Turkey’s Role in the Diffusion of Democracy in the MENA Region

Halim Rane and Bridget Minogue
Griffith University
© 2013 National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies, Australia

Disclaimer:
The contents of the articles published are of the author’s sole responsibility. They do not necessarily represent the views of the National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies or its staff. Comments, questions, and permission to cite should be directed to the author.

ISSN: 1836 - 5442

About NCEIS Research Papers
This is a peer-reviewed online publication. NCEIS Research Papers are aimed at promoting original and scholarly research on Islam. The range of topics covered is diverse and represents the breadth of research excellence in the field. NCEIS Research Papers is a multidisciplinary publication. Submissions for consideration may be sent to nceis-office@unimelb.edu.au

Series Editor: Prof Shahram Akbarzadeh

National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies
Sidney Myer Asia Centre
University of Melbourne, VIC
Australia 3010
Dr Halim Rane is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Humanities at Griffith University. He is the author of a number of books, including *Reconstructing Jihad amid Competing International Norms*, *Islam and Contemporary Civilisation: Evolving Ideas, Transforming Relations*, and *Making Australian Foreign Policy on Israel-Palestine*. Dr Rane's main areas of specialisation include political Islam, the *maqasid* philosophy of Islamic thought, the Israel-Palestine conflict, and inter-community relations of Muslims in Western societies.

Email: h.rane@griffith.edu.au

Ms Bridget Minogue is an Hounour's student in Islamic Studies at Griffith University. Her thesis is concerned with political Islam in Turkey. She currently works for the State Government Department of Communities.

Email: Bridget.Minogue@communities.qld.gov.au
Turkey’s Role in the Diffusion of Democracy in the MENA Region

Halim Rane and Bridget Minogue
Griffith University

Since its rise to power in 2002, Turkey’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) has achieved levels of political stability, economic development and regional influence that has resulted in it being regarded by both the masses and political parties of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region as a potential model. Critics involved in the ‘Turkish model’ debate tend to concentrate on the unique circumstances that led to Turkish democratization and how these factors differ from the experiences of the Arab countries in the MENA region. Drawing on diffusion theory and key literature on democratization, this paper contends that political and social institutions need to be reflective of the geographical and historical contexts within the MENA countries and that a re-focusing of the debate in such terms could provide a more viable and realistic appreciation for Turkey as an example for other Muslim majority countries.

Introduction
Since the 1990s, Turkey has been suggested by successive US administrations as an appropriate political model for Muslim-majority countries to emulate. However, it was not until the rise of Turkey’s current government led by the Justice and Development party (AKP) that Turkey has received significant attention from the Muslim world, particularly the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). This paper argues that the MENA region’s interest in Turkey as a model is based on four main factors: Turkey’s successful balancing of Islam and democracy; its sustained economic growth and development; the government’s ability to bring the military under its control; and the influence Turkey has come to wield in the region, including its championing of such causes as Palestinian rights and statehood.

The question of a Turkish model has become a major of focus of academics and commentators since the Arab uprisings commence in 2010. A growing
body of scholarly literature has been generated. Additionally, the Chairman of Foreign Relations for the Justice and Development Party confirmed that his office receives delegations on a weekly basis from established and emerging political parties from across the Muslim worlds who are exploring the potential of the Turkish model in their own respective countries. This paper uses diffusion theory to explain the transfer of democratic ideas, process of democratisation in the MENA region and Turkey’s role in this process. It defines the basis of the Turkish model and examines the arguments for and against from the perspective of the Arab publics and political parties. This paper also considers the practical lessons that Turkey offers the emerging Arab democracies of the MENA region in the context of what some commentators and experts are seeing as a potential fourth wave of democratisation.

**Diffusion of Democracy**

Since the 1990s, diffusion theory has been used extensively in the study of social movements. Scholars in the field contend that “one cannot understand social movements – how they evolve, how they expand, how they engage the political arena – without understanding the dynamics of diffusion”. Originally applied to the study of how new technologies spread, diffusion theory has come to encompass the study of the spread of ideas concerning social movements, policy reform and regime change. Early proponents of diffusion theory explain that the diffusion process involves four elements: transmitters or those who initiate the diffusion of the innovation; adopters or those who receive the innovation; the innovation or item that is being diffused; and the channel or the means by which diffusion occurs. In the context of events in the MENA region, the key transmitters have been Tunisian followed by Egyptian activists, the key adopters have been the publics across various countries in the region, the central diffusion items are ideals concerning freedom and democracy, and a key channel of diffusion has been the transfer of images and information about the uprisings via social media to the mainstream mass media.
Researchers in the field have increasingly emphasised the extent to which adopters identify with transmitters than on direct interpersonal contact between them. As Soule explains, “the higher the level of identification with a shared social or cultural category, the more extensive the transmission of an innovation”. Also integral to this process are the actions of social movements, including framing, tactics and slogans which do not occur in a vacuum but are adopted from other movements with which a given movement identifies.

