

Turkey and the Middle East: A Sub-Regional View

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Many have noted that Turkey has become an increasingly prominent actor in the Middle East these days. A far cry from the almost blasé approach the country adopted towards the region in much of the 1990s, Turkey now seems to engage wholeheartedly in the challenges of the region. One of the first countries to pour its support behind the democratic movements that have overthrown four of the region's long-standing autocrats, Turkey is now a key country in trying to solve the Syria crisis. But when many proclaim Turkey as a regional leader or an actor of prominence they often leave out one key question: what the region thinks of Turkey.

As such, this article looks to develop understanding of how citizens throughout the region see Turkey. Building on the work of TESEV's annual *The Perception of Turkey in the Middle East* survey¹, we break the data down into sub-regional groups (North Africa, the Levant and the Arab Peninsula²). In doing so, the article seeks to better understand how Turkey is seen in the region politically, its role in response to

the 'Arab Spring' and whether it is a model for the people of the region. Importantly we specifically discuss who in the region looks at Turkey in what way by leaning on socio-economic categorisations, including gender, class and age. We hope that this analysis sheds light on Turkey's relationship with the Middle East, alludes to its potential value but also highlights both the related opportunities and limitations associated with it.

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE?

Turkey's vastly improved image in the Middle East over the last decade is often attributed its new active foreign policy in the region, its economy and popular culture. These, of course, constitute important elements of Turkey's attractiveness. But when it comes to Turkey there is seemingly something for everyone but there are two things to consider: what appeals to one person may not appeal to another and just because something is visible doesn't mean it's popular.

As the survey shows when respondents from the Middle East are asked for their opinion of Turkey, the total favourable and somewhat favourable responses is a very impressive 78%. When we look at the sub-regional breakdown of the results however there are significant differences. For example, as shown in Figure 1, 87% of North African respondents view Turkey favourably compared to 66% in the Levant.

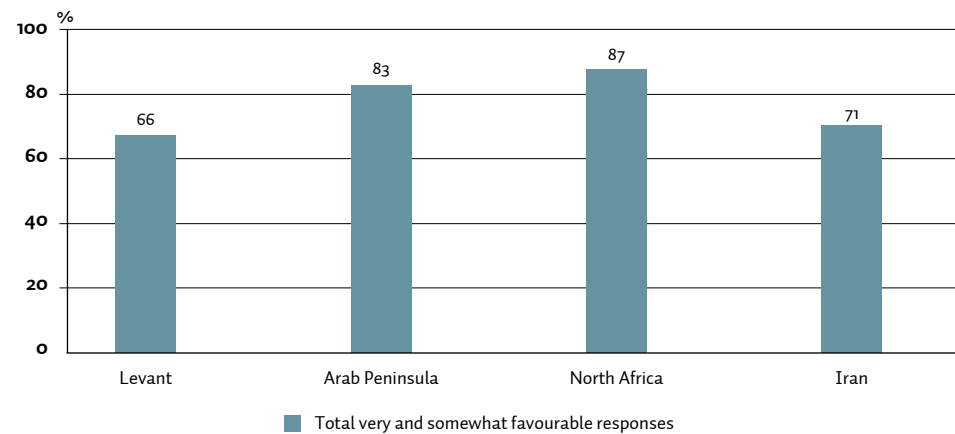
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1 Akgün, M. and Senyücel Gündoğar, S. (2012). *The Perception of Turkey in the Middle East 2011*. Istanbul, TESEV Publications.

2 In the data we use, the North Africa includes Tunisia, Libya and Egypt. The Levant includes Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria. The Arab Peninsula includes Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iraq, Bahrain, Kuwait, the UAE, Qatar and Oman. Iran is also included as a separate category for comparison.

FIGURE 1: FAVOURABLE OPINION OF TURKEY



Two factors should be pointed out here. First, the North African countries, including Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, which are going through a transition process, generally express a more positive view towards actors that supported the protests in the region. Indeed, the high percentage in North Africa can be explained by the fact that Turkey's open support for change is well received by respondents.

