

THE ISLAMIST MOMENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND TURKEY: EXPECTATIONS AND REALITIES*

Ismail Kemal

Researcher of Turkish Studies and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Cyprus

The US Institute of Peace Press recently published a book under the title "The Islamists are Coming: Who They Really Are?" "The Islamists are not only coming. In several countries, they've already arrived. Others are primed to take prominent roles down the road. Altogether, Islamist movements are today the most dynamic political actors across the Arab world—and they may well be for the next decade or longer" wrote the editor of the book Robin Wright.

What will be the domestic and geo-strategic implications of the rise of Islamists? How will these parties and their opponents adapt to the new realities? It is too early to predict.

Each country has its own dynamics. Generalizations should be avoided. At the same time linkages between issues across the region are increasing. Events in one country resonate in other countries. Arabs pay attention to what happens in other Arab countries.

There is no doubt that the Arab world is changing. We don't yet know what the new Middle East will look like. There have already been changes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen. Can these changes be sustained through institution building? Are we witnessing the beginning of a deeper transformation in the area? What will be the result of increasing sectarian and ethnic polarization? Will some countries face challenges to their territorial integrity? The jury is out. Most probably the process will take years. There is no guarantee that democracy will triumph.

It is true that almost everybody was surprised by the uprisings. So we have questions like "Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring?" But there were warnings such as the Arab Human Development Reports of the UNDP of 2002, 2004 and 2009. The predicament of the Arab world was outlined in these reports.

The Islamists did not plan the uprisings. They are better organized and more popular. Islamic movements are playing an important role in shaping the events and are shaped by the events. Islamism is not monolithic. Divisions and disagreements exist among them.

* Summary of presentation at the Conference *New Threats and Challenges for Regional Security in the Eastern Mediterranean*, which was organized by the Center for European and International Affairs of the University of Nicosia in cooperation with the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Cyprus and the Representation of Rossotrudnichestvo, on April 24, 2012.

Some are warning that the "Arab spring" is leading to an "Islamic winter". Will it be "one man, one vote, one time?" Will the Islamists turn against democracy? It is not the first time that Islamists are winning elections. In the past they were suppressed and excluded from the political process. Now the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared that the Obama administration would work with Islamist parties of the Muslim world. Excluding the Islamists from politics did not solve the problems of the area. It is time to have a well informed, unbiased and calm debate on the rise of Islamists.

In 2002 the AKP with Islamic roots came to power in Turkey. The Turkish experiment was mostly successful though much remains to be done. The AKP consolidated its control over the military. AKP's economic and political successes have been a source of inspiration for many Islamists. As the Arab Awakening spread in the Middle East, Islamists in Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, Syria, and Tunisia cited the AKP experience. The AKP does not define itself as Islamist but its successes can be useful for Islamist movements. It is not a coincidence that there are Islamist parties in Morocco, Tunisia and Libya with the same name.

The AKP government's activist policy in the Middle East dates before the Arab Awakening. The so called "zero problems with neighbours" policy aimed at good relations with the existing regimes. Trade with Middle East helped Turkey to ease the impact of the global economic crisis. Turkey had an 8 billion dollar surplus with the Middle East in 2009.

The Arab Awakening changed all this. Turkey was also surprised by the wave of popular Arab uprisings and had to improvise its response to these developments. It managed in short time to change its policy and gave support to the uprisings. Turkey's early support for pro-democracy forces in Tunisia and Egypt was noted in the area. After some hesitation Turkey also supported the NATO action against the Gaddafi regime in Libya. Syria is a particularly challenging case. Initially the Turkish leaders believed that they could persuade Bashar Assad to stop the use of violence and initiate political reforms. Frustrated by Assad's refusal, Prime Minister Erdogan gradually turned against the Syrian government.

The AKP enjoys good relations with the Islamist parties in the Middle East. This does not mean that they agree on everything. Electoral successes of Islamists in Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt are welcomed by Ankara. The AKP helped these parties in their election campaigns. The expectation is to enhance Turkey's influence in the area through good relations with these new actors.

Is Turkey a model for the countries where the Islamists won elections? Speaking to Cairo Review Mr. Ahmet Davutoglu rejected the notion of being a model. "Each and every country has its own unique characteristics shaped by its own unique historical and socio-political background.

Therefore, as Turkey we do not want to present ourselves, nor to be seen, as a role model" he said.

There is no doubt that Turkey will benefit from good relations with the Islamist parties which are coming to power. The main challenges for Turkey's expectations are near its borders namely Syria. What happens in Syria has much more consequences for Turkey than North Africa. The prospect of an unstable and fragmented Syria is not in Turkey's interests. We don't know how events will evolve in Syria. For Turkey the stakes are very high.

One of the casualties of the Syrian uprising was Turkish-Iranian relations. The AKP government steadily improved relations with Iran. The Syrian uprising dealt a blow to these relations. Now Turkey and Iran are competing powers in the region. This competition has implications both for Syria, Iraq and beyond. Relations between Turkey and Iraq are deteriorating because of sectarian and ethnic divisions in Iraq. Along with the Syrian crisis and instability in Iraq, an Israeli or Israeli-US attack on Iran will deal a blow to Turkey's efforts in the Middle East. Turkey's interests are in peaceful and diplomatic resolution of the Iranian nuclear issue.

In the evolving Middle East Turkey is facing both opportunities and challenges. Whether its expectations will materialize or not, to a large extent will depend on developments in Syria, Iraq and developments related to the nuclear issue of Iran.