The framing of collective action by actors in a social movement is critical to a movement’s success. Framing defines and gives meaning to a social movement and impacts on how external actors will respond. Specifically, frames define the motivations, grievances and demands of a movement as well as its identity, nationally and internationally. A social movement’s leadership is central to this process. Who are the key receivers or adopters who lead social movements? They are not necessarily mainstream or traditional opinion leaders. Rather, they are often ‘ordinary’ but excluded citizens that identify new social problems, articulate grievances, formulate solutions and who form ‘critical communities’.

The Arab uprisings were largely an expression of shared conditions and responses of the MENA region’s people, including high levels of unemployment and underemployment, real and perceived lack of opportunity for socio-economic mobility, high levels of corruption, and severe restrictions on political participation. Although officially leaderless, the key social groups involved in the Arab uprisings included unemployed and underemployed Arab youth, trade unionists, the working class and members of various professional classes including lawyers. These groups are among those that did not share in the privileges dispensed by the ruling regimes; they shared grievances over unemployment, rising food prices, lack of political representation, corruption, and a lack of basic rights, freedoms and protections. Their protests were framed in terms of demands for dignity, justice, freedom and democracy. Moreover, the uprisings have been overwhelmingly nonviolent, which has
been another critical element in their framing and, in turn, the support they have received from the international community. As will be discussed later in this paper, the example of Turkey as a successful democratic model in the region is a key element in the process of democracy diffusion in the region. However, equally important to the process of the diffusion of democratic ideas and the emergence of the uprisings was not only the above mentioned social, political and economic conditions but the opportunity for social groups to organise and mobilise and the response they received domestically and internationally.

Understanding how diffusion of ideas has worked in past democratisation processes could provide another dimension to the current debate. Political diffusion can be defined as the existence of a model that, through its own processes and behaviours, influences outside actors and results in the ‘observer match[ing] these behaviors’. Huntington’s Third Wave theory describes this process as ‘demonstrative effect’ – the positive impact a democratic country can have on surrounding non-democratic countries. Of course democratic diffusion can work in reverse and cause a move away from democracy – a process long feared by the US during the Cold War when it was felt communist countries would cause a domino effect and pollute surrounding countries.

Many scholars have argued for the ‘neighbour effect’ democracies can have on non-democracies on the basis that the more democracies surrounding a non-democratic country the more likely it is that country will shift towards democracy. Although simply being within a region that has at least one democracy does not necessarily mean a democratic transition will take place, other factors also impact on the likelihood of a transition. The image or popularity of the democratic country is argued to be important in whether or not a region will be influenced. Contrastingly, diplomatic ties between...
nations have been found to not always have a substantial influence on non-democratic countries.\textsuperscript{20} It has also been debated the level of external threat can have an impact – the less an external threat exists the more likely a country is to be democratic.\textsuperscript{21} Interestingly, Gibler and Sewell find no evidence that wealth is necessarily linked to a country’s ability to democratise or remain a democracy.\textsuperscript{22}

It has also been suggested that international organisations (IO) can also have significant influence on non-democratic countries or ‘young democracies’ by forming networks between various countries that have certain membership requirements.\textsuperscript{23} Membership of an organisation such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) or the European Union can serve to place restrictions or spur on reforms, encouraging a democratic transition. Furthermore, a young democracy may use IOs to safeguard themselves from a potential drift away from democracy or from those who lost out in the transition to democracy such as the military.\textsuperscript{24} As discussed later in the paper Turkey has been argued to use a similar tactic by using EU membership requirements to make much needed national reforms.

In a study on diffusion and democratisation, Bell and Staeheli analyse the use of the diffusion theory by previous governments and scholars.\textsuperscript{25} They identify two democracy theories “procedural and substantive”, the former is concerned with “democracy in terms of institutions, rules, and practices of governance and participation”, and the latter “focus[es] on the outcomes of democratic governance and practice”.\textsuperscript{26} Two distinct periods in the treatment of diffusion are identified: 1945 to the mid-1970s and the mid-1970s to 1990.\textsuperscript{27} During the 1945 to mid-1970s period a “procedural” definition of diffusion was adopted.\textsuperscript{28} It was argued that in order for the diffusion of democracy certain “requisites” were necessary; economic and social development were considered key to successful democratization, therefore, “policy was directed at fostering them”.\textsuperscript{29} The fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent democratization that worked its way through Europe, Asia and South America, greatly challenged
the theory of “requisites”, as the majority of these nations did not have the “required social, economic, and civic conditions” that had been thought necessary.\textsuperscript{30} Applying these findings to the current debate on the Turkish model, a parallel can be drawn between the treatment and definitions of democracy and diffusion between the 1940s to mid-1970s period. At this point it is necessary to identify the elements that constitute the Turkish model.