When it comes to the Levant however Turkey's response to the turmoil seems to get a negative reaction in Syria which, in turn, affects the sub-regional average. Compared to 93% in 2010 and 87% in 2009, only 44% of Syrian respondents had a favourable opinion of Turkey in the 2011 survey – by far the lowest favourable opinion of Turkey in the region in 2011.

Among different age groups, social classes and gender, favourable opinion of Turkey is quite

consistent, with only minor 2 or 3 percentage point differences across the categories. However, there is a correlation between education levels and favourability of Turkey. More educated respondents – i.e. those that identified themselves as being well-educated by virtue of being a university graduate or higher - were more likely to have a favourable opinion of Turkey. Whereas 72% of survey respondents with more limited education favoured Turkey, among well educated respondents this percentage goes up to 85. This being a trend among other responses too.

In the search for the causes of Turkey's popularity in the Middle East, some academics give reference to its economy, cultural heritage and the popularity of its TV series in the region.³ Rather, looking at the survey results from a sub-regional point of view, the correlation between a favourable view of Turkey and how it is perceived culturally and economically is important but not the only factor. For example, unlike the favourability levels in

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³ Karol K. (2011). *Turkey and Democratization in the Arab World: Between an Inspiration and Model. The Polish Institute of International Affairs*. August 2011.

Figure 1, respondents from the Levant are the most likely to have watched a Turkish TV series (83%), whereas North Africans are the least with 70%. Likewise, those from the Levant were more likely to have knowingly consumed a Turkish product than respondents from North Africa.

This of course does not underestimate the “Noor” phenomenon⁴, especially among certain demographic groups. Interestingly, as a respondent’s age rises, the likelihood of having watched a Turkish TV series drops. 80% of the respondents between 18-29 years old had watched a Turkish TV series at least once, whereas 72% of 30-49 year olds and 70% of those aged 50+ had watched one. As a holiday destination, Iranian respondents were the most likely to identify Turkey as their favoured destination (40%), despite being comparatively less favourable of Turkey than say the Arab Peninsula. Again the 18-29 age

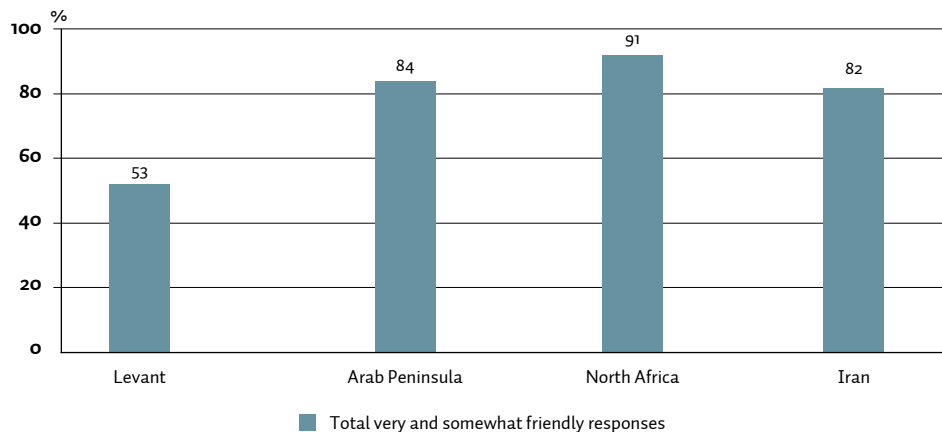
group (34%) and the upper class (36%) were the most likely to identify Turkey as their first preference. There is only a slight difference between men and women - 27% and 33% respectively.

Turkey’s economy is perceived most positively in Iran and North Africa both now and in ten years time. Surprisingly, respondents of lower education and income are the ones who are least likely to see Turkey as an economic success. As education levels and income increase, respondents tend to be more appreciative of Turkey’s economy. Respondents who are most familiar with Turkish products are from the Levant with 82%. Again with 78%, respondents with higher education consume more Turkish products than those with lesser education.

