THE SYRIAN CONFLICT AND THE CRISIS OF ISLAMIST NATIONALISM IN TURKEY

Turkey’s position vis-à-vis the Syrian conflict has been, from the outset, replete with the AKP’s ideological vision pertaining to Turkish society and the Middle East. The AKP conceived the Syrian war as a springboard for the realization and consolidation of its new Islamist conception of nationalism. Thus, its involvement in this war has also directly reflected on domestic political and ideological struggles, and, as a result, the Syrian War has been a testing ground for the AKP’s Islamist nationalist project. However, AKP’s regional ambitions were ultimately scotched by the complicated dynamics of the Syrian conflict and Islamic nationalism as an ideology has reached its limits. This led the AKP to engage in certain discursive maneuvers to alleviate this ideological crisis.

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The 79th anniversary of Atatürk’s passing on 10 November 2017 meant more than a routine official commemoration of the founder of the Republic, once Recep Tayyip Erdoğan praised Atatürk with the following words the same day:

Our Nation has an eternal respect for the Gazi. There is not the slightest hesitation concerning the respect of our nation for Mustafa. Our nation does not have the slightest problem with Kemal. We know very well that our nation has no difficulty with the surname Atatürk, which itself gave him this surname. So, why has there been a debate about it?1

These words surprised many observers of Turkish politics as Erdoğan is known to have mentioned Mustafa Kemal Atatürk very rarely in his speeches and when he did so he typically referred to his role in the War of Liberation rather than to his leadership in the foundation and consolidation of the secular Turkish nation-state. Up until this speech, Erdoğan, like most of other Islamists, opted for “Mustafa Kemal” not “Atatürk” when addressing him in his speeches, as the latter was the surname given to him after the formation of the Republic and was identified by conservative circles with the major secularist reforms that he pioneered.

Such a swift shift in the discourse was interpreted by some commentators as a brand new strategy of guaranteeing a sweeping victory in the fast-approaching 2019 presidential elections. It was stated by many that by reconciling with “Atatürk,” Erdoğan was striving to win the hearts of at least certain segments of secularist Turkish nationalists who had been long alienated from the Justice and Development Party (AKP) due to this party’s perceived distance to republican ideals, and thereby to add a new bloc of supporters to Erdoğan’s already consolidated and solidified conservative-religious social base. This is by all means a reasonable explanation; but is at the same time inadequate to fully grasp the multilayered meaning of this seemingly sudden discursive shift.

This article argues that Erdoğan’s performance of publicly appraising Atatürk is as much a tactic for the “present” impasse of the AKP rule as a “future” election investment. The nodal point of the present impasse is the Syrian war where Turkish foreign policy under the AKP rule has been suffering from a stalemate and without a coherent exit strategy. It might seem odd at first glance to link an ideological maneuver in Turkish domestic politics to such an international matter as the Syrian

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war. However, the Syrian conflict that started in 2011 has never been merely a “bi-
partisan” foreign policy issue of the Turkish state, but rather it has been an integral 
component of the AKP’s search for ideological hegemony within Turkey.

Ambitious ideological projects cannot 
be feasible and effective only through 
rhetoric; they also need to be validated 
by action. As Ewan Stein suggested, 
demonstrable foreign policy successes 
could be an effective instrument of en-
trenching domestic ideological projects 
and hegemony. Turkey’s position vis-
à-vis the Syrian conflict has been, from 
the outset, replete with the AKP’s ideo-
logical vision of Turkey and the entire 
Middle East. The AKP conceived the 
Syrian war as a springboard for the val-
idation and consolidation of its new Islamist conception of nationalism and national 
identity. As a result, its involvement in this war, by a variety of means, has also 
directly reflected on domestic political and ideological struggles. In this respect, the 
Syrian war has been a testing ground for the AKP’s Islamist nationalist project in 
Turkey. The AKP’s and its leader’s recent turn to Atatürk is also related to the dramat-
ic outcome of this test. Now into its seventh year, the course of the Syrian conflict has 
clearly shown that the AKP’s regional ambitions were scotched by the complicated 
dynamics of the conflict, and that Islamist nationalism has reached its limits and lost 
its sustainability in the Middle East in general and in Syria in particular. This led the 
AKP and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to engage in certain discursive maneuvers 
to alleviate this ideological crisis. Erdoğan’s recent reverence of Atatürk can be seen 
as a manifestation of this crisis and an example of these maneuvers.