**Defining the Turkish Model**

Turkey’s balancing of Islam and democracy, albeit with a secular orientation, has encouraged publics within the MENA to hold Turkey in high regard and to view Turkey as a potential model for countries in the MENA. A 2011 TESEV poll of opinions in the MENA region towards Turkey revealed that 61 percent see Turkey as a model for countries in the region with Tunisia and Egypt the highest respondents.\textsuperscript{31} When asked why Turkey could be a model for the region the highest three responses were ‘democracy’, ‘economy’, and ‘Muslim background’.\textsuperscript{32} Interestingly, this response has changed since 2010, as ‘Muslim background’ was the highest rating response pre-Arab uprisings.\textsuperscript{33} This perhaps indicates that Turkey’s Muslim background has not fallen as a reason why Turkey is so appealing but now there has been significant change in political regimes, establishing democracy is the ultimate goal and Turkey with their Muslim background is able to offer not only hope but also a realistic example of how it can work.

**Islamic Roots**

Whilst there may be varying opinions regarding the viability of the Turkish model, or indeed, what the Turkish model entails, the argument that Turkey at the least provides an example of the compatibility of Islam and democracy is agreed upon by most scholars, commentators and Arab political parties. The uniqueness of Turkish Islamism is largely due to the secular structure of Turkey - secularism has placed religion under the control of the state and reduced it to the individual giving it no part to play in law making or state politics.\textsuperscript{34} During the 1970s Islamists began to participate in politics, albeit
briefly, before the military ruled it a threat to the secular foundations of the country. Over time, and under the watchful eye of the military, Islamist movements developed and evolved to fit within the confines of Turkish secular politics. It is also argued that this unique secularism means Turkey is unable to be a model, as the same secular environment does not exist in the MENA region and therefore Islamist parties cannot be forced to moderate and work within democratic boundaries.

Although the rise of the AKP has been a relatively quick process, their political experiences provide important lessons for Islamist parties within the MENA. The AKP arose in 2001 after the collapse of the Fazilet Partisi (FP) who had been banned due to Islamist leanings. Perhaps key to the AKP's success was the economic liberalization introduced under Turgut Özal, which gave rise to an influential group of conservative businessmen in central Anatolia who have been labeled the ‘Anatolian tigers’. They have been strong supporters of the AKP and hold considerable influence on ‘Turkey’s character, identity, and future foreign policy orientation’. The AKP do not define itself as Islamist, instead choosing to describe themselves as a ‘conservative democratic’ party. The AKP’s ability to work within the confines of a secular democracy has since given rise to the argument that ‘Islamic movements can be moderated through democracy’.

Central to the debate about the Turkish model is the question of whether Turkey essentially offers a model that is Islamic or secular. The Abant Platform held a conference in December 2011 to debate the future of the Middle East after the Arab Spring and Turkey’s position. Speakers at the conference noted that Turkey offers two models: ‘the [earlier] Kemalist top-down modernisation project . . . which marginalised Islam’ and ‘[the more recent which has] incorporated Islamic conservative values into the political process [and in particular the AKP’s] successful engagement with secular and Western values both at home and in the world, while keeping their deeply held religio-conservative values in tact’.
Prior to the electoral win of the AKP, the US had already voiced support for the Turkish model due to its compatibility of democracy and Islam, clearly more in support of a Kemalist Turkish model with the emphasis on secularism. For the US, a majority Muslim population was enough to deem Turkey as a model that had found a balance between Islam and democracy, therefore for the US it was Turkey not one political party that provided a model for the Muslim world. The Arab world, however, did not view Turkey in the same light and instead saw the country ‘as [an] anti-Islamic image of Kemalist secularism . . . [that lacked] democratic legitimacy’. It was not until the election of the AKP that the MENA region began to see Turkey in a positive light. It was not Turkey but the AKP and their Islamist roots that provided a potential model and caught the attention of a region that had never connected with Turkey’s ‘authoritarian secularism’.

Although the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood did reject Erdoğan’s suggestion to consider secularism as an inclusive political system, representatives of the group have stated: ‘we welcome Turkey and we welcome Erdoğan as a prominent leader, but we do not think he or his country alone should be leading the region or drawing up its future’. Then again, this mood may even be changing within the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood with a recent statement from Khalid al-Zafarani, a member of the group, saying the group are looking to establish ‘a political party with the same program of Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party [AKP]’. Despite the arguments put forward regarding the unique nature of the Turkish and AKP experiences, it appears there is as expressed interest from the Muslim parties in the MENA to move towards democratisation. Furthermore, it appears they are willing to look to, or even attempt to borrow lessons from, the AKP.

