

THE REVIVAL OF OTTOMANISM IN TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY: “THE WORLD IS GREATER THAN FIVE”

Turkey under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government since 2002 has been subjected to radical changes in both its domestic politics and its external relations. The impact of religious identity and values have become more visible in Turkish politics as a party with Islamic sensibilities came to power. During its early years, the AKP continued the pro-Western foreign policy direction of the previous governments. However, as the party solidified its power, a more assertive and active policy, very much emanating from the leadership's understanding of history and self-definition, was implemented. Consequently, a country with leadership ambitions in its region and beyond has emerged, which became manifested in the slogan: “The world is greater than five.”

Umut Uzer*



* Dr. Umut Uzer is an Associate Professor at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Istanbul Technical University (ITU).

Turkey is a country which has undertaken revolutionary political experiments. Under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938), the new Republic aimed towards civilizational change, as the country endeavored to join the Western club of nations by adopting Western ways of thinking based on science and rationalism, which were very much grounded on the basic tenets of the European Enlightenment. While the Ottoman period was characterized by an imbalance in the interactions between the Empire and its European counterparts, Kemalist foreign policy – which was prudent and pro-Western, reflecting its secularist outlook – was adamant about full equality with the major powers and was very protective of its national sovereignty.

In the foreign policy arena, generally a peaceful approach was accepted, which was manifested in Atatürk’s dictum “peace at home, peace in the world.” However, the Kemalist administration also paved the way for future activist policies: On the cusp of WWII, Turkey annexed the province of Hatay in 1939,¹ which had come under French control after WWI. Turkey’s operation in Cyprus in 1974 was another activist policy decision, undertaken against the resistance of major powers, which demonstrated Turkey’s protective approach to its ethnic kin, provided that a set of domestic and international factors were met.²

In addition to these activist policies, Turkey established good neighborly relations with its former enemies such as Russia and Greece from the 1920s and the 1930s onwards, and endeavored to create regional cooperation organizations such as the Balkan Pact (1934) and the Sadabad Pact (1937). These decisions are examples of Turkey’s preference for multilateralism in solving conflicts within international organizations. Having said this, however, Turkey’s foreign relations in the first decades of the republic were not particularly attuned to involvement in the Middle East, especially regarding relations with Arabs. In fact, there was a discourse of “the Middle East morass” reflecting the disappointment with the Arabs regarding their conduct during World War I and consequently a desire to stay away from conflicts in the region.

The element of multilateralism continued after the death of Atatürk as Turkey became one of the founding members of the United Nations and the Council of Europe, and it joined NATO in 1952, three years after its establishment. Acceding to the European Economic Community, later the EU, has been the goal of Turkey as a pro-Western country for many decades, which officially continues to this day.

¹ Umut Uzer, *Identity and Turkish Foreign Policy*, (London: I.B.Tauris, 2011), pp. 86-89.

² Umut Uzer (2011), pp. 148-152.

New Turkey

Conservative nationalist commentator, Ahmet Kabaklı, wrote a book under the title *Muslim Turkey* in 1970 calling for a more religiously-oriented country placing Islam at the center of national identity and presenting Turkish-Islamic amalgamation as the keystone of the Turkish nation. His ideas were critical of the Westernizing modern Turkey which has, in his judgment, lost touch with its Ottoman past.³ These arguments at the time seemed merely as wishful thinking, however they have become a reality.

His ideas were connected to domestic developments in the previous 20 years. With the advent of multiparty politics, politicians especially of the center-right persuasion, became more responsive to the demands of the provinces, in other words the periphery. Gradually, both through urbanization and democratization, the values of provincial towns have come to the center, namely the large cities of Istanbul, Ankara, and to a lesser degree İzmir.