Islamist Nationalism and the Syrian War

Elsewhere, Özhan Demirkol and I have discussed the ways in which the AKP’s 
foreign policy discourse and practice, especially in the Middle East, is intricately 
linked to this party’s quest for building and consolidating a new nationalist hege-
monic project in Turkey. This new project, which will be referred to as Islamist 
nationalism in this paper, included a reconfiguration of the defining characteristics 
and boundaries of the “nation” at the expense of its long-standing Kemalist

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conception. In brief terms, Islamist nationalism envisages an overarching national identity based on Muslimhood and a shared Ottoman past that encompasses other ethnicities in Turkey as cultural components. This new definition of nation went hand in hand with the redefinition of (a) the “national” space (sphere of influence); (b) national interests; and (c) national mission.

The Islamist nationalism of the AKP, as opposed to the conventional Kemalist framework, declared the former Ottoman territories as a “geo-cultural basin” to which the Turkish state could extend its influence. The redefinition of national space (sphere of interests) as such constitutes the first pillar of Islamist nationalism. Along the lines of this principle, the AKP has depicted Turkey’s involvement in Syria for the purpose of ousting the Assad regime as a historical responsibility of the Turkish nation since, according to this perspective, Assad represents not the Syrian people but the narrow interests of the Alawite minority. Thus, Syria has been perceived and presented as a “space” where the Turkish state’s interests could be proactively and legitimately pursued.

The AKP’s reconfiguration of Turkey’s geographical sphere of influence is internally connected to its redefinition of national interests. In its new formulation of nationalism, the AKP defined national interest on the grounds of creating as powerful and influential a country as the Ottoman Empire and criticized the Kemalist’s “defensive” stance in foreign policy and “its regional policy of non-involvement” as being too passive and at odds with the historical interests of the nation. Identifying national interests with a proactive and revisionist foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East, constitutes the second pillar of Islamist nationalism. Accordingly, AKP officials and its media outlets have presented Turkey’s involvement in the Syrian war as a necessary step to pursue the nation’s enlarged interests and as an opportunity to prove the hitherto underestimated might and capabilities of the state.

Through a redefinition of the geographical sphere of influence and of national interests the AKP has endowed its foreign policy with a new mission of Pax Ottomana: bringing peace and stability to the former Ottoman territories under the moral and political leadership of the Turkish state, which is conceived as the heir of the Ottoman Empire. The redefinition of national mission as such forms the third pillar of Islamist nationalism. In this perspective, the mission of the Turkish state in Syria was to help the opposition groups overthrow the Assad regime, which was designated as primarily responsible for the outbreak of the civil war. It was expected that

post-Assad Syria would represent the cultural values and silenced aspirations of the Sunni majority and fully embrace the Ottomanist vision represented by the AKP government. It is important to note that the AKP also intended to situate the resolution of the long-standing Kurdish question within this framework. The overarching Muslim identity was expected to assure the Turks and the Kurds in the region that they would be equal components of a common historical mission. This would eventually reverse the gradual alienation of the Kurds from the Turkish state and its secularist-Kemalist conception of nation. In this respect, the sustainability of the “peace process” that the AKP initiated in 2013 was dependent on the power of Islamist nationalism to absorb the Kurds under a “new mission” and to eradicate the influence in the region of the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK) and its political and ideological offshoots. As such, the course of the peace process and the Kurdish question in Turkey was dependent on the AKP’s capacity to assert the weight of its neo-Ottomanist vision in Syria.

The International Context of Turkey’s Involvement in Syria

The above-explained ideological framework was a reference point for the AKP’s motivations behind its involvement in the Syrian conflict. Nevertheless, it should be taken into account that Turkey has limited military and political capabilities to fully enforce its ideological strategies in the Middle East at the expense of so-called “great powers” such as the US and Russia and regional powers such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. As such, acting on the basis of “subjective” ideological ambitions could have been only possible for Turkey under some exceptionally favorable conditions that could allow some autonomy for its single-handed operations. AKP officials seemingly interpreted the successive Arab Uprisings that started in 2011 as a harbinger of the emergence of this favorable international context. The collapse of the years-old political structures and incumbent leaders in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, as well as the destabilization of the Syrian regime during the so-called “Arab

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Spring,” was interpreted by the AKP as the emergence of a political and ideological vacuum that could be filled by neo-Ottomanist interventionism. The election victory of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 2012 was a boon for the AKP, as it represented the rise of Sunni-Islamist political forces that could act in tandem with the AKP on its regional strategies.

The acme of the Arab Spring occurred at a time when US foreign policy was being shaped by the “Obama Doctrine,” which prescribed avoiding direct military intervention in the Middle East and instead outsourcing its ground operations to allied state or non-state actors. In the initial years of the conflict, the Obama administration considered Turkey – a NATO ally and a strategic partner for the US – as an ideal surrogate that could proactively build a new regional order, and protect and enhance US interests in the region. For the AKP government this new US strategy in the Middle East provided a golden opportunity to enforce and solidify neo-Ottomanism against the backdrop of ongoing turbulence. It was in this favorable international and regional context that the AKP attempted to organize the Syrian opposition according to its Islamist nationalist agenda and provided political and military support for opposition groups, most of which were overtly Islamist.