**Historical Experiences and Military Control**

The general concern raised by commentators on the Turkish model debate is whether Turkey’s path to democratisation has been one built on a number of unique external and internal influences. Unlike in Turkey, Islam in the MENA
countries has taken on a vastly different role in politics and society.\textsuperscript{51} In the MENA region most Islamist parties ‘would not be able to abandon their commitment to implementing Islamic law’, nor do they want to.\textsuperscript{52} Those who argue Turkey’s unique secular experience could hinder the compatibility of the model in the MENA region do not take into account the diversity of the Arab public on such issues. The argument that a lack of secularism in the MENA could mean the absence of pressure on Islamists to moderate or become politically pragmatic does not appreciate the very nature of the uprisings. Demonstrations across the MENA region were not dominated by religious or secular aspirations. Instead there were calls of political, economic and social frustrations, with slogans in Egyptian protests calling for ‘bread (‘aish), freedom (hurriyya) and human dignity (karama insaniyya)’. Public demands for governance that serves ‘democracy and social justice may provide pressure needed to ensure parties remain pragmatic.’\textsuperscript{53}

The fall of the Ottoman Empire, and the establishment of a secular Turkish state under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, brought with it a sense of resentment within the Arab world.\textsuperscript{54} While some Arabs felt the ‘Turks had not only turned their backs on the caliphate but also on their responsibilities,’ Arab nationalists saw the new state as an embodiment of their own aspirations and revered Turkey for its ‘modernization’ and ‘stability’.\textsuperscript{55} It has also been suggested that Turkey greatly benefited from its Ottoman experience in bureaucratic politics and carried over a great wealth of knowledge and political confidence.\textsuperscript{56} Whilst in the MENA, colonisation and regional conflicts obstructed political development and led to authoritarian leadership, and the ‘militarization of Arab politics’.\textsuperscript{57} During this time Turkey was able to establish strong relations with the West through pro-Western foreign policies, willingness to recognise Israel, and joining international organizations such as NATO.\textsuperscript{58} This proved to only isolate Turkey further from the region and revived previously held negative perceptions of Turkey within the Arab world.\textsuperscript{59} However, a recent TESEV poll indicates negative opinion of Turkey is indicative of past relations rather than the present with a total of 85% of countries in the MENA region viewing
Turkey positively.\textsuperscript{60} It appears that the shift in perception of Turkey from a majority of people in the MENA region can be attributed to the AKP and its notable successes politically, economically and in terms of its championing of regional causes.

Similarly, the role of the military has also been argued as crucial in upholding secularism, which has left countries in the MENA viewing secularism as being forced on the Turkish population.\textsuperscript{61} Regardless of the militarized nature of Turkish politics, the military did allow Islamists to participate as long as they toed the secular line, allowing Islamists to gain valuable political experience.\textsuperscript{62} For this reason, it is suggested that political groups within the MENA are lacking a similar level of political experience that has been needed in order for the AKP to evolve into a mature and pragmatic party.\textsuperscript{63} However, across the MENA region Islamist parties have been banned and unable to participate in politics. This has been the fate of parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Syria as well as An-Nahda in Tunisia.

As Islamists in Turkey had to work within strict secular boundaries in order to participate in politics, it became necessary to abstain from religious ideology in discourse and instead draw on political experience.\textsuperscript{64} The process of moderation or transformation of the Islamist approach to politics can be seen clearly in the development of numerous forerunners that eventually led to the establishment of the AKP.\textsuperscript{65} Adapting political policies and discourse to fit within the secular framework, proved to not only satisfy the secular restrictions, but allowed the AKP to build up a wide support base as they began to realise the benefits of practical policies rather than ideological discourse.\textsuperscript{66} It has been suggested that unique historical and social circumstances are responsible for the success of Turkish secularism.\textsuperscript{67} However, secularism is not necessarily a goal of Islamist parties within the MENA region, particularly in Egypt where both the public and political parties wish to see Islam play a role in politics and state affairs.\textsuperscript{68} If this is the case,
the argument that secularism is needed to moderate parties needs to be revised to be more reflective of the realities in the region.

**Economy**

Over the past decade, Turkey has experienced economic growth. The country’s GDP exceeded 8 per cent in 2010 and the rate of unemployment was reduced to below 10 per cent. 69 This economic success coupled with the AKP’s Islamic roots and commitment to democracy has given Turkey significant credibility among Muslims. The economic aspect of the Turkish model is one that has been largely acknowledged by the MENA. Turkey’s own process of economic liberalisation through Turgut Özal’s economic reforms during the 1980s ‘became a driving force of Turkish foreign policy’.70 As previously mentioned these reforms led to the rise of the Anatolian tigers who have been central to the success of the AKP. It appears the MENA also view the economic expansion Turkey has experienced as central to their reasons for supporting the Turkish model. When asked why Turkey is viewed as a model, the second most popular reason was their economy.71 It has even been argued that the current debate that focuses on the role of Islam has ‘absorbed our analytical capacities at the expense of a closer inspection of societal change’.72 Instead, an understanding of how Turkey’s ‘political economy’ has transformed Turkish society through regional and national economic development may prove more valuable when considering how Turkey can inspire countries in the MENA.73

