

# Revisiting Turkey's Protean Self vs. 'Other'

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### Revisiting Turkey's Protean Self vs. 'Other': Realism, Constructivism, or Ontological Insecurity?

"One must therefore lay it down that the origin of large and lasting societies lay not in mutual human benevolence but in men's mutual fear" (Hobbes, 1998: 24)

The Greek historian Thucydides once observed that "three Great Things (fear, honor, and interest)" were the key driving forces behind the foreign policy of Athens (Thucydides, 1954). But the concept of *fear* in this Thucydidean trinity is of paramount importance as it emanates from potential uncertainties, identity crises and insecurities which are informed by the psychological and social environments in which the global actors operate. From time immemorial, fear (and the desire to overcome fear) has been perceived to be a decisive yet a dormant factor animating inter-units' interactions, pushing few states over the precipice of war and encouraging the great many to find ways for creating conditions conducive to cooperation rather than conflict even under the prevailing security dilemmas (Jervis, 1978).

Examples of states' perceptions of fear abound in the history of international relations. Otto von Bismarck feared that a hostile alliance of France, Austria, and Russia would bring Germany down to its knees; Joseph Stalin feared that the Western ideas would burrow deep into the fabrics of the Soviet ideology and society; George W. Bush, in a more contemporary context, spearheaded the "Global War on Terror" to defeat those constituting the "axis of evil" (Bacevich and Prodromou, 2004). However, perhaps nowhere in the realm of contemporary international politics has the perceptions of fear and threat vis-à-vis the *other* been more pronounced and ubiquitous than in the Republic of Turkey. The chronicles of the Ottoman history and of the early Turkish Republic are replete with references that lend credence to the pervasiveness and import of the notions of dread and distrust. The bitter memory of "deceitful Arabs" revolting against the Turks in the First World War; Turkey's fear of Soviet intentions on her territory after the Second World War; the spurts of suspicion arising from the notorious "Johnson letter" in 1964; the constant fear over Kurdish ambitions, and, most notably, the imperishable feeling often referred to as the "Sèvres syndrome" are stellar cases in point (cf. Jung, 2003: 2-3; Michael, 2008: 74). Against this background, one can posit that from a realist vantage point Turkey's need for "physical" security against these fears and insecurities seem plausible and warranted since in the absence of a higher authority, politics is likely to be conflictual and the fear of not surviving is in essence the corollary of such anarchical dynamics (Wohlforth, in Smith, et al., 2008: 34).

In contradistinction to the realist strand of thought, however, constructivists argue that "fundamental structures of international politics are social rather than material" and that actors' identities and interests, and, most importantly, the perceptions of threat and fear in the context of this article, are socially constructed through a process of interaction between agents and the structures (Wendt, 1992: 391-425; Checkel, in Smith et al., 2008: 72). This paper attempts to determine the extent to which the realist paradigm and the constructivist approach in particular can capture the (non-)normative and identity-based intricacies and nuances of Turkish foreign policy making in relation to its European ambitions, including membership in North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU). The core argument of this analysis is that while constructivist precepts are useful in shedding light on the ideational side of Turkey's westernization project, they may, nonetheless, fall short of fully grasping the *microphysics* of fear and insecurity embedded within Turkish foreign policy decision-making apparatuses. Therefore, a theoretical bridge between constructivism and realism, better known as 'ontological security' (Mitzen, 2006: 341-370) is deemed necessary. This will help us gain a thorough insight into the changing intersubjective processes that Turkey has been

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grappling with over the past 50 years as it has sought to rein in the unsettling conditions of deep insecurity (fear) and render its self-identity secure in relations with the "other" (especially through closer integration with Europe).

## From the Ottoman ruins to the Kemalist renaissance

It is almost axiomatic that the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire occurred as the result of both internal and external threats. Beginning from the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the former challenger of Europe found itself embroiled in an attritional power struggle that at times pitted the European powers of the Age of Metternich, such as Russia, Prussia, Britain and France against each other (Jung, 2003: 2-3). Internally, the Ottomans were also suffering from a series of revolts and wars of independence, namely in their Arab territories and in Bosnia and the Herzegovina (Ibid.). Almost a century has passed since the fall of the Ottoman rule. But what appears to have remained bitterly vivid in the Turkish collective memory is two-fold: first, the betrayal of the Ottoman Arabs in conniving with the British and the French to take control over the former empire's territory during the First World War; and second, the signing of the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920, which marked the beginning of the carving-up of the "sick man of Europe".

