

**Turkish Foreign Policy under the Justice and Development Party (AKP):
Between kemalism and Neo-Ottomanism****Arabi Melouk***Hassiba benbouali University of Chlef
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Abstract: Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP: *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) came to power in 2002, Turkey's foreign policy orientation became a source of contention as Turkey shifted its interest from the West and focused on the East. This increasing interest in the Middle East, mainly those countries of the former Ottoman sphere, was interpreted as a major shift away from Kemalism to Neo-Ottomanism. The present study examines the continuity and change in the Republic's foreign policy for nearly eight decades and discusses the main factors that shaped the country's foreign policy making throughout various administrations.

Keywords: Turkey; Justice and Development Party; Kemalism; Neo-Ottomanism.

Introduction :

Since the inception of the Turkish Republic in 1923, foreign policy making has been based on two pillars: Westernization and the preference for status quo. Although the founding fathers fought against the Western powers in the war of independence, they sought close relations with the West. The context of the Westernization vision of Turkey's founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk remained the fundamental platform through the history of the Republic and the only choice to build extensive relations with the West and to modernize the country. The Kemalists strove to establish a nation-state that looks towards the West: "*They created a secular national identity, eschewed involvement in the Middle East and searched of any pan-Islamist leanings which they think of a key obstacle to the modernization of Turkey.*" (Sander, 1993, p31)

In addition to Westernization, Turkish policy makers sought to preserve the status quo in international relations and made great efforts in ensuring the peace of the world. Atatürk himself formulated his epigram "*peace at home, peace in the world*" (Davison, 1981, p167) which linked domestic and international peace together. For him, there was, and should be, close correlation between the internal structure and the foreign policy of a country and the best foreign policy option during this critical period was to ensure Turkey's security by avoiding foreign entanglements and achieving workable agreements with neighbors in matters of local and regional concerns.

Atatürk did not try to expand the Empire but to create and perpetuate a new and national Turkish State based on modern principles within the boundaries of its homeland. These principles were followed by the Turkish policy makers and governments the decades to come. To establish this new state, the leaders of the new Turkish State sought to cut ties from its Oriental and Islamic past trying to build a new secular, modern and Turkish national identity. Atatürk

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wanted to raise the new Republic to the status of a ‘contemporary civilization’ by establishing a nation-state of a nineteenth century and evolving twentieth century European model: *“Turks have always gone towards the West. We want a European Turkey, in other words a Turkish country that looks towards the West. We want to modernize our country. All our efforts are aimed at founding modern Westernized government”* (Stone, 2001).

In the following decades, Kemalist principles led Turkey to approach the West, while remaining distant from the Middle East as much as possible, and not to conduct a foreign policy based on religious affiliations. Notwithstanding, Kemalism was buried with Özal Neo-Ottomanist approach to foreign policy. Kemal challenged the traditional order, both in domestic and international affairs, and followed a pro-active, multi-dimensional foreign policy. He believed that Turkey’s interest was to extend its influence to territories that were formerly Ottoman, for which the term Neo-Ottomanism was used for the first time (Danforth, 2008, p88). One reflection of his Neo-Ottomanism aspiration was his engagement with neighboring areas, including the Middle Eastern countries, trying to embrace the Kurdish identity, and play a more constructive role to address the Arab-Israeli conflict. This policy was followed without detaching from the West. He staunchly supported the United States in the first Gulf War and praised American and Ottoman multiculturalism to show the world that Turkey was a strategic Western Ally.

Turkish foreign policy from 1923 to the end of the century showed a great continuity with overall goals as being passive and Western-Oriented and dealt with neighboring areas from a security perspective. Indeed, since the rise of Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power in November 2002, Turkish foreign policy making has been at the center of scholarly debates. As its founders were former members of the Islamist Party and the AKP represented Conservative Muslims, changes in foreign policy making was anticipated, particularly when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became President of Turkey in 2014 and political conditions suddenly changed in Turkey and the Middle East. These debates on Turkey’s foreign policy orientation relate to its international identity and image, EU membership and US-Turkish relationships.

The present study examines the continuity and change in the Turkish foreign policy making in an attempt to understand the nature and the fundamental transformations in the current foreign policy by evaluating (pre-AKP) and (AKP) periods. It discusses the main factors that shaped the Republic’s policy behaviors throughout various administrations and redefines its role in the Middle East.