**Regional Influence**

There are various avenues in which Turkey has been able to influence as well as gain considerable support and admiration from the MENA region. Central to this capacity has been Turkey’s economic prosperity, positive relations with Europe, commitment to the Palestinian cause and constructive response to the Arab uprisings. Economically, Turkey has invested significant amounts of money into the region and has established strong economic ties in the region that has significantly increased movement amongst Arabs who are now
travelling in larger numbers to Turkey.\textsuperscript{74} One impact of this has been the cultural awareness of Turkish society amongst Arabs who have taken to, in large numbers, watching Turkish television programs that have exposed them to a more Western yet uniquely Islamic culture.\textsuperscript{75}

The influence of the European Union has not only had a large impact on Turkish politics but may also flow on to influence the MENA region. Turkey has had to make dramatic reforms in order to satisfy EU accession requirements.\textsuperscript{76} It has been suggested that the success of the EU influence on Turkish reforms could not be replicated in the MENA region as a Western influence such as the EU would not be received as positively as it has been in Turkey.\textsuperscript{77} Yet, despite a history of negative relations with the West, the TESEV poll also revealed that Turkey’s membership in the EU is seen as a positive by over half (57\%) of the respondents.\textsuperscript{78} This indicates that while the MENA countries do not have a similar outside influence, as Turkey has with the EU, Turkey’s move towards membership is acknowledged as having possible positive effects within the region. Additionally, it has also been suggested in a policy brief for the EU that it remains unclear whether Turkey itself will reach EU membership and may remain as a “hybrid status,” which may also be a possibility for “more successful [Arab] neighbours.”\textsuperscript{79} The brief also mentions the possibility of Turkey playing a guiding role model “in helping the EU’s Arab neighbours to modernise – by investing in them, developing infrastructure and advising on how to reform political systems”.\textsuperscript{80} Therefore, it is possible the MENA may never have a similar EU-style influence in making dramatic reforms, however, there does remain the possibility of Turkey having a positive regional impact.

Turkey’s political stance and championing of Palestinian rights has also had a significant impact on how the region views Turkey.\textsuperscript{81} Erdoğan’s reception on arriving into Egypt on his Arab tour in September 2011, has been described as being ‘received like a rock star,’ which was credited to the AKP’s recent criticism of Israel’s actions in Palestine and the Gaza Flotilla incident.\textsuperscript{82} With
the Israeli-Palestinian conflict rating as the top international concern of people within the MENA, combined with support for Turkey as a model due to their ‘stand[ing] up for Palestinians and Muslims,’ it is not surprising the AKP’s ardent criticism of Israel has won them wide public support within the MENA. Consequently, it has been noted that the AKP’s overt criticism may jeopardize Turkey’s role as mediator between Israel and Palestine in the future. Turkey’s successful balancing of Islam and democracy, its sustained economic growth and development and championing of such causes as Palestinian rights and statehood are the key factors that have put Turkey ‘back on the map’ so to speak as far as the people of the MENA region are concerned. These factors have significantly contributed to the appeal of the Turkish model in the region.

In respect to the Arab uprisings Turkey’s prominence in the MENA region has significantly increased. According to the most recent Arab public opinion poll conducted by the Brookings Institution and Zogby International:

Turkey is the biggest winner of the Arab Spring. In the five countries polled, Turkey is seen to have played the "most constructive" role in the Arab events. Its prime minister, Recep Erdoğan, is the most admired among world leaders, and those who envision a new president for Egypt want the new president to look most like Erdoğan. Egyptians want their country to look more like Turkey than any of the other Muslim, Arab and other choices provided.

When asked to name the two countries that played the most constructive role in the uprisings, 50 per cent of respondents chose Turkey, followed by France (30%) and the US (24%). Respondent were also asked who they would like their future leader to look like, to which 31 per cent selected Erdogan. The next closest leaders were King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, Mandala of South Africa, and Nasrallah of Hezbollah all on 9 per cent. Most importantly, 44 per cent of Egyptian respondents chose Turkey when asked to name the political
system they would prefer Egypt’s political system to look like. The next closest was France (10%); Saudi Arabia, China and Germany (8%); United States (5%), United Kingdom (4%), and Iran with less than 2 per cent.  

Support and Opposition
As mentioned above, 61 per cent in the MENA region regard Turkey as a model for their country. Highest levels of support came from respondents in Libya, Tunisia and Egypt. Importantly, this sentiment is shared by many of the emerging Islamic political parties in the region. Mohammad Shaqfah, leader of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has expressed his support for the Turkish model and stated that his party would follow the Turkish governance system. The leader of Libya's National Transitional Council (NTC) Mustafa Abdul Jalil has called Turkey a model for Libya and the other Arab Spring countries. He stated in Today’s Zaman that “Turkey’s democratic structure is an example to Libya and the other countries that experienced the Arab Spring. Libya will look to Turkey as a model for its own political and democratic structure”.  