The Crisis of Islamist Nationalism in Syria

“Arab Spring” optimism started to fade away much earlier than the AKP government expected, and with it Ankara’s ambitions. A series of developments in the Middle East in general and in Syria in particular has gradually undermined the basis of the aforementioned three pillars of Islamist nationalism. In July 2013 the newly elected Muslim Brotherhood-linked Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi was overthrown by the Egyptian army following a mass uprising against his rule. This meant for Turkey the loss of a prospective strategic partner in the region and a blow to the dream of forming a Sunni-Islamist bloc against Iran, which staunchly sided with the Assad regime since the beginning of the Syrian

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10 Clemens Hoffmann and Can Cemgil (2016), p. 16.
war and provided Hezbollah with military assistance against the rebel groups that Turkey supported.\(^\text{12}\) Egypt’s anti-Turkey stance after the coup obstructed the AKP’s efforts to extend its ideological sphere of influence in the region and wrought havoc upon the first pillar of Islamist nationalism (the redefinition of national space or national sphere of influence along the lines of neo-Ottomanism).

When ISIS expanded its control in Syria and occupied Raqqa in early 2014 and started to plot terrorist attacks in European capitals, the world’s attention shifted from the “status and future of Assad regime” to the immediate eradication of this extremely violent organization.\(^\text{13}\) The rise of ISIS in Syria marked the beginning of a mismatch between the priorities of Turkey and the US, as the former continued to insist that the priority should be to overthrow Assad at all costs. Turkey’s perceived negligence towards the presence of ISIS on its border\(^\text{14}\) in the beginning stages of the Syrian conflict raised questions among the international community about Turkey’s role in the conflict and promise of bringing peace and stability in the region under the spearheading leadership of the Turkish state. In other words, Pax Ottomana as the third pillar of Islamist nationalism began to be questioned in international arena. The intensified protraction and even further complication of the Syrian war with the emergence of non-state actors and terrorist groups undermined AKP’s ambition of achieving Pax Ottomana on Syrian soil.

The dynamics of the war in Syria spilled over into Turkish territory as well. In 2015 and 2016, ISIS carried out a series of attacks against Turkish civilians by using suicide bombers. The ISIS attack against a peace rally held in Ankara in October 2015 that killed 102 activists was the deadliest terrorist attack in Turkish history to date. In the face of these attacks, it was no longer possible for AKP officials to continue to prioritize neo-Ottomanist ambitions and Pax Ottomana as a project outside the borders of Turkey. Rather, since 2015, the government has had to switch to a discourse that prioritizes above everything the restoration of stability and security inside its borders.

The Syrian uprising and the consequent erosion of the sovereignty of the Syrian state also enabled the PKK-affiliated Democratic Union Party (PYD) to take control of certain towns in Northern Syria along the Turkish border with the de-facto consent of the Syrian state, which saw this organization as a counter-balancing actor against the radical Islamist opposition. In due process the PYD, with the US’ open support, took an active role in combatting and repelling ISIS both in Iraq and Syria and rapidly expanded the territories it controlled. The emergence alongside

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\(^{12}\) Christopher Phillips (2017), p. 40


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The violence was not limited to the Kurdish populated regions; it also hit the civilians even in the capital Ankara, when in March 2016 a bomb attack carried out by the PKK-affiliated Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK) cost the lives of 37 civilians. As such, rather than preparing the ground for the permanent resolution of the Kurdish question as AKP officials and AKP-linked journalists expected, the course of the Syrian conflict turned out to be a dynamic that further complicated the Kurdish question in Turkey. It irreversibly ended what is referred to as the “peace process” and undermined the feasibility of the AKP’s project of integrating the Kurds into a “nation” which was redefined along the lines of Islamist nationalism.

Russia’s direct involvement in the Syrian war appeared as yet another serious obstacle to the ambitious objectives of the AKP’s Islamist nationalism in Syria. In September 2015, Russia, a long-term ally of Syria, directly intervened in the Syrian conflict for the purpose of supporting the Syrian army against the jihadist groups and counterbalancing American influence in the course of the war. This turned the tide of the war in favor of the Syrian government and enabled the Syrian army to recapture the territories it lost to the rebel groups supported by Turkey. In an attempt to counteract the changing balances of power, Turkey shot down a Russian warplane in November 2015, which was by all means counterproductive. As NATO and the US remained reluctant to take sides with Turkey in its crisis with Russia, Turkey had to face on its own the costs and risks of the Kremlin’s reaction. The Russian response to Turkey’s action included further reinforcement of its military arsenal in the Khmeimim airbase in Latakia, Syria. This enabled the Russian army to fully dominate Syrian airspace, and it enacted economic sanctions against Turkey which hit its food, construction, and tourism industries. In the face of such challenges, the AKP government tried hard to reach a détente with Russia and found itself in a position of being restricted by Russia’s grand strategy in Syria in the long run.