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The AKP’s ascension to power in 2002 was very much a function of the crisis of center right and center left politics each of which were divided into two left and two right opposing parties, all tarred with corruption, inefficiency, and selfish partisan desire for power. This state of affairs created political instability, which had a detrimental impact on the Turkish economy. The reformed Islamists of the AKP were perceived by the people as honest and efficient leaders trying to bring about a more democratic, as well as a Muslim Turkey. The expectation of stability was also one of the significant reasons for the electorate to vote for the party in question.

Turkey’s foreign policy under the AKP is still grounded in the transatlantic alliance of NATO but it does not shy away from closer involvement with Russia and Middle Eastern countries. Particularly, there is increased interest in the former territories of the Ottoman Empire, other Muslim countries, as well as African and Latin American continents. For instance, Turkey had 12 embassies in Africa in 2009; now, that number has increased to 39.⁴ Therefore, Turkish foreign policy has been diversified as opposed to the pro-Western foreign policy conducted during most of the Kemalist era, without forgetting the first opening to Africa and the Middle East in the 1960s due to Turkey’s desire to gain more support for its Cyprus policy.

³ Beşir Ayvazoğlu, “Ahmet Kabaklı,” *Türkiye Araştırmaları Literatür Dergisi*, Vol. 4, No. 8, (2006), p. 552.

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, “Turkey-Africa Relations,” <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-afrika-iliskileri.tr.mfa>

The Question of Ideology under the New Government

Turkey's foreign policy direction has gradually but increasingly reflected the Islamic orientation of the government in power since 2002. In its early years, politicians such as Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Abdullah Gül deemphasized their Islamist background, focusing on a pro-EU foreign policy with all the democratization it denoted. However, that does not change the fact that the leadership of the AKP – while coming from an Islamist rather than a conservative nationalist ideological proclivity – has over time and especially since 2016 appropriated the nationalist discourse in addition to its pan-Islamic worldview. To a lesser degree, as the AKP has increased its power, it has also reluctantly adopted Atatürk as a symbol of unity of the nation.

Focusing on the foreign policy of the AKP, one could argue that the early pragmatic approach to world affairs from 2002 to 2008 has given way to a more activist or proactive foreign policy aimed at creating a new Turkey and a new regional and international order. In that sense the party has become revisionist towards the UN system. This is manifested in the slogan of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: “The world is greater than five,” which is directed at the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. For instance, he used these exact words in September 2014 when he addressed the UN General Assembly calling for a revision of the current status quo at the UN. The president was particularly critical of the UN's lack of action in resolving the crises resulting in loss of life in Palestine, Syria, Iraq, and Egypt, as well as its weakness towards the struggle against terrorism.⁵ As a solution to frequent deadlock in the Security Council, Erdoğan recommended increasing the number of permanent members of the UNSC from five to 20, allowing every country the right to be elected as a permanent member. Moreover, he was particularly adamant that there should be a Muslim-majority country among the permanent members of the Security Council.⁶ While the exact manifestations of his proposal were not clear, what was evident was his desire to reform the UN system into one that is less West-centric and more representative of the nations of the world. Erdoğan's worldview is shaped to a large extent by Muslim sensibilities; he looks at the world in binary opposites such as West-Islam, exploitative-just, belligerent-peaceful. In his judgment, all the positive qualities mentioned above were represented in what he called “our civilization,” and all the negative characteristics denoted Western practices in the past and today. In other words, the Ottoman-Muslim civilization is considered to be more just and humanitarian compared to the Western world. In its early years, the AKP government also implemented a balanced and pragmatic

⁵ “Erdoğan: Dünya Beşten Büyüktür” [Erdoğan: World Is Bigger Than Five], *Al Jazeera Turk*, 24 September 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/haber/erdogan-dunya-5ten-buyuktur>

⁶ “Erdoğan: BM’de 20 daimi üye olsun” [Erdoğan: There Should Be 20 Permanent Members in the United Nations Security Council] *Sabah*, 3 October 2016.

approach in the Arab-Israeli conflict, trying to work as a facilitator between Syria and Israel. Particularly after the Israeli operation against Gaza between 27 December 2008 and 18 January 2009, known as Operation Cast Lead, and Prime Minister Erdoğan's strong rebuke of Israeli President Shimon Peres at the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos holding Israel responsible for killing children and women,⁷ relations went downhill. The AKP had already established close relations with