Lastly how Turkey is perceived as a political actor in the region is also noteworthy. When the respondents were asked how friendly they think the government of Turkey is to their government, the general sub-regional trend continues, North Africa being the most positive (91%) and the Levant being the least positive (53%). But again the effect of the Syria factor on

4 For more information on the popularity of Turkish soap operas in the Middle East see: Aridi, F. (2011). *Turkish Soap Operas: Neo-Ottoman influence?* Or Kart, E. (2011). *Foreign Melodramas*. Both in Revolve Magazine’s Summer 2011 Turkey Supplement.

FIGURE 2: HOW FRIENDLY IS THE GOVERNMENT OF TURKEY TO YOUR GOVERNMENT?



the Levant region should be alluded to. Whereas 90% of respondents from Jordan and 92% from Palestine see the government of Turkey as friendly to their government, only 41% of Syrians think the same way. Given the fact that even at the time of the survey conducted the tension between Syria and Turkey was growing the result is not so surprising. Again for the region as a whole, as respondents' education level rose, the likelihood of them believing that Turkey is acting in a friendly manner to their government increases.

The same pattern continues when the survey respondents are asked whether Turkey should play a bigger role in the region. The statement finds most support in North Africa (83%) and the Arab Peninsula (74%). Only half of the respondents from the Levant support the idea of Turkey playing a bigger role in the region. Syria's effect is significant but this time respondents from Jordan and Lebanon are also less supportive.

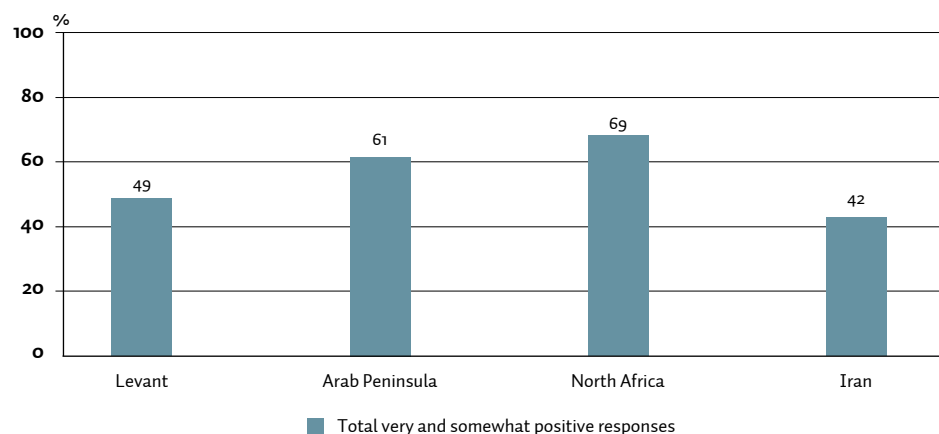
THE RIGHT RESPONSE?

From certain perspectives, Turkey became an increasingly important actor in the wake of the

Arab Spring. Erdoğan, for example, was the first leader to call on Mubarak to depart and Turkey is at the forefront of efforts to support Syrian protestors. But the views of the region have rarely been sought; in the wake of the uprisings of 2011, is Turkey seen as positive and effective actor by the people of the Middle East?

As Figure 3 shows, opinion of Turkey's effect on the Arab Spring is mixed. Whereas over two thirds of North African respondents thought Turkey had had a positive effect on the Arab Spring, only 42% of Iranian respondents thought the same. Indeed, Turkey's response is viewed most favourably in North Africa; a sub-region that, successful transitions have been confined to bar, arguably, Yemen. Responses were also high in the Arab Peninsula, where 61% viewed Turkey's impact in a positive fashion. Interestingly, the results were fairly consistent across age groups, education levels and class. The only distinction was between genders: 60% of male respondents and 51% of female respondents thought Turkey had a positive effect on the Arab Spring.

FIGURE 3: TURKEY'S EFFECT ON THE ARAB SPRING



What's clear is that Turkey's policy towards the unfolding events that have come to be known as the Arab Spring is viewed somewhat favourably in the region but not universally so.

