

Democracy and Bread: Turkey's Link between the EU and the Middle East

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A historic wind of change is sweeping Turkey's neighborhood. Peoples of the Middle East and North Africa are demanding better. They are demanding a better life, better economy better education, a better health care system and most importantly, a better government. Such a government requires democracy and good-governance.

While Turkey is firmly attached to its destined course of integration with the European Union, we are equally involved with our Eastern and Southern neighbors. Turkey's attachment and alliance with the West is complemented with its historic and cultural roots in the East. This combination makes Turkey a strategic asset for the EU. Similarly, Turkey's unique position in Eurasia makes us a key global actor. Turkey is the most Eastern part of the West and the most Western part of the East whereas Istanbul is the most European City of Asia and the most Asian City of Europe.

Since the beginning of the new era in the Middle East, pundits have been at pains in trying to categorize and model this historic event.

From the beginning, we have emphasized that Turkey has no claims or aspirations to be a "model" for the region. We are ready to share any experience and provide any possible support if asked, and wish for the best. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has clearly outlined this when he said Turkey was ready to do its fair share to promote democratization in the Middle East and facilitate such this momentous transformation.

Erdogan got a warm welcome from thousands of Egyptians who had gathered to meet him in Cairo. There he said democracy and freedom is as basic a right as bread and water for the Egyptian people. He emphasized that freedom message spreading from Tahrir Square had become a light of hope for all the oppressed through Tripoli, Damascus and Sanaa.

It is also a fact that the prime minister has been sincere, and frank when he advised our Egyptian brothers that they should not be wary of secularism and thus secularism should be included in the new constitution.

In all cases, Turkey is keenly aware that Egypt and other brotherly countries in the region will determine their destiny through their historic experiences and the wisdom of their people.

If Turkey is seen as an inspiration that Muslim nations can advance through democracy, economic reforms, popular dynamism and stable democratic governments, let it be. If this is seen as a "Turkish Model" we have no objection. Meanwhile, some fiction writers try to muddle the minds through another "Turkish Model", namely, a bizarre concoction of a shadow-military government that remote controls the civilians. An anti-democratic system, where elected governments are curbed or sidelined through various pretexts. It is true that a sham called the "Custodian Democracy" had unfortunately ruled Turkey in the last few decades. This tragedy ended in Turkey with the election victory of the AK Party in November 2002.

Since, Turkey is trying to heal the wounds of this tragic period with more democracy. It is preposterous that a past Turkey had buried, is proposed as a future on brotherly Egypt. A civilian government with a puppet image under the military's custodial rule is not the Turkish model. We utterly and categorically reject this slander. That political sham may have been an unfortunate imposition on Turkey, but is now dead and buried. That model means corruption, political assassinations, death squads, political polarization, looted banks, 110 percent inflation, and a closed-economy based on pillaging. If these fiction writers need a "model" for this sham, the correct term is not the Turkish, but the Baathist model. This is the model currently in charge in Damascus. This model won't last long, and certainly cannot be imposed on Cairo.

In the last 10 years, Turkey has been healing through the democratic mandate bestowed upon my party. It is no coincidence that Turkey is more democratic, more prosperous and more stable under the AK Party. Our pro-EU path is irreversible and we ultimately aim to upgrade our nation, and elevate our political, economic and democratic standards to those of the European Union.

We cannot and will not condone any political system that falls short of addressing the full democratic aspirations of its people. This includes the brotherly Egyptian people and certainly the oppressed and proud Syrian people.