

# Identity and Turkish Foreign Policy in the AK Parti Era

Written by Alexandros Zachariades

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## Identity and Turkish Foreign Policy in the AK Parti Era

<https://www.e-ir.info/2018/03/21/identity-and-turkish-foreign-policy-in-the-ak-parti-era/>

ALEXANDROS ZACHARIADES, MAR 21 2018

Under the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) leadership, Turkey has been in a process of re-engagement with its Ottoman past. The usage of Neo-Ottoman ideology by the ruling AKP has been focused on and has promoted greater influence of Ottoman culture in domestic social policy that has brought it at odds with the traditional forces of the modern Turkish Republic, secularism and republicanism (Kiper 2013). The question posed by this essay is to what extent resurgence of Islam and Turkey's Ottoman past has affected Turkish foreign policy since 2002. The argument proposed here is that the correlation between Turkish Foreign policy and identity has to be understood across time whilst taking into consideration the AKP's domestic power vis-à-vis the Kemalist military establishment. Based on this correlation different IR frameworks need to be utilised to gain the best possible understanding of Turkish foreign policy at a time. In specific, between 2002 and 2008, identity played a minor role in the conduct of Turkish Foreign policy due to the country's focus on the jump start of Turkey's economy and EU membership negotiations. From 2009 and until the summer of 2013 identity was the major driver behind Turkish foreign policy because the increased permissiveness of the AKP administration in its foreign policy decision-making. The Arab Spring uprisings, which led to the establishment of a friendly administration in Egypt, the renewed Kurdish peace process along with the close relations between Erdogan and the head of the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) gave an aura of confidence that AKP's "neo-Ottoman" vision was coming to fruition. However, the regional setbacks of Turkish foreign policy in Egypt and Syria have unraveled Turkey's regional aspirations and have led Turkey to resort to a more realist and ad-hoc foreign policy stance while the impact of identity has been gradually fading. Since the violent crackdown on the Gezi park protests in the summer of 2013, Turkey has taken an authoritarian turn. The resignation of Prime Minister Davutoğlu in April 2016, the subsequent coup d'état and Erdogan's victory in the constitutional referendum in April 2017 illustrate a shift from national security to regime security with regards to foreign policy decision-making whilst identity has been placed on the backburner (Dalacoura, 2017).

Before analyzing the role of identity in Turkish Foreign policy, the AKP's 'neo-Ottoman' and Islamist vision needs to be understood. Both Erdogan and Abdullah Gül, the AKP's chief co-founders, had criticized the character of the reforms brought about by Kemal Ataturk and his descendants, who promoted secularisation and rejection of the country's Ottoman past. (Mufti 2014; 30-31) As members of the Islamist Refayol Party (RP) in the 1990s they believed that Turkey was undergoing a 'systemic crisis' due to the Kemalist state's forceful imposition of a secular Turkish identity on the citizens of the country, highlighted by the incompatibility of the regime with Islam (Ibid; 30-31). This 'crisis' could only be resolved by the return of an Islamic and Ottoman ethos in Turkish politics. They pointed out to the successful integration of people of various nationalities and religions under the Ottoman *millet* system, which they believed could serve as a blueprint for the resolution of the Kurdish problem (Ibid; 31-2). Although Erdoğan believed that democracy would be useful in expressing the people's will that would allow a reform of Turkish politics along his envisaged lines, he did not commit to democratic politics. He supported that democracy was not an end (amaç) but a means (araç) for establishing the kind of regime that people wanted (Ibid; 30). Regarding foreign policy, they criticized the Western orientation of Turkish foreign policy. They argued that Turkey should not only look towards the West but should seek to play a more active role within the Muslim world. The AKP's foreign policy vision was expressed in the best way possible by the Former Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu in his 'strategic depth' doctrine.