Additionally, the Tunisian Prime Minister Hammadi Cibali has repeatedly endorsed the Turkish model. In an interview with Today’s Zaman he explained that the Tunisia would be based on Turkey’s parliamentary system. For the Tunisian Foreign Minister Rafik Abdessalem, the Turkish model is appealing for it demonstrates that Islam and democracy can co-exist. In an interview with Hurriyet Daily News he conceded that a different interpretation of secularism from Turkey’s would be needed in Tunisia as his country strongly values it’s Arab, Muslim identity.

However, there is also significant opposition to the notion that Turkey can offer a model for the region. In the aftermath of Mubarak’s overthrow and the establishment of Egypt’s Freedom and Justice Party, representatives of the party suggested that Turkey would provide a model for the party and the country. While this position has been maintained by some such as Momhammad Badie of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Freedom and Justice Party deputy leader Essam El-Erian has been a vocal critic of Erdogan’s
remarks that Muslims should not be wary of secularism, which the Turkish PM made on Egyptian television during a visit in September 2011. Although Erdogan explained that “secularism doesn’t mean a lack of religion but creating respect for all religions and religious freedoms for all people” the term has a strongly negative connotation among Islamists. Essam El-Erian stated in response that secularism has “a very bad perception among Egyptians” and that “we have no need for this term.”90 It should be noted that according to Gallup world polling, almost two-thirds of Egyptian want shariah to be the only source of legislation.91

While many Muslims hear anti-religion or anti-Islam when the word secularism is mentioned, this misconception is being challenged by current Islamic discourse.

The diversity of the countries, parties and people of the MENA region must be appreciated, however. While many Muslims hear anti-religion or anti-Islam when the word secularism is mentioned, this misconception is being challenged by current Islamic discourse. Leader of the Tunisian An-Nahda Party, Rachid Ghanouchi, has said “I envisage an AKP-style structure. They prove that Islam and democracy can go together”.92 In a recent speech at a forum hosted by the Centre for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID), Ghanouchi went even further and made a case for the place of secularism within Islam:

The greater part of the debate taking place nowadays in our country is a misunderstanding of such concept as secularism and Islam….secularism is not an atheist philosophy but merely a set of procedural arrangements designed to safeguard the freedom of belief and thought.93

Ghanouchi explained that within the legal traditions of Islam is acknowledgement of the distinctions between or separation of the civil
(mu’amalat) and the religious (ibadat) in terms of human action and interaction. He added to this point that:

It is not the duty of religion to teach us agricultural, industrial or even governing techniques, because reason is qualified to reach these truths through the accumulation of experiences. The role of religion, however, is to answer the big question for us, those relating to our existence, origins, destiny, and the purpose for which we were created, and to provide us with a system of values and principles that would guide our thinking, behaviour, and the regulations of the state to which we aspire.94

Beyond the challenge of secularism, other factors, including historical experiences have been cited as detracting from the relevance of Turkey as a model for the MENA region. Arab participants at the Abant Platform conference in 2011 asserted their opposition to the idea of a Turkish model. They stressed the uniqueness of the various countries in the region and based their argument on the distinctive histories and socio-cultural experience of Turkey and the Arab countries. It was also reasoned that advocacy of the Turkish model might entrench the army in the politics of Arab countries such as Egypt, under the guise of a protector or guardian. Conference participants conceded that Turkey provides an inspiration for the emerging Arab democracies.95 Additionally, the January 2012 Doha Debates passed the motion “This house believes Turkey is a bad model for the new Arab states” (59% to 41%). However, it should be noted that the debate framed the issue in terms of Turkey’s ability to balance Islam and democracy versus its record on human rights and did not give sufficient attention to such issues as governance, containment of the military, economic development and independent foreign policy.96
Lessons

While the idea of a Turkish ‘model’ may still be under debate, at a minimum Turkey is serving as an ‘inspiration’ for the people and parties of the MENA region. There is increasing agreement that Turkey, and the AKP more specifically, can offer important lessons for the emerging Arab democracies. Seymen Atasoy recently wrote for the Middle East Policy Council that Turkey provides an important “demonstration effect”. Central to Turkey’s appeal is Turkey’s democracy, economy and independent foreign policy. Atasoy contends that Arab states can learn vital lessons from Turkey, including political and economic development based on European models of liberal democracy, rule of law, and market-based capitalism. However, he notes that the absence of European colonial rule over Turkey meant that the country was able to pragmatically evaluate and embrace Western institutions of governance voluntarily; whereas Western institutions were imposed on Arab countries and were viewed as a threat to national and Islamic identity due to the experience of being colonised by European powers.97