When respondents were asked to rate Turkey's response to the events of the last 12 months, the sub-regional breakdown mirrors that in Figure 3. 80% of respondents from North Africa thought that Turkey's response was either very or somewhat positive, compared to 70% from the Arab Peninsula, 60% from the Levant and 42% from Iran. Unlike the previous question, those that identified themselves as upper class and/or well educated were the most likely to judge Turkey's response either very or somewhat positive. Again, however, male respondents were more positive than female (68% to 57%).

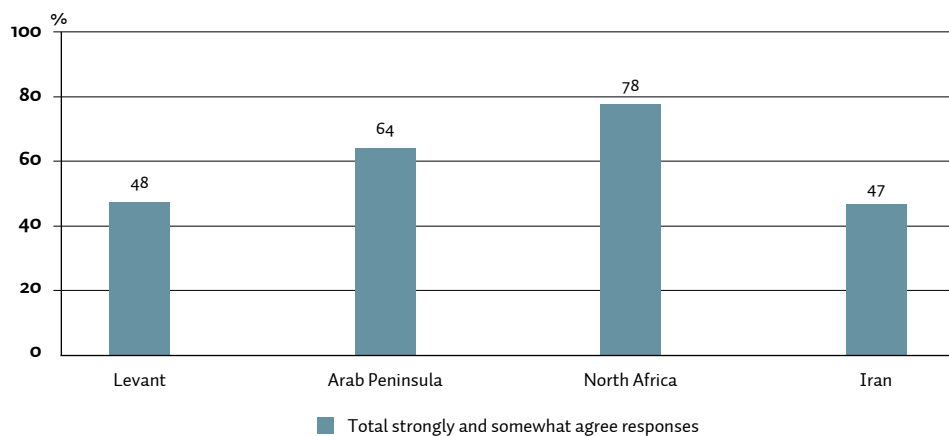
What's clear is that Turkey's policy towards the unfolding events that have come to be known as the Arab Spring is viewed somewhat favourably in the region but not universally so. Turkey's response is viewed more positively

than its effect on events in all sub-regions bar Iran. As such, regional public opinion seems to resemble a rather pragmatic view; Turkey's stance was well thought of but it was viewed as being not quite as effective as it was appreciated. Turkey was also more popular amongst male respondents than female and there is a tendency that those that identify themselves as better off are more likely to view Turkey in a more positive frame.

BEAUTY IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

The events throughout the region saw the Turkish model debate back on the agenda. But while the question of whether the Turkish model was appropriate for the region much discussed, few sought to see what the citizens of the region thought of Turkey. Indeed, this article does not seek to argue whether or not Turkey is a model for the region or what sort of model the country is – indeed Turkey has many shortcomings in both respects - but rather understand what citizens in the region think of Turkey as a model. After all, beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

FIGURE 4: DO YOU THINK TURKEY CAN BE A MODEL FOR MIDDLE EASTERN COUNTRIES?



These results, to an extent, contradict the assumption that Turkey is seen as some sort of champion of the ‘Arab street’; Turkey is more likely to be seen as a model by the more educated, well-off citizens of the region.

TESEV’s 2011 survey demonstrates that, in general, people in the region do see Turkey as a model with nearly two thirds of respondents in the region thought Turkey was a model – a result that is consistent over the three annual surveys and supported by the University of Maryland’s survey of Egypt⁵. As demonstrated by Figure 4, however, there is significant sub-regional discrepancy in support for the idea. Whereas 78% of respondents in North Africa saw Turkey as a model, less than half of Levantine respondents thought the same – in should be noted here that the impact of Syrian respondents, where support for Turkey as a model is lowest, affects the results from the Levant. Additionally, 64% of respondents from the Arab Peninsula and 47% of Iranian respondents saw Turkey as a model.

