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Can Turkey really be a political model for its region?

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By Seyed Ali Alavi. From the outset of the 'Arab Spring', Turkey has pursued an active foreign policy and supported a number of recent popular uprisings throughout the Arab world. Having appeared on Arab TV channels such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya to express Turkish support of political opposition in revolutionary Arab countries, Turkey's Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, is now a familiar and popular figure in the Arab world. The Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, conducted an 'Arab Spring Tour', where he visited post-uprising Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. In his visit to the latter, Erdogan was greeted at the airport by chairman of Libya's new National Transitional Council, Mustafa Abdul-Jalil. He has even been compared by some to the late Gamal Abdel Nasser, whose pan Arab propaganda, amongst other factors, made him a regional hero in the 1950s.

What is more, Turkey has, as its Western allies, stepped up pressure on neighbouring Syria – a country that Mr. Erdogan once promoted close connections with – by calling on Bashar Al Assad to recognise the will of the Syrian people and step down as president. His view is – somewhat ironically, as the latter part of this article will show – that a future cannot be built on 'the blood of the oppressed'. Statements such as this one have been warmly received by the Arab streets, as has Turkey's leading sponsorship of exiled Syrian opposition, whose meetings and events have been facilitated in Istanbul and Ankara.

Just as Turkey's support for the popular uprisings was welcomed in the Arab world, the country's (op)position toward the Assad regime has been commended by the United States and the European Union. More generally, the country has received praise from Western and Arab pundits, some of whom have suggested that the seemingly successful [political model](#) in which Turkey's moderate Islamic government coexists with democracy and secularism, be the model that emerging democracies in the region replicate. There is, however, reason to be vigilant about Turkey as a regional political role model. In late December 2011, around the period when Turkish foreign delegates were visiting Arab countries and making strong statements in support of revolutionary uprisings, the Turkish military launched an offensive air strike using highly advanced F-16 warplanes, targeted at Kurdish villages along the Turkish and Iraq-Kurdistan border. The attacks killed 35 villagers. To its major embarrassment, the Turkish government admitted that the dead, originally thought to be fighters from the separatist [Kurdistan Workers' Party \(PKK\)](#), were in fact civilians. This episode brings to mind Turkey's ongoing and longstanding ethnic rights issue towards its Kurdish minority, for which it has yet to find a peaceful solution. This is in spite of what has appeared as goodwill – or perhaps simply good diplomacy – on part of the Turkish Prime Minister who, when taking office in 2003, promised that his government would alter Turkey's policy of Kurdish suppression. The ethnic minority issue also persists despite Mr. Erdogan being the first Turkish Prime Minister to visit Erbil, the capital of Kurdistan Regional Government in Northern Iraq, and opening a Turkish consulate there in March 2011.

Some elements within the Turkish political and military establishment as well as some extremists within the Kurdistan Worker's Party's political structure seem to view any Turkish initiatives towards the Kurdish question as disadvantageous for their respective political ambitions. Be that as it may, escalation of 'domestic' violence in Turkey begs the question of whether the country in fact merits the praise and role model status that some have granted it. Being a democratic country requires implementation of ethnic minorities' human rights. In order for the 'Turkish model' to be one worth replicating in post-authoritarian Arab states, Turkey must first and foremost pursue coherently within its own borders the pro-democracy rhetoric that it has been promoting throughout the Arab world.

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