Deeply apprehensive about malignant forces seeking the destruction of the Turkish state, Mustafa Kemal 'Atatürk' embarked on a social engineering process in order to infuse the new Republic with a robust European identity and culture. In the words of Bozdağlıoğlu, the modernization project was "a top-down process carried out by bureaucratic-authoritarian political elite and military officers, whose ideology was based on secularism, rationalism, nationalism, and statism" (2003: 51). Yet the security context in which the Turkish Republic was founded was fraught with the recurrent feelings of dread and distrust toward the neighboring states (i.e. the Arabs) and driven by the desire for joining the European civilization. For a new identity and political culture to flourish within the Anatolian heartland, root and branch structural reforms were needed not only to provide a stable *physical* and *cognitive* environment for constructing a sense of agency and continuity among the populace but also consolidate an *identity security* for the new Turkey according to the fundamentals of the West. As some scholars argue, "a country's identity—how it sees itself in relations to others—and its conception of its role in the world can be powerful ideas" that are shared by its people and are relatively enduring over time (Kaarbo et al., in Beasley Ryan K. et al, 2012: 14). Based on the foregoing constructivist premises, one can justifiably posit that the Kemalist secular reforms (1924-1938), including the de-Islamization of political and social life, the de-Arabization of the Turkish language, the exclusion of religious leaders from the Grand National Assembly, granting full political rights to women, and the drastic changes to the national dress code and the finance calendar were all adopted as part of a social engineering process aimed at building a "social habitus" (Bourdieu, 1992) that would fit in closely with the Western identity. Hence, contrary to the erstwhile perceptions of being surrounded by "a veritable ring of evil" (Jung, 2003: 8), a new "generative grammar" of patterns of actions was set in motion with a strong vision about Turkey's future interactions with others. Put differently, for the next 50 years the new Turkey was not going to play second fiddle to the whims of the West as it was the case during the First World War, nor was it destined to become vulnerable to the deception of the neighboring countries. This was primarily because Turkey unlike the previous times had managed to cultivate its distinct 'European' identity security and therefore develop a capacity for agency and sense of personal continuity.

It is against this background that Turkey's decade-long yet protracted effort in securing a membership within the European Union finds meaning. More to the point, aside from realist considerations, one can also tap into ontological (in)security as well as constructivist narratives to unearth the ideational and intersubjective processes that led to Turkey's joining the NATO in 1952.

## Turkey-NATO – EU trilogy: the end of the Sèvres syndrome?

The Turkish penchant for economic, political and social integration with the West remained unchanged even after the Second World War. In hindsight, it can be argued that if the Kemalist modernization project until the Second World War resulted in complete disassociation of Turkish Republic with Islamic identities and brought forth the external "otherness" of the Arab World, the Cold War era was defined by Turkey's internal as well as "external westintegration" (Jung, 2003: 8) as Ankara endeavored to highlight its "sameness" to the west rather than its externally viewed "otherness". That being said, however, it is vital to note that here again the element of fear and insecurity, this time arising from the Soviet Union's actions, for its own part constituted the ideational premises upon

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which Turkey's NATO ambition was rested. Simply put, the Soviet threat served as the catalyst to the Europeanization of the Turkish Republic during the Cold War. Borrowing Jung's words, "Stalin's abrogation the Turkish-Soviet friendship pact in 1945 and his demands to return the Kars and Ardahan provinces, as well as to establish Soviet military bases along the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, were instrumental in Turkey's decision to seek full affiliation with the West" (Mufti, 2009: 41). In fact, in the eyes of a realist Turk, it was crystal clear that countering the threat of the Soviet Union and overcoming the Turkish fear of the colonialist and irredentist forces required material power. Nevertheless, seen through a constructivist lens, material power gains a meaning within the framework of certain social relations and interactions (Wendt, 1999: 24-25). In this context, one can cogently contend that by virtue of engaging itself in a deeply-entrenched intersubjective interaction with the European institutions since the onset of the Kemalist reforms and by means of integrating norms of appropriate behavior within its foreign policy decision-making processes, Turkey sought to compensate for its 'ontological insecurity' and the chronic fear of outsiders with which it has always been struggling throughout its history. In other words, Turkey's persistent bid for NATO membership in tandem with its decade-long westernization efforts were used somewhat as normative justifications to define the USSR as a particular "Other" to which the west and the newly 'westernized' Turkey was unrelated, if not alien.

To take the argument one step further, Turkey's NATO membership in 1952 also served two purposes: First, it fulfilled Ankara's long-lasting quest for security. Second, it came as a resounding endorsement and recognition of its identity as an integral part of the western institutions as a whole (Yilmaz, 2012). Although the Turkey-NATO relations have been pregnant with numerous peaks and troughs, i.e. the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Cyprus problem in the 1960s and the 1970s among others, the two entities' interactions at low politics level were generally benign. Kinacıoğlu and Gürzel (2013: 589) argue that:

"Turkey's participation in NATO's military operations as the sole Muslim ally, in the post-Cold War era, enabled NATO to build an identity as a global security actor in crisis management while Turkey's active role in these operations served to keep Turkey's sense of prominence in the protection of the universal values and, thus, its claim to Western identity."