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Hamas, possibly going back to the Welfare Party⁸ years in the 1980s, as the party had contacts with numerous Islamist movements. Regardless of the exact time of cooperation with the Hamas leadership; in the 2000s, Erdoğan first as prime minister and then as president from 2014 onwards, took up the mantle of leadership on the Palestinian question, believing that it was being neglected or not adequately addressed by the Arab world. With increased emphasis on Palestine in general and Jerusalem in particular, Turkey has become the most vocal defender and sponsor of Palestine in the international arena.⁹

In fact, establishing closer relations with the Muslim world and Islamist movements has been a defining quality of the new Turkish foreign policy which has been emerging over the past 16 years. Turkey has tried to become a “game setter,” very much determining the rules of international interactions in its region and beyond. The old regime has been criticized for being passive, and the new foreign policy is coming to terms with its past and its geography. Especially in the Middle East, Turkey wanted to create an alliance of like-minded countries.

Turkey's relations with the EU were particularly positive in the early 2000s, in tandem with AKP policies targeted towards decreasing the power of the military in Turkish policy-making, opening up more space for ethnic groups including the Kurds, and promoting democratization. Gradually, however, Turkey-EU relations deteriorated. While Turkey lost confidence in the European countries' sincerity

⁷ “Leaders of Turkey and Israel Clash at Davos Panel,” *New York Times*, 29 January 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/30/world/europe/30clash.html>

⁸ Welfare Party [*Refah Partisi*] between 1983 and 1998 was one of political parties which belonged to the Islamist National Outlook Movement.

⁹ For instance, see the statements by İbrahim Kalın, press secretary of the Turkish Presidency, <https://thenewturkey.org/jerusalem-is-not-for-sale/>

towards its membership, EU countries such as Germany and France have been reluctant to allow Turkish membership from the get-go. EU countries also observed Turkey drifting from European values, as its confidence increased exponentially and it began to define its identity in opposition to Europe.

Soft Power

Soft power as a concept was coined by Harvard Professor Joseph Nye. As opposed to hard power such as military power or economic prowess, soft power entails “the ability to affect others by attraction and persuasion rather than just coercion and payment.”¹⁰ For example, the cultural and educational appeal of countries can be particularly influential in the shaping of other countries’ preferences. The US’ enormous power is partially due to the existence of a number of attractive centers in the country such as Harvard, Microsoft, Hollywood, and the NBA. Though they seem unrelated, according to Nye, these are diverse elements of America’s cultural strength, which has translated into considerable soft power reach.

The AKP has been successfully promoting Turkey by operationalizing its conservative Islamic orientation and making it more appealing to the Arab and Muslim people with the use of cultural products. Turkey’s Ottoman past is used as a justification for a more activist foreign policy in the former territories of the Ottoman Empire and beyond. In places such as Africa, Turkish politicians argued that they were not there to exploit them but rather to treat them as equals and foster relations based on mutual interest and equality. In other words, foreign aid, Turkish soap operas, Muslim solidarity, and humanitarian and egalitarian discourse were all employed to make Turkey a more appealing country.

As part of a more active foreign policy, Turkey’s election to the UN Security Council as a non-permanent member in 2008-2010 after an absence of more than 40 years and providing foreign aid via Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA)¹¹ and other state organizations¹² are noteworthy examples of soft power promotion. These steps made Turkey one of the most significant contributors of foreign aid to countries in need.¹³ In this regard, one could argue that foreign aid was used as a tool for the promotion of Turkey in the less developed countries of the world.

In addition to these government-sponsored policies, Turkey has increased its appeal

¹⁰ Joseph Nye, “The Information Revolution and Soft Power,” *Current History*, Vol. 113, No. 759 (2014), p. 20.