Alper Dede contends that there are three key lessons that the emerging Arab democracies should learn from Turkey. The first is to maintain a separation of politics and religion. Turkey has a government that respects Islamic values whilst upholding a level of secularism that ensures that the state controls religious institutions, leaders and education. The second is to ensure that the military remains out of politics but this relationship between the government and the military must be managed in such a way as to ensure that a military coup becomes undesirable and unviable. The third is to replace statist economic policies with policies that liberalise the economy so as to encourage economic growth.98 In respect to these points, others have added that economic growth has become an effective protective factor against a military coup in Turkey. The military have also been legitimately and effectively put back in its barracks through the reforms being undertaken towards membership in the EU. Moreover, a key lesson the AKP provides Arab states such as Egypt in respect to the military is not to confront the military generals
openly but to chip away at their political authority through sound economic management, winning subsequent elections, and using the justice system to deal with those guilty of corruption or plots against the government. Another important lessons the AKP offers Arab states is to allay the fears of minority groups concerned about an Islamist agenda. This is achieved through and deeds by governing in the interest of all citizens and not just Islamists.\(^9\)

A Fourth Wave of Democratisation?
The Arab uprisings of the past two years have been framed as a shift towards democracy. The uprisings have resulted in the successful expulsion of autocratic leaders in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, and have had political implications for most countries within the MENA region. Following the toppling of their long-standing dictators, Tunisians and Egyptians have been able to participate in free and fair democratic elections, which have resulted in Islamic parties coming to power in both countries. In Tunisia, the largest plurality of votes was won by the An-Nahda Party, while in Egypt the political party of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Freedom and Justice Party won a majority of votes. The leaders of both have emphasised their respective party’s commitment to the principles of democracy and their respect for the will of their people. This prompts the question of whether or not the Arab uprisings and the subsequent election of democratic governments constitute a fourth wave of democratization that is characterized by the infusion of Islamic values and principles, or at least their co-existence, with democracy.

To date the world has witnessed three waves of democratization that some have observed to have occurred as sudden and sweeping movements.\(^{100}\) Huntington identifies the American and French revolutions as the first wave. A second wave occurred post World War II when various countries throughout Europe, Asia and South America shifted towards democracy. In the decades between the 1970s and 1990s a third wave of democratization moved through large parts of Europe, particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as well as allied Asian and South American countries.
For Huntington, democratisation appears to be limited to certain countries and cultures. Islam is identified as sharing some compatible traits with democracy, although as a whole he argues it provides barriers to democratisation – most noticeably the union of religion and state. Exceptions to this rule include Turkey and Indonesia, although other Muslim-majority countries like Pakistan and Lebanon have at times been considered among the other rare examples of Muslim democracies. The latter two have been unable to sustain democracy for extended, uninterrupted periods of time. Why Turkey was able to establish and maintain democracy, according to Huntington, is due to Atatürk’s separation of Islam in state politics. However, this perspective has been countered by those who argue that each wave of the three waves of democratisation have resulted in different but equally valid forms of democracy. For instance, Bell and Staeheli contend that different forms of democracy should be expected on account of different historical, geographical and social contexts. The authors state that the imposition of certain requisites for democracy that deny socio-cultural factors may inhibit our ability to “grasp the complex interaction between democratization and specific geographical–historical contexts”.

In a lecture entitled *The Arab Revolts: A Fourth Wave or an Ebbing Tide?* Carl Gershman explores the question of whether the Arab revolts can in fact lead to significant democratisation of the MENA region. Gershman stresses the significance of how rapidly the region has been able to oust four longstanding dictators in what has been a relatively short period of time. However, it is perhaps the shift away from pan-Arab and ideologies and the move towards individual citizens within separate countries pushing to establish democracy that Gershman finds particularly significant. Tunisia is highlighted as being the most successful of the four nations by having fulfilled the four requirements for a democratic transition as well as coming close to achieving ‘twin tolerations’ – the toleration of the state and religious groups of one another. Whether or not it is a fourth wave or an ebbing tide Gershman believes it is currently both, although he remains optimistic that the power of those people who want
democratic change in the MENA regions outweigh the repressive regimes clinging to power.

Expanding geographically on Gershman’s proposed fourth wave, Sarihan argues the fourth wave will not only flow through Islamic countries but communist countries as well. Sarihan differs to Gershman by hanging the success of the proposed fourth wave on the ability of international actors to support the transition to democracy, without such support the fourth wave, in his opinion, is bound to fail. Similarly, Diamond argues the West, particularly the United States and the United Nations (UN), have an important role to play in supporting a democratic shift in the MENA region. Rather than a wave, Diamond describes the region as likely to experience in the coming years ‘cycles – ups and downs’ as they forge a new political landscape. Generally there is a reluctance to call the current situation in the MENA region a fourth wave as it is unclear just how many countries will be successful in their transition, but there is considerable acknowledgement there is democratic change to come as long as the will in the region remains as well as support from outside actors is strong.

