

BOOK REVIEWS

TURKEY RISING: INCREASING CONFIDENCE IN TIMES OF CONFLICT

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A Review of *Turkey and the Arab Spring: Leadership in the Middle East*
By Graham Fuller
(Vancouver, BC: Bozorg Press, 2014), 408 pages.

As the saying goes, history may not repeat itself, but it certainly rhymes. This adage is the thrust of much of Graham Fuller's recent book *Turkey and the Arab Spring: Leadership in the Middle East*. Early in the text, Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu describes his nation's resurgence as "the return of history," and the echoes of Ottoman-era preeminence haunt the rest of the book.¹ Fuller, a former CIA official, delivers an accessible, well-researched book that explores the nuances of an increasingly confident Turkey and its modern ambitions within the Middle East. The author traces the roots of modern events through the Cold War and colonial administration of the Sykes-Picot era and into the prolonged period of Ottoman decline, when Istanbul's regional influence began to wane. By shading current geopolitics with their historical beginnings, he convincingly explores the layers and contradictions of power in Ankara.

Fuller is attentive to what Ankara's newfound confidence will *not* bode for the future. "Neo-Ottoman" assertiveness of Ankara as a regional power likely will not signal the rebirth of the empire: Regional powers are unlikely to be subjugated as *vilayets* or vassal states in any meaningful way. The author is also careful to discuss the history of the Ottoman caliph and, in contrast with the anxieties of jittery pundits, why a grand regional caliphate is unlikely to be a meaningful component of an assertive Muslim state, in Turkey or elsewhere. In the pursuit of a modern, ostensibly Western state, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the first president of Turkey and perhaps the most significant figure in the birth of the country as a post-Ottoman state, dismissed the final caliph in 1924.

Rather, the author argues that Turkey will broaden its engagement with other powers and chart a course following its own interests. This may well occur outside of regional blocs like the EU, and the author notes that Erdoğan's growing assertiveness is broadening his appeal as a potential partner beyond the Western world. Turkey's policies will likely be dictated by the pursuit of its own geopolitical interests rather than the dictates of radical Islam. Although democracy in Turkey is not unassailable, it will likely remain a beacon of stability and freedom in the region.


Fuller does several things right. He skillfully gives the reader a feel for Turkey's recent history without relying on personal anecdotes for flavor. Rather than focusing exclusively on religion, his exploration of the tension between the West and the Middle East examines geopolitics, ethnicity, and economics in the same way that made *A World Without Islam*, his previous work, quite engaging.

Turkey's return to prominence was tempered by thorough coverage of the setbacks that have buffeted Erdoğan's rule: corruption scandals, heavy-handed suppression of dissent, and an inconsistent record of successfully projecting power during the Syrian Civil War. The future may be bright for Ankara, but it might not be particularly smooth sailing.

The author is at his best when exploring the region's history and its mark on prolonged rivalries and conflicts. To this end, his analysis of the potential for a Turkish-Iranian rivalry playing out across the region (not only over doctrinal differences but also the nature of regional democracy and development) was engaging. His coverage of the long history of fissures within Sunni Islam was instructive as well, and a welcome change from yet another exhaustive analysis of the Sunni-Shi'a divide.

It would have been interesting to see more coverage of Turkish engagement along the region's periphery and how that has shaped its attempts to project influence within the Middle East. As prime minister in 2005, Erdoğan proclaimed the "Year of Africa" in a bid not only to demonstrate Turkish clout as a donor, but also to influence the larger Muslim world.² Ankara has spent \$400 million on Somalia's reconstruction since 2011, in part to cast itself as a protector of Muslim communities and build potentially useful ties.³ A more detailed exploration of how this strategy has afforded it leverage closer to home would have been a welcome addition to the book's narrative.

Turkey and the Arab Spring explores a time when Muslims around the world looked to Istanbul as a useful partner against external aggression. Despite Erdoğan's failings as prime minister, Ankara's influence and assertiveness may mark the return of its importance to the larger Muslim community. Fuller's most recent work is worth reading for its careful study of history alone. Its clear-eyed analysis of a resurgent power makes *Turkey and the Arab Spring* mandatory reading

for anyone interested in the fate of the region. 

NOTES

¹ Graham E. Fuller, *Turkey and the Arab Spring: Leadership in the Middle East* (Lexington, KY: Bozorg Press, 2014), 27.

² Peter J. Pham, “Turkey’s Return to Africa,” *World Defense Review*, 27 May 2010, <http://world-defense-review.com/pham052710.shtml>.

³ David Lepeska, “Turkey’s Rise from Aid Recipient to Mega-Donor,” *Al-Jazeera English*, 25 April 2014, <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/4/turkey-internationalaidafricasomaliamiddeast-erdorgan.html>.