¹¹ For an example of TIKA’s aid activities see its aid to Chad in agricultural assistance see http://www.tika.gov.tr/tr/haber/cad_da_tika_nin_tarim_projesi_meyvesini_verdi-40998

¹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, “Turkish Emergency Humanitarian Assistance,” http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye_nin_inساني-yardimlari.tr.mfa

¹³ “Turkey Ranks Second in the World for Humanitarian Aid, Named Most Generous Donor,” *Daily Sabah*, 21 June 2017, <https://www.dailysabah.com/turkey/2017/06/21/turkey-ranks-second-in-the-world-for-humanitarian-aid-named-most-generous-donor>

to tourists from all around the world, particularly through its popular soap operas. The increased international circulation of Turkish soap operas has contributed to rising Turkish influence abroad, as the shows have piqued the interest of fans about the country where the plots are taking place.

Furthermore, Turkey's close relations with the Arab world have also contributed to a flow of tourists especially from the Gulf region. The tourism industry is bouncing back after the challenges of the last two years, during which the country was rocked by multiple terrorist attacks and suffered a diplomatic fallout with Russia, all of which had a detrimental impact on tourism. Moreover, Turkish Airlines now boasts that it flies to more countries than any other airline in the world.¹⁴ Its flying to Africa and many other locations is part of the policy of a new Turkey which aims to be visible all around the world.

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The opening of Turkish cultural centers such as Yunus Emre Institutes all around the world and the election of a Turkish secretary general to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) are all examples of a more engaged Turkey in international affairs.

The most potent symbol of Turkey's soft power in the Middle East and the Islamic world especially among the Sunnis and in Africa, however has been President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In those regions, he is perceived as the defender of Muslims and the oppressed against the imperialist West. Having said that however, the initial positive reception towards Erdoğan in Europe and the United States due to his more pragmatic approach in conflicts such as Cyprus, has dissipated and has in fact been totally reversed.

In sum, according to Turkish policymakers, the country's new foreign policy demonstrates pragmatism and is underpinned by an ideology, which stresses the superior qualities of the country's Ottoman and Islamic past as opposed to an exploitative West.

¹⁴ “Avrupa’da Uçmadığı Nokta Kalmıyor Yeni Hatlar Uzaklardan Gelecek” [There is no Place Left in Europe where it does not fly, New Lines will include distant destinations], *Dünya*, 20 May 2016, <https://www.dunya.com/sirketler/avrupada-ucmadigi-nokta-kalmiyor-yeni-hatlar-uzaklardan-haberi-317394> ; also see <https://www.bcdtravel.com/move-be-turkish-airlines-serves-more-countries-than-any-other-airline/>

Concluding Remarks

A new Turkey has emerged due to both domestic and international factors. Internally, Turkish society became increasingly disillusioned with politics and wanted to elect individuals outside the inner circle of corrupt politicians. Externally, old Turkey was too nationalistic in its jealous protection of its national sovereignty and rigid in its approach to Cyprus. The role of the military was omnipresent in Turkish political and social life. Moreover, ever since the advent of multiparty politics in the late 1940s, there has been an increase in the usage of Islamic discourse and emphasis on the Muslim element in Turkish identity. In contrast to the failures of the old political parties, the AKP presented itself as a party that get things done and promised a country more at peace with its own identity. It should also be added that Erdoğan had charismatic appeal for the conservative masses and was perceived by many as a problem-solver not marred by the nationalist discourse of the past decades and ready to compromise on many issues, especially in his relations with the EU. However, the deadlock in its relations with the EU allowed Turkey to follow a more ambitious and unilateralist foreign policy in its region and beyond, considering itself as the leader of the Muslim world emanating from the implicit change of its state identity from a Western to a Muslim country. This new Muslim-centered identity is being promoted domestically through schools and through the discourses of AKP politicians, and internationally through an agile engagement with the Muslim world. Today, Turkey is more confident about its power-seeking to establish regional hegemony particularly among the Muslim nations and in the former territories of the Ottoman Empire.