In order to accomplish these objectives, the article compares the AKP policy making with those of the Kemalist principles. This is important because a good understanding of the Kemalist ideology-that is seen as anti-thesis of Ottomanism- will have serious implications on the debate whether the AKP government- which is considered more pro-Ottoman- is shifting its foreign policy away from the Kemalist principles.

2. Kemalism in Turkish Foreign Policy

Modern Turkey and its foreign policy cannot be evaluated properly without understanding the ideational basis of the Turkish Republic designed by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, known as



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Kemalism, “*The General who led the military campaign that culminated in the creation of a Republic in 1923 covering the whole of Anatolia and parts of Thrace on the European Continent then ruled it until his death in 1938*” (Reynolds, 2012). These principles, later called ‘indisputable dogmas’, have remained unchangeable (Aydin, 2003, p318). Kemalism as a nationalistic independent foreign policy described the Turkish identity as ‘modern’ and ‘westernized’, while their Muslim and Ottoman counterparts represented backwardness and threat to secular state.

It is important to point out that Turkey’s external relations and foreign policy principles in the kemalist Era were determined by three factors: the Ottoman experience, Turkey’s weakness, and the nation-state building ideology in which the most important factor was the last one. Thus, “*Kemalists launched a comprehensive de-Ottomanization campaign to wipe out the Islamic/Ottoman state institutions and create a state identity based on Western values. Before the establishment of the republic in 1923, Islam was the central ideology and the defining identity in the Ottoman Empire. However, the founding elites replaced Islam with nationalism and secularism in order to reach the level of contemporary civilization*” (Pehlevan, 2019).

The Kemalist re-orientation of Turkey towards Europe and the Western Civilization resulted in a re-orientation of the country’s foreign policy agenda in a way that suited to the Western countries interests. “*After the Lausanne treaty, the Kemalist foreign policy was defined as anti-adventurist and non-aggressive, preoccupied with protecting the territorial integrity rather than having an imperial goal of extending Turkey’s borders. In other words, the Kemalist foreign policy aimed to preserve the existing status quo*” (Çalış, Bağcı, p198). Atatürk’s epigram “*peace at home peace in the world*” emphasized the relationship between internal stability with the international peace and order, prioritizing the home front (Aydin, 2003). Mustafa Kemal always said: “*let us recognize our own limits. Turkey does not desire an inch of foreign territory, but it will not give up an inch of what it holds*” (Kinross, 1993, p458). This was an indication of pursuing an idealist foreign policy making with the objective of reaching the level of the contemporary civilization and a realist isolationist policy that conditioned the former objective with the attainment of complete independence from the West.

Certainly, Turkey aligned with the Western interests without being sensitive to the neighboring Arab countries. For its leaders, the Arabs sided with the invading forces during WWI, an act -while motivated by the Arab drive for independence- is still viewed by many Turks as unforgivable treachery. “*The Sadabat Pact between itself, Iran, Afghanistan and Iraq signifies Turkey’s choice of a non-interference policy towards its Eastern neighborhood. In addition to that, the requirements of the contemporary civilization demanded that Turkey would cut down its ties with its Islamic and Ottoman Past in international affairs as wel.*” (Çalış, Bağcı, p202). Thus, the early decades of the Republic saw deterioration in Turkish relations with the Muslim countries. The roots of such behaviors were the State’s identity and a kind of reaction to the past. The Arabs reminded the Turks of Islam and ottomans so it was best to leave them alone in a chaotic region that became a competition ground for the colonizing powers.

Ataturk’s foreign policy was considered a distinguishing characteristic of newly-born states. Although he was a military leader, his foreign policy was starkly different from typical military regimes. Turkey believed it was wise not to resort to military action in order to conserve



military resources and energy. The political environment out which the Kemalist ideology was born was dominated by the perceptions of fear and disempowerment as well as by widespread feelings of frustration, discontent and bitterness towards the ottoman past. These factors led the government to believe their best course of action was to work on reforming themselves internally and become passive internationally. This can be achieved through the alliance with the West and the rejection of Eastern cultural links.

3. Neo-Ottomanism in Turkish Foreign Policy

Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, the question whether Turkey is adopting a Neo-ottoman foreign policy was asked a number of times. Any increasing interest in the Middle East, mainly those countries of the former Ottoman sphere was interpreted as a major shift away from Kemalism to Neo-Ottomanism. But before elaborating on the idea of Neo-Ottomanism in Turkish foreign policy, it is important to distinguish the Ottomanism and Neo-Ottomanism.

