning. Social media platforms, which provided a truer picture of the public's feelings, were clogged with congratulations when the failure of the coup attempt was clear.

The stance of Arab elites, represented by think tanks, intellectuals and community leaders towards the Turkish people's resistance against the coup attempt was fairly positive and they regarded this stance as the victory of Turkish democracy. The Arab elites, particularly those with Islamic tendencies, expressed their solid opposition against the coup attempt in Turkey, considering it to be a flagrant violation of the peoples will in the most stable democracy in the region.

Mohammad al-Shanqeeti, professor of political ethics and comparative religion in the Qatar Faculty of Islamic Studies commented: "The reactions in the Arab world towards the failed coup is a sign that the whole region is enduring a major conflict of values between a camp

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that brings together the believers of freedom, dignity and the people's right to govern themselves, and a camp that gathers all counter-revolutionaries and maintainers of the deep state, exclusionist logics, corruption and tyranny.”³

He added: “What happened in Turkey made it possible to see such huge division between the camps,” pointing out to what he called “schadenfreude,” which began amongst “anti-people's rights” and eventually was turned into heartbreak for those, whose delight turned quickly into embarrassment.⁴ Most notably the Egyptian mainstream media kept celebrating what they thought was a successful coup till the early hours of morning.

Those words of al-Shanqeeti came across like the truest description of the struggle in the region between the people and the authoritarian regimes. This also shows that the deep state is still in control in the Arab world and has the upper hand when it comes to power and controlling the media.

Mehdi Mabrouk, professor of sociology and former Tunisian Minister of Culture, commented that cultural, historical and religious factors were significant in determining the Arab positions that were expressed on the failed coup in Turkey, whether for or against it. No doubt that President Erdoğan's position on supporting Islamism and the Arab spring revolutions in the Middle East has deepened tensions between him and some of those Arab regimes.

He explained that the failed attempt revealed a sharp polarization in the Arab region between the two camps; one supports the Turkish experience and the process of democratic transition, rejecting the logic of the coup and the rule of military while the other camp claims to be set on modernity and supposedly ‘democracy,’ but is actually riding on “the back of a tank supporting the military when the opponent is Islamist.”⁵

Mabrouk believes that “the significant lesson in what happened in Turkey is that it asserted the indispensability of the Arab peoples to safeguard the ballot boxes, considering that the problem with the Arab elites is that their political culture is corrupted and anchored in the military, which they think of as a haven from political Islam.”⁶

Ahmed bin Rashid bin Saeed, a Saudi academic, wrote: “The real triumphant winner in the failed coup is President Erdoğan and the historical achievements of the AK Party over nearly two decades... The most sig-



Hundreds of Palestinians from Gaza, carrying Palestinian and Turkish flags poured out in to the streets after the morning prayer to celebrate the failure of the coup attempt in Turkey.

AA PHOTO / ALI JADALLAH

nificant factors in the coup's failure are that military rule has become repulsively detestable in Turkey.⁷

It is worth mentioning that many Tunisian parties like Ennahdaa, al-Irada and The Democratic Current, issued strongly worded statements against the coup attempt, calling for “democratic forces in Tunisia and the Arab world to be alert to the dangerous course of the coup,” and expressing complete solidarity with the Turkish people and their President.

It needs to be noted that the matter of Turkey has always united Palestinian hearts. Turkey's Erdoğan has always been a strong supportive ally for Palestine and continues to be so. Regardless of the internal state of disunity, between Fateh and Hamas, Turkey has unfailingly supported the Palestinian Authority at the United

Nations on the one hand, and exerted a lot of political, financial and humanitarian support to the Gaza Strip and the West Bank on the other hand. It has followed a balanced policy towards the internal disputes in Palestine – not tending to one Palestinian side at the expense of the other – but has been trying to maintain their direction to help and support of all Palestinians. Most notably, Turkey has exerted remarkable efforts in its quest to lift the injustice applied to the Palestinians by the Israeli occupation, an injustice that – unfortunately – some Arab regimes have helped to perpetuate.

On the Left and liberal spectrum, there were several objective pens that wrote fairly, and their analyses were in support of democracy against the coup. Here is a brief look at what some leftwing and liberal writers,

who deserve appreciation and respect, have written.

