

المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
ARAB CENTER FOR RESEARCH & POLICY STUDIES



(Doha Institute)

Reports

*The Arabs and Turkey:
Present Challenges and Future Prospects*

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In the spirit of a shared historical legacy, a common geographical reality, and mutual interests that bind Arabs and Turks, the Doha ACRPS held a symposium on May 18 and 19, which was entitled "Turkey and the Arabs: Present Challenges and Hopes for the Future," and focused on a number of set themes: historical relations and outlooks for the future, politico-strategic themes, economic relations, and water and energy issues, in addition to the societal aspect of relations between the Arabs and Turkey.

The conference closed with a roundtable discussion attended by the center's guests, including academics, scholars, and other specialists whose final debate centered on two main topics:

- 1) What do Arab-Turkish relations mean for the Arabs? Would it be possible to have a coordinated Arab standpoint with respect to Turkey and what shape could such a relationship take?
- 2) Could the example of Turkey's political movements be taken as a template for Arab Islamist political movements?

The participants reached a consensus regarding the centrality and importance of Turkish-Arab relations, and their special significance in the context of the revolutions presently sweeping the Arab countries. Turkey represents an important alternative, strategic ally that has accrued achievements in terms of economic development and democratization, and been accepted by the wider world, including Western powers, as well as China and Russia. The participants further agreed on the strategic interests driving the resurgent Turkish interest in the Arab homeland's affairs. While some skeptics in the Arab homeland interpreted these efforts purely as an attempt to pressure on the European Union, nobody could any longer doubt their existence.

From an Arab perspective, the participants suggested, the value of a Turkish-Arab partnership lies in the power of an alternative strategic ally which could help the Arab states reshape the regional power balance, and inform the Arabs' own reforms with their own experiences of economic development and political reform. Turkey also represented the possibility of a new link with Central Asia through "the New Silk Road". It becomes clear, then, that the Arabs no longer view Turkey as simply a link to Israel, but rather as a possible defender of Arab rights, a view which began to coalesce after the Israeli attack on the Turkish-led Freedom Floatilla which aimed to land on Gaza's shores. What remains to be clear, however, is the extent to which Turkey is convinced of this new rapprochement with the Arabs.

While all Arab states agree that there is a need to build joint relations with Turkey, not all agree on the implementation of this agreement into policies for a variety of reasons, one of the most important being that these relations took the shape of individual bi-lateral relations between

single Arab states, and these states did not always have overlapping shared interests with Turkey. A further source of imbalance was the different governmental structures between Turkey and the Arabs. While Turkey is presently ruled by a party which possesses a comprehensive agenda for change and needs to secure citizens' consent for its agenda through the ballot box, no such system is in place in the Arab world, even though some sort of global influences do exist as a pressure lever. Even as the governing [Islamist] Justice and Development Party of Turkey (AKP) reshapes the image of their country in the world, they are in no way challenging the secularist nature of the state, an issue which seems to have been settled in Turkey. On the other hand, the role of religion in the state remains an unsettled question in the Arab states, on both constitutional and practical levels. The participants also presented a few ideas to help overcome these hurdles and coordinate the Arab-Turkish relations.

One of the primary recommendations for doing so was to "institutionalize" the relations between Turkey and the Arab states by building onto some of the smaller initiatives that have already been agreed upon in principle between Turkey and the Arabs. An example of this might have been converting the Arab-Turkish Forum, which was initiated in 2007, signed by some Arab states, into a fully-fledged, institution-based organisation, with mutual offices in both Turkey and within the Arab League. Such moves could be informed by similar bi-lateral arrangements between the Arabs and China or other Sino-African agreements. A future multi-lateral organisation would have space for governments, businessmen, academics, artists, and intellectuals, as well as other civic society organisations. Further to this, the participants also suggested the formation of an independent cultural body which could coordinate educational and cultural exchanges between the Arabs and Turkey, including the possibility of forming a common history curriculum which would express one side's history to the other.

Other interjections from the symposium emphasized the need for coordination between the Arabs and Turkey on the issue of shared water rights between Turkey and other Arab states, with the added need to work on promoting more responsible water consumption, production, and purification technologies, without resorting to monetary exchanges for water, which would set a dangerous precedent for the Arab states, having to purchase water from upstream countries. Additionally, some participants pointed to the importance of having an Arab forum offers suggestions and recommends policies to the Arabs and the Turks, so that Arab initiatives interact with Turkish movements aiming at building influential relations. However, the participants' general focus was the emphasis on building relationships based on shared interests, benefiting from cultural and historical similarities between Arabs and Turks.