...political and social institutions need to be reflective of the geographical and historical contexts within the MENA countries and....a re-focusing of the debate in such terms could provide a more viable and realistic appreciation for Turkey as an example for other Muslim majority countries

With much of the Turkish model debate focused on key political, economic, historical, and social factors, it appears a similar oversight towards diffusion that was made during the 1940s-70s is being repeated. Focusing on Turkey’s uniqueness or similarities to countries in the MENA may be neglecting the ramifications of past attitudes and definitions of democracy. Instead, a substantive approach to diffusion, “insist[s] that truly democratic institutions must adapt and respond to their geographical-historical contexts”. For example, the argument that a lack of secularism in MENA countries means an absence of pressure to moderate Islamists, as it did in Turkey, does not recognise that
secularism is not reflective of the historical and social context of the region. What has been of particular focus throughout the Turkish model debate is a concentration on the *unique* circumstances that led to Turkish democratization and how these differ to the experiences in the MENA region. A substantive approach to the Turkish model debate, that accepts that political and social institutions need to be reflective of the ‘geographical-historical contexts’ within the MENA countries, could provide a more viable and realistic appreciation for Turkey as an example for other Muslim majority countries.110

**Conclusion**

This paper has demonstrated the importance of diffusion theory for understanding the process of democratisation in the MENA region. The Arab uprisings, characterised by social movements for freedom and democracy, were due to the shared conditions and responses of the Arab people. The people themselves were responsible for toppling long-standing dictators and for initiating the process of democratisation. In this process of democratisation, however, Turkey’s role has been both constructive and substantial. While semantic arguments continue as to whether Turkey provides an actual ‘model’ for the emerging Arab democracies, few disagree that Turkey, and particularly the AKP, is a source of inspiration for the people and parties of the region that has important lessons to offer.

The key elements that constitute the Turkish model include Turkey’s successful balancing of Islam and democracy; its sustained economic growth and development; the government’s ability to bring the military under its control; and the influence Turkey has come to wield in the region through an independent foreign policy, including its championing of such causes as Palestinian rights and statehood. These factors are central to the appeal of Turkey, its political system and its Prime Minister among Arab people and parties.
Those who question or reject the notion of the Turkish model tend to focus on two main factors: the significantly different historical experiences of Turkey compared to most the Arab countries and the central place of secularism in Turkey. However, in respect to the former, the history of democratisation shows that each of the three waves occurred in different regions within different historical and social contexts. Moreover, the lessons that Turkey offers the emerging Arab democracies in terms of balancing of Islam and democracy, achieving economic growth and development, and bringing the military under civilian control are all highly relevant to the countries of the MENA region. In respect to the question of secularism, Turkey is also providing an example to Arab people and parties once adverse to the concept. This paper has highlighted the perspective of the Tunisian An-Nahda Party leader, Rachid Ghanouchi, who has reconciled Islam and secularism at least in a procedural context. His perspective is likely to open the way for the further acceptance concept in Islamic discourse.

The Arab uprisings appear to have initiated a fourth wave of democratisation. The election of Islamic oriented parties in the Arab countries where elections have been held indicate that this wave of democratisation, like those before it, will be shaped by the social and cultural realities of the region. Democracy in the MENA region will reflect and will have to respect Islamic values and principles. Having demonstrated the efficacy of this fusion over the past decade, Turkey is central to this democratisation process in the region and will continue to be a reference point for the emerging Arab democracies.
NOTES

1 See, for instance the extensive number of articles published in such academic journals as *Insight Turkey* in 2011 and 2012.
2 First author’s interview with Erol Adayilmaz in Istanbul on 15 January 2013.
11 Ibid.
22 Ibid. p.426.
24 Ibid. p.614.
28 Ibid. p.184.
29 Ibid. pp.182-183.
30 Ibid. p.183.


Ibid.


Ibid. p.117.


Ibid. pp.67-68.


Ibid. p.10.


Ibid.
73 Ibid.
80 Ibid. p.12.
84 Perthes, V 2010, ‘Turkey’s Role in the Middle East: An Outsider’s Perspective’, Insight Turkey, Vol. 12, No. 4, p.3.


Ghanouchi, R 2012, speech given at CSID-Tunisia, 2 March 2012, “Secularism and Relation between Religion and the State from the Perspective of the Nahda Party”


Diamond, L 2011, 'A Fourth Wave or False Start?', 22 May, accessed from: [http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67862/larry-diamond/a-fourth-wave-or-false-start](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67862/larry-diamond/a-fourth-wave-or-false-start).

Diamond, L 2011, 'A Fourth Wave or False Start?', 22 May, accessed from: [http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67862/larry-diamond/a-fourth-wave-or-false-start](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67862/larry-diamond/a-fourth-wave-or-false-start).


Diamond, L 2011, 'A Fourth Wave or False Start?', 22 May, accessed from: [http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67862/larry-diamond/a-fourth-wave-or-false-start](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67862/larry-diamond/a-fourth-wave-or-false-start).


Diamond, L 2011, 'A Fourth Wave or False Start?', 22 May, accessed from: [http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67862/larry-diamond/a-fourth-wave-or-false-start](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67862/larry-diamond/a-fourth-wave-or-false-start).