Palestinian intellectual Akram Atallah adopted the language of reason to respond to those who were prejudiced against Erdoğan and to those few Palestinians celebrating the coup attempt. Atallah wondered: “if the coup succeeded and the Turkish President was overthrown, could the Palestinians possibly imagine that the next established regime would be as close to them as the current one? Certainly not... The alternative to Erdoğan would have been conversely worse for the Palestinian cause. And that isn’t desirable by a Palestinian who would remember previous governments that were at best completely neutral towards the Palestinian cause, but closer to Israel compared with the present Turkey.” He added: “if the coup succeeded in Turkey, it would have been a great loss of a leading experience of moderate political Islam which we are trying to push our Islamic movements, especially Hamas, to follow... Such a level of sufficiency in people management with an advanced social and ideological flexibility can be seen by everyone who has the chance to visit the country... It’s good that the [Turkish] model didn’t fall; because that would have provided ammunition for the extremists.”⁸

Journalist Hani Habib, also wrote: “No doubt, the failure of the coup emphasized that the Turkish political system is stable, steadfast and powerful, this is most evidenced by the role that the opposition parties have

played against the coup, in coming out on to the streets to combat the coup with the people despite the intense and declared disputes with Erdoğan and his policies. This confirms once again that there is no strong political system without a strong opposition.”⁹

Talal Okal, writer and political analyst, wrote: “It was not expected that Turkey would have become any better if the coup had succeeded in toppling the ruling AK Party government... If they were partisans of the preacher Fetullah Gülen who lives in the U.S., the result would have led to a civil war and the destruction of many significant achievements which have made Turkey one of the most powerful countries on the global level. On top of that, the American protection and support of Gülen would have put Turkey in to a position of submission to the U.S. policies and interests.”¹⁰

The former diplomat and a journalist Adli Sadeq has expressed his feelings on Facebook, saying: “I did not sleep until dawn... the coup attempt troubled me a great deal, and I was delighted when it failed; because Israel, the U.S. intelligence and Turks who are racists and hostile to Arabs and Muslims are ubiquitous in the military institution.”¹¹

The coup has failed, and the people’s will triumphed and proved that the time of military rule and tyrannical governments ended long ago. A mere call on Facetime was enough to awaken the entire Turkish street.

Surely, what we've seen on televisions of vivid photos that show unprecedented courage and resilience will live for generations yet to come.

The Palestinians should learn from the lessons of what happened on the streets and squares of Turkey. The people's will was stronger than all of the dreadful weapons and murderous tanks. If the Palestinian division continues, we have to use the power of the people and mobilize to end the division for good and restore our geographical and national unity.

Yes, a lot of blood has been spilled in Turkey, but the mere idea of military ruling has totally collapsed, and the confrontations that we've seen have proven that there is a correlation between the will of life and the response of fate.

Official Stances on the July 15 Developments

The vast majority of the Arab countries including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Sudan, Morocco, Somalia, Djibouti denounced the coup attempt, and welcomed its failure, to varying degrees.

While Kuwait and Saudi Arabia welcomed Erdoğan's regained control of the country, Qatar showed a greater enthusiasm, due to the special ties between the two governments. Qatar news agency reported that the Qatar's Emir Tamim Bin Hamad called Erdoğan and congratulated him on the "incredible reaction of his people

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in standing up to the coup, in support of the democratically elected government."

As for Morocco, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that "the kingdom denounces the coup attempt in Turkey, and calls for the preservation of the constitutional order." Likewise, in Sudan, President al-Bashir openly condemned the coup and expressed "his country's support for President Erdoğan."

In Iraq, the Foreign Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari called for "the need to protect state institutions," while the speaker of the parliament Salim al-Jabouri, condemned "the attack on the Council of the Turkish people."

In Somalia, President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud condemned the coup in a statement issued from his office, stating that "the Somali government and the Somali people stand by the democratic government, and condemns in the strongest terms the failed coup."

Likewise, the Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned the coup

People supporting the legitimate government of Turkey gathered in front of the Turkish Embassy in Amman, Jordan. A demonstrator carries a placard with the Turkish flag and the words "God bless Turkey."

AA PHOTO / SALAH MALKAWI



and expressed solidarity with the Turkish people, saying in a statement that Minister Riyad al-Maliki called his Turkish counterpart and congratulated him for "the triumph of democracy and the defeat of the coup plotters and their miserable attempt to destabilize the Turkish Republic." Maliki stressed that "the Palestinian leadership, government and people condemn in the strongest terms the cowardly terrorist coup attempt in Turkey."¹²

The Orientations of the Media towards the Coup Attempt

The problem of the official Arab media's blatant bias and subjectivity is perhaps better summarized in an article entitled "Turkey triumphed ... and the Arab media has lost its professionalism." It pointed out that

the attempted coup in Turkey has renewed "direct confrontation" between some of the Arab media and the people of the Arab spring; in which, for example, a wave of severe criticism has attacked some of the channels, newspapers and websites for their hastiness that resulted in broadcasting false news, such as the Egyptian broadcasts.¹³