As for Turkey's bid for EU membership, it seems tenable to aver that similar patterns, like that of its NATO quest, were traceable, albeit accompanied by noticeable contradictions and ambivalent orientations. It is no exaggeration to say that Turkish "identity crisis" is nowhere more evident if not polemical than in its struggle for EU membership. Why is it that the NATO's sole Muslim ally can secure an important position in a Western military organization while it has so far failed to become a member of the EU? Some scholars point to the fact that the removal of the Soviet threat, the *raison d'être* of NATO, coupled with the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe not only turned the security situations in Europe on its head, but most importantly, deprived Turkey of its urgent security (strategic) agency for the first time since the end of the Cold War, thereby leaving the country isolated and exposed to its deeply-entrenched identity crisis (Bozdağlıoğlu, 2003: 84).

Additionally, unlike the Cold War period, the Turkish relations with the EU did not include the strategic nature of interactions the country shared in its interactions with the NATO. Instead, the Turkey-EU relations entailed normative significance and ideational as well as deep cultural undertones. Two important caveats can be distilled from this argument: First, it seems that with the end of the Cold War and the extirpation of the Communist threat, the EU engaged in somewhat more explicit discursive and normative practices, shifting its attention away from matters of "high politics"—that were essentially the preserve of NATO—and more towards issues of "low politics", namely democratic values and norms *inter alia*. This explicit normative turn within the EU happened at a time when Turkey had just expedited neoliberal economic policies in accordance with the EU standards. As one scholar puts, the nature of relationship between Europe and Turkey during the 1980s turned into a struggle between the two parties over the definition of democracy, instead of only economic imperatives (Ibid.). In a similar vein, whereas the end of the Cold War was regarded as a "permissive cause" for the activism of Turkish foreign policy (Giray, 2012), it, nonetheless, posed serious dilemmas and challenges for its European ambitions in particular, and its foreign policy in general. For example, the EU's accusation of Turkish denial of the Armenian problem, the European Parliament's pressure over the Kurdish issue, and other hot-button internal problems in Turkey rekindled the familiar feelings of suspicion of the West among the Turkish populace and reinforced the sense of identity insecurity it has been tussling

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with for a long time.

Second, one can posit that the gradual rise of political Islam under the official banner of a "Turkish-Islamic" synthesis beginning from the tenure of Turgut Özal to the coming to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has unearthed the growing divergences between Turkey and the EU along religious and normative lines. It is believed that "the religion embedded in a country's national identity, which shaped its institutions, would be expected to shape how that country defines its foreign policy interests" (Giray, 2012: 300; Warner and Walker, 2011: 120). In the case of Turkey, while religion has acted as a strong impetus for foreign policy activism as well as a source of legitimacy among Turks and the Muslims across the globe, it has, nevertheless, reinforced the EU's perceptions of Turkey's "otherness" rather than "Europeanness". In fact, regardless of the negative repercussions of Turkey's prolonged EU membership process in domestic spheres, what seems to be a veritable assumption is that, the fear of not being fully recognized by the EU—not to mention being labeled as the "other" —could undermine Turkey's self-identity (as European) and therefore exacerbate the country's ontological insecurity.

## Conclusion: practice meets theory

If we consider norms, values, culture and other ideational factors as important variables in the study of Turkey's quest for membership in the EU and NATO (as part of westernization project), then Constructivism as a distinct theory of foreign policy analysis would have a lot to say. True, Realists also may argue that self-interest and the need for security as well as economic protection from the West played a prominent role in Turkey's drive for joining the two western alliances. However, it behooves us to know that the states' interests and preferences are not necessarily given; rather they are constructed through intersubjective and ideational process of interaction between agents and the structures. In this light, Turkey's Europeanization project can be seen as an attempt to disengage the Turkish society from feelings of dread and distrust vis-à-vis the "other" by virtue of engaging them in social mechanisms of (European) identity construction so that a "social habitus" conducive to dispelling of identity insecurity and subsequent spill-over of "Europeanness" could be sustained at various social, political and economic levels. That being said, the contention here is that analyzing Turkish Europeanization attempt through NATO and EU membership projects, from either a realist or constructivist approach, may fail to account for microphysics of fear and insecurity deeply embedded within the Turkish society and historical memory. Therefore, this article endeavored to introduce *ontological insecurity* as an alternative theoretical perspective that can provide a more accurate analysis of the ways in which Turkey, because of its "precariousness of being," (Young, 1999: 15) has attempted to create a secure base in European civilization by means of joining European institutions, i.e. the EU and NATO. Mitzen argues that states seek for physical security as well as ontological security, adding that states are ontologically secure only when they can maintain *consistent self-concepts*, exercise capacity for agency, and sustain their sense of continuity in the face of security dilemmas (Mitzen, 2006). However, states can exercise their agential capacity as long as there is a stable cognitive and physical environment, which can be achieved by routinizing relationships with significant others (Ibid., 341). As can be seen, one can argue that the Turkish Europeanization project has been essentially designed to turn actions (the Kemalist reforms and the ensuing economic and political readjustments) into "routines" (via integration with the EU) which then contribute to Turkey's sense of continuity and agential capacity vis-à-vis the "other" in relation to whom it has been feeling historically insecure. It remains to be seen, however, whether the fear of the Sèvres syndrome would let Turkey overcome its ontological insecurity in its relations with other external actors, namely Russia.

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