



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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“Egypt and the Middle East: A Turkish Model of Democracy”

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

1300 Pennsylvania Ave, Washington DC

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On Friday, the Wilson Center hosted an event, entitled, “Egypt and the Middle: A Turkish Model of Democracy,” discussing the growth of democracy in Egypt and the role other democratic models could play in the process. **John Sitilides**, Chairman of the Board of Advisors for the Wilson Center Southeast Europe Project moderated and introduced the speakers: **Steven A. Cook**, the Hasib J. Sabbagh senior fellow for Middle Eastern studies at the Council on Foreign Relations; **Henry J. Barkey**, a visiting scholar at the Carnegie Middle East Program and the Bernar L. and Bertha F. Cohen Professor at Lehigh University; and **Robert Toscano** a former Italian diplomat who was ambassador to Iran from 2003-2008 and India from 2008-2010.

John Sitilides began by discussing the situation in Egypt, which he described as **the military pitted against Islamist factions in a fight to uphold secularism, which so far seems to have been upheld throughout the unrest**. He believes that the debate will now center on whether or not democracy will come to Egypt and if so, could Turkey serve as a model. And if Turkey is to serve as a model, which Turkey would serve as the model: the Turkey of the 1920s in which the secular state was controlled by the military, the Turkey controlled by the AKP (Justice and Development Party) in 2003-2005, or the Turkey of today which has befriended Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas while leaning towards a more authoritarian rule as seen by the Turkish government’s infringement on the freedom of the press.

Henri J. Barkey began by stating: **“I don’t know if Turkey is a model, it may be it may not be.”** However, he argues Turkey is a source of inspiration, even though it is not necessarily a model of secularism as it was believed to be in the early 2000s. Barkey hopes that Egypt can one day **“punch way above its weight,”** in terms of economic prowess and international relations while pursuing a process of merging religion and democracy and controlling the military as Turkey has. He went on to address Turkey’s political issues such as the **sharp divide between the “old and new guard”** as well as the **“unresolved Kurdish problem,”** which Barkey believes will have a drastic impact on Turkey being lauded as model of a secular democracy in Muslim majority nations.

Barkey asserts that Turkey’s democratic and economic reforms have been a 30 year long process which has had many missteps along the way. The process, he argues, is not necessarily a model either due to the history of suppression of minorities and human rights including those of the Kurds and Islamists.

Roberto Toscano believes that Egyptians and others are looking for a reference point or model because of the lack of coherent ideology driving the revolutions across the region. In regards to Turkey, Toscano asserted that Turkey shows **“Islam and democracy can be compatible.”** He believes that Turkey can be an economic, political, and religious model for Egypt to aspire to. However, he states, there are also many differences between the countries that could make this unachievable such as the Turkey’s long history of secularism, the lack of a post-colonial syndrome, and the strong driving force of nationalism, “democracy (in Turkey) is alive but tensions are high.”

Steven Cook addressed the role of the military in Turkey in Egypt stating: **“democratic change occurred in Turkey not because of the military but despite of the military.”** He believes that the military will play a central role in supporting democracy in Egypt, but worries about the close relationship between the Egyptian military and the old regime. Cook discussed the relationship between the AKP and the Muslim Brotherhood and the AKP’s ability to work with and not against the Turkish military. He believes that **this could potentially serve as an example for the Muslim Brotherhood to succeed in gaining a foothold in Egypt’s democratic process.** An example of this already taking place is **the Muslim Brotherhood’s declaration that they will not field a candidate in the upcoming election,** he argues. Cook believes that the Brotherhood is questionable as they have not repudiated their goals of creating an Islamic state under their conception of Islam; it remains to be seen how large of a role they will play in a democratic Egypt.

When the panelists were asked, if not Turkey, what other country could serve as a model, Barkey responded by stating that he believes Indonesia’s **ability to transform into a democracy from under the Suharto regime, which is similar to Mubarak’s, along with their ability to thwart fundamentalist Islamic factions show that Indonesia could serve as a model.** Cook believes that **there is no model,** arguing **that they will develop uniquely** and that while it is interesting to look at other models, there will not be any clear model to follow.