The article highlighted that a series of reports that lacked credibility was more than enough to ignite the social media. For instance, one Arab News channel said that the Turkish President Erdoğan is seeking asylum in Germany at the time when he was actually heading to İstanbul to stand by the masses, and another channel asserted the success of the coup and "the restoration of democracy in the country by the army," as they put it.¹⁴

Once the Turkish authorities regained control over the country and the coup failed, critics on twitter spared no effort in criticizing the media, stressing that a large part of the Arab media wished the success of the coup, and they accused the media of actually trying to help the coup by spreading false news.

Others also highlighted that some channels were caught out by the attempted coup, which revealed their lack of professionalism and impartiality. A critic wrote on twitter that "The coup attempt was a landmark incident for the Arab media to stop to reconsider and review its work, its professionalism and the extent to which it is politicized."¹⁵

On the other hand, popular Hashtags emerged right after coup attempt with the help of Al Jazeera channel which demonstrated its impartiality and credibility, and they also praised the professional coverage that has continued since the beginning of the events.

The media in the UAE and Egypt has raised several suspicions in the minds of the public due to its handling of the failed coup in Turkey. Activists launched a tweet called "spitting on Al-Arabiya," which topped the list of the most active trends on Twitter, after thousands of people criticize its coverage of the coup attempt.

As for Sky News, it too sparked a wave of ridicule after releasing dozens of news items and then retracting them. Self-respecting media would

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ostracize a journalist for publishing one false news item in a lifetime, yet the channel was spreading multiple false news items in one night. This was because they received their news from the Emirati security apparatus, not from news agencies or reporters.¹⁶

The scene that provoked the most laughter and ridicule was that all headlines in newspapers in Egypt and the UAE were: "The army is in power in Turkey," or words to that effect, while images of those responsible for the coup holding up their hands to surrender on the Bosphorus Bridge reached readers before the newspapers that were printed at the expense of Abu Dhabi.

On the other hand, the Syrian regime's media gave the incident a special coverage through its news channels, and they regarded the coup as a "revolt against the rule of President Erdoğan- the number one enemy of the Syrian regime," arguing that "one of the reasons for the coup is opposition to his hostile policy towards Syria," and all the official news channels of the Syrian regime started cheering for the coup.¹⁷ It is worth mentioning that the Arab states that have no quarrel with Turkey, such as Jor-

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dan and Saudi Arabia, relied fully on global news agencies and television channels.¹⁸

In short, the failed coup in Turkey resulted in world-wide media-chaos, in which the Arab media played a huge role. Unfortunately, some Arab media attitudes were very similar to the attitudes of the anti-revolution official media when it came to the coup attempt in Turkey, a disgracefully unprofessional work that depends on trying to mislead the people and on legitimizing dictators. This shows that the positions that those pro-coup media revealed are a reflection of the political positions of their tyrannical regimes, which bear a blind grudge against President Erdoğan.¹⁹

Conclusion: The Victory of Democracy

The popular scene in most Arab countries is fear over the democratic experience in Turkey from collapse, as Turkey is a country that is characterized by economic achievements and political stability, unlike most other countries in the region. It is

one of the leading industries in the world and its example has earned the respect of many Islamic and also secular intellectuals who look at it as a political model that they want to see prevail across the region.

However, there are Arab regimes that find this model of democracy a threat to their survival, so they conspired against it, and cheered the coup through their media, even though the people of the region were overwhelmingly opposed to the attempt to overthrow the Turkish government.

Undoubtedly, the failure of the coup attempt was a blow to all corrupt and oppressive regimes, as Mustafa Al-labbad said that “the real victors are democracy in Turkey and the opposition parties that rejected the coup.”²⁰

What happened in Turkey was truly an exceptional historical phenomenon where the will of the unarmed people triumphed over the military and democracy won.

“The Turkish people today gave a lesson to the world – and Arabs as well – that the will of life can make changes and preserve achievements, and if the Arab peoples’ revolutions have failed, they should not despair but try again, always without violence, to achieve national consensus in order to strengthen the desire for change and reform in everyone.”²¹

In conclusion, the Arab position on the July 15 coup attempt in Turkey has been disparate, and can be

summarized by the following: there are countries that rejected and denounced the plot, while others appear to have conspired with it; however, the vast majority of the Arab Street stands in support of Turkish democracy and President Erdoğan. ■

Endnotes

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