Ottomanism can be defined as *“the political thought aiming to incorporate different ethnic and religious groups living under the Ottoman rule into the identity of the Ottoman”* (Turan, 2016). In other words, Ottomanism is a rescue strategy that sought to create one Ottoman nation through the rule of law. This law brought all subjects together as equal in rights and privileges in exchange for their fidelity and loyalty to the nation and the state (*kayalı*, 1908, p14). Ottomanism’s main purpose was to face the major threats posed by ethnic nationalism and colonialism. Despite these attempts, Ottomanism failed because competing identities were more cohesive and powerful than the ottoman identity and because nationalist movements were sponsored by European nations against the ottoman state. In short, the concept of Ottomanism emphasized domestic affairs and had a defensive nature.

Neo-Ottomanism, on the other hand, focuses more on foreign policy matters. It is a term that is constructed to mean different things to different people. The British scholar David Barchard was the first to pioneer the term in his monograph titled *‘Turkey and the West’* to underline Turkey’s possible future orientation, in an attempt to revive the greatness of the Ottoman Empire. Many researchers used the word to describe Turgut Özal’s foreign policy moves during the 1990s. Özal challenged the traditional order of Kemalism both in domestic and international affairs and sought to follow an active and multidimensional foreign policy.

The geopolitical change in post-cold war era aroused a consciousness of the past. It reminded Turks that they had a great multinational empire that ruled the Middle East, North Africa, the Balkans and parts of Central Europe (Taspinar, 2008). Contrary to Kemalist Western skepticism, Özal believed that *“there is no compulsory relationship between progress and Western Civilization; so, Turkey did not have to choose between the European, Turkish, or Islamic civilization. Instead, the Turks were and they are still European Muslims and they should be proud of their origin and their Ottoman past.”* (Ibid) Özal favored the peaceful coexistence of European and Oriental civilizations.

Neo-Ottomanism, as understood by Özal, sought not to replace the Kemalist project of secular nation-building but rather to modify and update it by branding the variety of Ottoman



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identities as a feature of pluralism (Yavus, 2016). Therefore, Özal started an engagement policy with the neighboring areas including the Middle East, the Muslim countries, the Muslim countries of central Asia and the Caucasus that were secular, democratic, free market oriented and aligned with the West. The goal was for Turkey to serve as a model for the newly independent Republics of the former Soviet Union.

This active policy was followed without detaching from the west as Özal actively supported the United States in the first Gulf War, applied to the European Economic Community for full membership, and even attempted to resolve the issues of conflict with Greece. He wanted to assume a new role for Turkey in foreign policy as a 'bridge' between the East and the West using Turkey's geostrategic location. The aim was to create a multicultural and socially inclusive political culture. This multiculturalism and religious pluralism would make it easier for Özal and his successors to deal with problems such as the Kurdish issue and Islam. However, with Özal's early death combined with the political instability and economic crises that dominated the 1990s, Neo-Ottomanist policy was put on pause.

4. The Rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP): Change and Continuity in the Turkish Foreign Policy

The success of the AKP in the early 2000s can be traced to the Welfare Party (WP; Refah Partisi), an Islamic Party founded in 1983 by Necmetin Erbakan. Erbakan represented a different aspect of Neo-Ottomanism. His emphasis on Political Islam made him a controversial figure of sorts. The AKP emerged out of the Pro-Islamic political background and focused on democracy and human rights values. It is important to note that the success of the AKP could not solely be attributed to its adoption of new values and declared change in ideology. One of the contributing factors that led to the AKP's historic win was the financial and economic crisis of 2001 (Karakas, 2007). The Party gave hope for new changes and won the elections of 2002.

Foreign policy has been of the areas that the AKP governments have been quite assertive and ambitious about. Ahmet Davutoğlu, who first served as the chief foreign policy advisor of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (2002-2009) and then became Minister of foreign affairs in May 2009, has been the main architect of the AKP's foreign policy. The fundamentals of the foreign policy that were determined in his book 'the Strategic Depth' has been dubbed Neo-Ottomanism by international scholars and analysts.

Under the first AKP government (2002-2007), the AKP appeared to be highly focused on EU membership. In this period, the status quo was protected and relations with Europe and Turkey's role as a bridge between the East and the West were emphasized. This emphasis was changed during the AKP's second period in power (2007-2014), from a bridge country to a central one (Davutoğlu, 2004). As a result of this change, Turkey's widening strategic foreign policy has focused on not only the traditional alliance with Europe but also with the Middle East and Africa in order to expand the boundaries of Turkish Foreign Policy and rise a great power in the international political arena. He argues that Turkey is the natural heir to the Ottoman Empire that once unified the Muslim world and therefore has the potential to become a Muslim Regional Power.