Looking at the results from throughout the region, support for the Turkish model is more prominent among certain social groups. Whereas only 52% of respondents from the region that classified themselves as of lower or working class thought Turkey could be a model, 63% of respondents that classified themselves as middle class and 71% that classified themselves as upper class saw Turkey as a model. Likewise, 70% of those that they were well educated compared to 42% of those that were poorly educated saw Turkey as model. Seemingly Turkey appeals to those that

are, or at least classify themselves as, better off or better educated.

Survey respondents who agreed that Turkey is a model for the countries of the region, were asked to specify why. In all sub-regions bar Iran, it was Turkey’s democracy that was the most cited reason, with around a third of participants in each sub-region noting it. Perhaps surprisingly, it is in the Arab Peninsula that Turkey’s democracy finds most credence with 38% of responses. It is also an answer that is prominent amongst respondents that define themselves as upper class as well as those in the 50+ age bracket.

Turkey’s economic success was also more regularly noted in Iran (35%) and North Africa (26%) than the Arab Peninsula (20%) and Levant (17%). Similar to answers that referred to Turkey’s democracy, respondents that identified its economy as the reason why they thought Turkey was a model for the region tended to be well educated and from the upper echelons of society⁶. The only common response that bucks this trend is Turkey’s Muslim background, which was a more prominent response among lower and middle class respondents than the upper classes. With religious parties succeeding at the poles in several countries, the relevance of the Turkish model now in the eyes of the people may now have in fact lessened.

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5 The University of Maryland’s annual poll of Arab public opinion asked Egyptian respondents which country they would most like Egypt’s political system to resemble. 44% said Turkey, way ahead of France on 10% and then Saudi Arabia, China and Germany each on 8%.

6 Indeed, as previously mentioned, when asked to identify which country they thought would be the leading economy in the region in 10 years, those better educated and from the upper classes were more likely to identify Turkey than any other groups.

those that are better off tend to highlight Turkey's economic performance and democratic system as reasons for Turkey being a model for the region. In essence, it is not just about what Turkey does but what Turkey is that make it important – a successful economy in a region that is characterised by the rentier state and more a democratic country than many of its neighbours. Likewise, Israel or Turkey's recent stance in support of Palestinians does not feature among prominent responses apart from in the Levant region.

Whereas Turkey's stance on this key regional issue does not seem to impact on the view of it as a model, it's clear that its stance on certain issues has the ability to impact on the country both positively and negatively. As abovementioned, Turkey's response to the Arab Spring is particularly well regarded in North Africa. Here too, the Turkish model is comparatively well thought of. For example, in 2011, 78% of Egyptians saw Turkey as a model in 2011 up from 66% a year earlier. But public opinion is a fickle thing and can rise as well as fall; in 2010 65% of Iranians saw Turkey as a model but this had dropped to 47% in 2011.

No doubt, the Middle East is going through a period of unprecedented change and Turkey is very much an actor in this. Turkey's stance towards the events has clearly impacted on opinion of the country throughout the region, both positively and negatively. While respondents in North Africa view Turkey favourably those from Syrian and Iran are less likely to – a result that was consistent across a range of questions and responses. Ultimately, there are risks related to Turkey's actions.

But this should not completely discount the fact that what Turkey is and represents is an important component of its image throughout the region. Interest in Turkey and the model that it represents seems to be predicated on its democratic credentials and economic success. As such, Turkey is not, seemingly, the spokesperson of the masses but is more appealing to the better educated and well-off citizens of the region. But being a model for the region is seemingly a difficult image to maintain. For Turkey to maintain its image as a model for the region the country needs to continue to democratise and consolidate its economic performance through further reform.



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The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) is an independent non-governmental think-tank, analyzing Turkey's most pressing social, cultural, political and economic issues. Based in Istanbul, TESEV was founded in 1994 to serve as a bridge between academic research and the policy-making process in Turkey by opening new channels for policy-oriented dialogue and research.

TESEV's Foreign Policy Programme aims to contribute to the resolution of critical foreign policy issues, to advocate Turkey's membership in the European Union and to help Turkey define its regional and global position. Currently the Programme works under four main themes: the European Union, Cyprus, the Middle East and Armenia.

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