The AKP brought Turkey increasingly into Russia’s orbit to alleviate the hazardous impacts of the diplomatic breakdown and to compensate for its increasing isolation from NATO and the EU.16 Meanwhile, the US was strengthening its already strong military ties with the PYD and designated this faction of the Syrian war as the only reliable partner to pursue its interests. Overall, this process demonstrated that Turkey’s quest for increasing its sphere of influence in Syria through a neo-Ottomanist vision has obvious limits in the face of regional powers such as Russia and Iran, and any attempt to disregard or sideline these limits could result in serious economic and political losses.17 The conflict with Russia in Syria and its concrete economic and political costs undermined the credibility of the idea that Turkey’s national interests lie in the revitalization of Ottoman might and influence in the Middle East, the second pillar of Islamist nationalism. Many polls carried out in 2014 and 2015 demonstrated that all of these risks and tensions associated with the Syrian war increased skepticism among the Turkish public and even among AKP supporters towards its policies in the Middle East.18 The AKP’s first electoral defeat on June 2015 can also be seen as another indication or manifestation of the unpopularity of its Islamist-nationalist infused foreign policy.

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“Nationalizing” the Crisis of Hegemony

Today, in the seventh year of the Syrian conflict, the AKP is entrapped by a vicious cycle emanating from the multitude of the problems in Syria that go beyond its capacity to fully control.19 The Syrian war was a testing ground for the credibility of its Islamist nationalist project and neo-Ottomanism. The outcome of this test was an explicit disappointment on the part of the AKP that marked the unsustainability of relying solely on an Islamist nationalist ideological framework to shape Turkey’s foreign policy in the Middle East. Nevertheless, the failure of Islamist nationalism as a hegemonic project in Turkey and across Middle East has not deterred the AKP from being involved in the Syrian conflict. On the contrary, the recent policies of Turkey in Syria show that the Turkish government tends to make use of contentious issues

in the Syrian conflict to advance political goals, both domestically and regionally.

The solution that the AKP developed to avert the crisis of Islamist nationalism was to transform the “troubles” stemming from the failure of its own Islamist nationalist project in Syria into nonpartisan “national security issues” that would entail full and unquestionable support for Erdoğan and AKP rule. Accordingly, the AKP’s recent discourse in Syria no longer revolves around the core premises of Islamist nationalism, such as extending the Turkish state’s sphere of influence deep into the Middle East or building Pax Ottomana in the former imperial territories. In their stead, the government prioritizes the emergent necessity of repulsing “imminent threats” to Turkey’s national security and territorial integrity. In lieu of a deep crisis of Islamist nationalism, it is through these means that the government could build a “unifying foreign policy ethos,” acquire unconditional public support for its one-party dominated rule at home, and risk maneuvers in the international arena. In this vein, the Turkish state’s recent Afrin operation against the PYD in Syria, which was presented by the AKP as a reaction to an imminent national security threat, needs to be evaluated not only within the context of changing balances of power in Syria but also as an exigent political and ideological necessity. This operation has, so far, seemed to be quite effective in consolidating public support for – as well as softening and deterring the opposition against – AKP rule amidst a deepening crisis of Islamist nationalism.

Making Sense of Erdoğan’s Praise for Atatürk

Keeping this context in mind, it is prudent to return to the question this paper proposed at the beginning: Why did Erdoğan, to the surprise of many, decide to openly embrace “Atatürk” in his November 10th commemoration speech? Despite the AKP’s long-standing endeavors to dethrone Kemalism in the domain of ideologies in Turkey, Atatürk is still revered by large sections of society and commands huge respect as the symbol of national unity and security. It is impossible for any political entity or figure in Turkey to identify itself with the “nation” and “national security” by keeping Atatürk at arm’s length. As such, Erdoğan’s recent appraisal can be interpreted as a political and ideological exigency that is needed to assert the position of representing the entire nation. Incorporating Atatürk into the discourse of the AKP is vital in order to depict the recent impasse in Syria as a national “liberation” issue that requires unconditional and unquestionable support from the public, and that entails concurrent mobilization and coordinated actions of the party officials, bureaucratic cadres, and armed forces.