Davutoğlu and Islamists do not consider the traditional order of Kemalism as the best solution to the decline of the Ottoman Empire. On the contrary, they retarded kemalism as the main factor that converted Turks and Kurds from brothers in faith to ethnic enemies and estranged Turkey from its history and geography in favor of close ties with the Western world. Davutoğlu criticized the kemalist foreign policy tradition by providing an alternative strategy intends to not 'dewesternize' Turkey's orientation but rather to create *"an autonomous, self-regulating, and self-confident foreign policy agenda that would remedy the hitherto crisis-driven Turkish foreign policy-making instead of attempts to change its international orientation"* (Bridal, 2013). Notwithstanding, domestic opposition and some foreign analysts pointed to the decline of Turkey's relations with the West claiming that this was not an expansion of foreign policy areas, but rather, a shift of axis from West to East. This shift was perceived as a result of AKP's Islamist origins. For example, in 2009-2011, Turkey cut its relations with Israel, hosted Hamas leaders in Ankara, voted against Iran sanctions in the UN, worked closely with Sudan despite the genocide charges against its President, and increased its relations with Russia and China, while slowing them down with EU.

Alongside aspirations for regional leadership, the focus on security-oriented policies that determined Turkish foreign policy for so long would be replaced by cooperation and use of soft power in international relations. The soft power in Turkish politics means the non-involvement of coercion in foreign policy making. One example of soft power approach is Turkey's 'Africa Opening'. This emphasis on soft power was implemented by the policy of 'zero problems with neighbors that attempted to find solutions and develop a new free- problems atmosphere with neighbors particularly with its bordering ones namely Armenia, Syria and Greece. By overcoming problems with neighboring states, Turkey would present itself with a new image.

Notwithstanding, the effects of the Arab Spring posed a major challenge to Turkey's foreign policy, particularly regarding its relations with regimes and publics, while trying to maintain its credibility. Turkey had to determine its stance on the changes in the Arab world. It tried hard to avoid any outside intervention to the crisis but this has the potential of losing some of the influence over the region it built over the years that included some of the Islamist movements and the Arab street in general (Turan, 2016).

Turkey was in favor of peaceful transitions that would not affect its past efforts in the region. At this point, it shifted its policies from protecting the status quo to supporting regime change throughout the region. This can be explained by its foreign policy basic rights of freedom, justice, and non-interference in domestic affairs. However, this attitude changed from time to time according to the nature and size of the Turkish interests in each country. *Whereas Turkey supported the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, it showed a reserved or conservative attitude towards the revolutions in Libya and Syria and almost ignored the situation in Yemen and Bahrain.* (Sumer, 2013, p19) Turkey tried to formulate an independent foreign policy in order to maintain its regional influence .Yet; it did not have enough economic, political, and diplomatic resources to carry on such policy. Thus, it cooperated with its regional allies such as Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States that represented the Sunni bloc. This period also proved the limitations of the Turkey's vision to become a major independent actor in the region since Turkey could not become influential enough to solve the problems of the region.



5. CONCLUSION

The in-depth examination of Turkish foreign policy under the AKP government yielded that replacing the Kemalist foreign policy priorities with those of Neo-Ottoman did not result in Turkey's radical departure from the West. Instead, the conventional foreign policy position had always insisted on the need to keep close ties with the Western world particularly the US and Europe.

Albeit Turkey's relations with the West has showed significant ups and downs during the AKP years, its objective to change the status quo in the Middle East and to make Turkey a regional leader remained constant throughout the AKP rule. In the years that preceded the AKP rule, Turkey followed a defensive foreign policy and refrained from engaging in the internal affairs of other states. This principle changed in early 2009 when Erdoğan started heavily criticizing Israel's Palestinian policy. This increased Erdoğan's popularity in Turkey and on Arab streets.

Turkish foreign policy shifted its focus from sustaining Turkey's survival to becoming a regional power considering itself the leader of the Muslim World deriving from the implicit change of its state identity from a Western to a Muslim country. Yet, the real change came with the Arab Spring in which Turkey attempted to shape the region to its preferences by cooperating with Sunni groups in the Middle East.

In sum, Turkey's new foreign policy is driven by ideology and pragmatism that stressed the superior qualities of the country's Ottoman and Islamic Past as opposed to an exploitative West. Despite different challenges, Turkey remained a critical player in regional affairs and its role is becoming increasingly significant.

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