One of the fears which arose in the deliberations was the possibility of a "New Ottomanism" arising, with participants insisting that the growth of healthy, bi-lateral relations which allowed for enhanced mutual respect and exchanges between the two sides should be developed instead. Such relations would benefit enormously from the commonalities inherent between the Arabs and Turkey; expanding exchanges and dialogue, on both the official and public diplomacy levels,

could enable Arabs to arrive at a greater self-knowledge of what they sought out of relations with Turkey, as well as how they could cooperate among themselves to achieve these aims. In closing this section of the discussion, the participants pointed out the folly of trying to pressure Turkey into changing its foreign policies too rapidly, being heedless of what could actually change from Turkey's standpoint. The changes in these stances, the participants agreed, should be gradual and slow.

In the following debates, researchers discussed, at length and in depth, the Turkish experience of an Islamist political party being the governing party in a democratic country, and how such an experience might be useful for groups within the Arab homeland. This topic had added urgency given the prominent role played by Islamist organizations in the revolutions around the Arab Spring and the growing debate concerning their potential role in the future in the political reconstruction in Arab countries. While there were a variety of viewpoints surrounding the question of Islamist political parties in Turkey, the attendees at the closing session affirmed that the uniqueness of the Turkish context made it impossible to reproduce the lessons learned from Turkey. Some of the unique features of the Turkish case could be seen in:

1. The advance of modernity in Turkey, which has taken a cultural and historical path distinctly different from that in the Arab homeland.
2. The Islamist movement in Turkey was born after the rise of a real modern, secular state, with deeply-rooted institutions, and accepted the secularism inherent in that state's institutions, but at the same time worked to soften that secularism in a way that would reconcile it with Turkey's cultural legacy.
3. Islamist political movements in Turkey had the ability to work within a large margin of democracy through local and national-level representative bodies, allowing them access to, and knowledge of, the concerns of Turkish voters, thus making way for a pragmatic political Islamism to take shape.

One group of participants cautioned others of the possibility of exaggerating the significance of Turkey's model, considering it as a “fragmenting” one; they stressed that, before any such experiment in the Arab states, Islamist movements would have to forego violence and the use of weapons, a trend which they have flocked to in recent years. To the opponents of the idea of adapting Turkish political Islamism in the Arab world, the mere idea of it reflected Arab political paralysis, which leave the Arabs open to any and all political opportunities.

Yet another contingent amongst the attendees pointed to the prospects of future cooperation with a Turkey led by the AKP. To this group, the AKP was evidently trying to rekindle Turkey's Ottoman past, which could only include the Arabs. To them, the legacy of Islamic thought provides for possible fruitful and rational discussion regarding the role of democracy and modernity in the Arab world, particularly given the movement of many pioneers in Islamist political trends to a type of political Islam which is in concord with modernity, as seen in countries such as Egypt and Syria. They note that this is a position which puts Islamist trends in the Arab homeland at an enviable position compared to those in Turkey. For Islamist Arabs, the

Turkish example could be borrowed from in terms of understanding the devolution of powers and the separation between the state and the ruling party, both of which require a strong, institution-based state and civil society.

This view also holds that the Turkish version of political Islam could inspire Arab, Islamist movements to begin to present a political and social agenda which provides practical solutions to societal and state-level problems, not simply remaining preoccupied with ideological slogans; this task was singularly that of the Islamist movements. The success of these endeavours would be seen in the end of the era of extraneous justifications (whether "imperialism" or "Israel") represented by the "Arab model" and a move towards a practical alternative, which would see the Islamist political parties addressing the needs of citizens in Arab countries without conceding the value of their own collective heritage and national sovereignty. In this vein, some of the recent activities of Islamist movements in Egypt and Tunisia point to a new willingness, on the part of these political parties, to embrace the Turkish model.

All of the participants shared the view that the Turkish example was an inspired one, with its ability to combine modern political forms with an Islamic cultural identity; there was a consensus on the need for the Arabs to create their own individual political forms that could see a new coexistence between the nation-state and political Islamism, taking into account not only their past and culture but the challenges on their horizon.

The responsibility for these changes would not, of course, rest on the shoulders of one party; while the Islamist political parties would adopt moderate behavior in the Arab homeland, the nation-state would need to provide them with the institutions they needed to play a part in a participatory democracy, one which would have equal concern for all and would not marginalize any given group.

The symposium was attended by:

Dr. Azmi Bishara, Dr. Farida Banani, Dr. Mohammed Al Misfer, Dr. Faisal Darraj, Dr. Fayez Al Sayagh, Dr. Wajih Kawtharani, Dr. Abdulwahhab Al Qassab, Dr. Huda Hawa, Dr. Fares Braizat, Mr. Jamal Barout, Dr. Mahmoud Muhareb, Dr. Sayyar Al Jamil, Dr. Mohammed Nouredine, Dr. Mohammed Sayed-Salim, Dr. Farah Saber, Dr. Hisham Al Qarawi, Mr. Mohammed Abdulqader, Dr. Mustaffa Al Labbad, , Dr. Wissal Azzawi, Mr. Samir Aita, Dr. Mounir Al Hammash, Mr. Issam Al Chelabi, Mr. Abdulmajeed Al Attar, Mr. Naji Haraj, Dr. Tarek Majzoub, Dr. Nazem Youness Othman.