According to this doctrine, Turkey's international position is characterized by its strategic depth, which consists of its

# Identity and Turkish Foreign Policy in the AK Parti Era

Written by Alexandros Zachariades

historical and geographical depth. Turkey's historical depth is defined by Davutoğlu by the fact that 'Turkey is a modern nation – state which was established as the heir to the Ottoman Empire' (Davutoğlu 2013; 33). This historical legacy deriving from the Ottoman Empire establishes Turkey's important geographical depth. In Davutoğlu's words Turkey 'is in unique position in geopolitical terms, in the midst of Afro-Eurasia' that makes it 'a European, Mediterranean, Balkan, Caucasian and Middle Eastern country all at the same time' (Davutoğlu 2010). Davutoğlu critiques the Western-orientated foreign policies of the Turkish governments, largely influenced and directed by the Kemalist military establishment, from the creation of the Republic in 1923 to the end of the Cold War (Cook 2007; 96-9). He asserts that this pro-Western foreign policy led to Turkey's 'alienation' from its near geopolitical environment, which consists of the Middle East, the Balkans and the Caucasus regions (Davutoğlu 2013; 142). During this period the stable factors were used as dynamic ones and consequently placed Turkey solely in the West rejecting its Ottoman past and its Islamic nature (Ibid; 143). Hence, Turkish foreign policy should address this by reestablishing the links with the countries of the former Ottoman space and should seek to play a leading and independent role in this vast geographic area as part of its infamous 'zero problems with neighbours' policy. Turkey, due to its status as the heir of the Ottoman Empire, Davutoğlu argues, has the potential to become not only a regional but a power of global stature that could unify and lead the Muslim world (Walker 2011; 7).

The AKP rose to power with a decisive victory in the 2002 parliamentary elections. The elections were held on the aftermath of the 2001 financial crisis that resulted in an increase in unemployment and an IMF bailout plan (Yeldan; 2002). Hence, the AKP's primary aim was to rejuvenate the economy and this is what they did. Through a policy of economic and social reform the Turkish economy enjoyed an average 6.8 % annual growth between 2002 and 2007 whilst Foreign Direct Investment rose to the record breaking 22 billion dollars in 2007 (Mufti 2014; 35; Çağaptay 2017; 92). In its foreign policy outlook the AKP retained Turkey's firm Western orientation, thus, defying its own Islamist and neo-Ottoman rhetoric. Instead, Erdoğan's administration focused its efforts in the accession negotiations with the EU, promoted the Annan Plan for the solution of the Cyprus problem and did not pose a challenge to the US invasion of Iraq, essentially following a liberal foreign policy (Robins 2007; 292-8). The only major point where identity partially made its appearance in the AKP's foreign policy during the region was in Turkey's relations with Israel when Erdoğan criticized Israel's actions as 'state terrorism' but was soon ready to mend fences with a state visit to Israel (Ibid; 298-9).

What explains the lack of identity as a driving force in the AKP's foreign policy during this period is on the one hand the pragmatism of the government's leadership and on the other hand the fact that the Kemalist military establishment was still in control of the most important foreign policy decision-making (Mufti 2014; 34). Therefore, the AKP primary goal was the betterment of Turkey's economy, which could only come through reform at home and greater economic interdependence with the West through Foreign Direct investment and increased trade relationships. Furthermore, at this point in time the AKP could not have followed an identity driven foreign policy because it was wise enough not to provoke the military. Erdoğan did not want to suffer the fate of Erbakan's government in 1997 (Cizre & Cinar 2002; 309-10). Finally, without a stable economy the AKP would have lacked the legitimacy in the eyes of the people to bring about any major change in Turkish foreign policy.

The 2007 parliamentary election was however the beginning of the end of the military's independent role in Turkish foreign policy. In the run-up to the election the military disapproved the choice of Abdullah Gül as President and threatened to intervene to safeguard Turkey's secular character (Mufti 2014; 35). Nonetheless, the result was a landslide AKP victory with 47%, which confirmed that the AKP had popular support on its side. Additionally, throughout 2007 General Büyükanit argued in favor of an intervention in Iraq against PKK positions (Ibid; 35). Erdoğan did not share the General's view and both sides were vocal of their opinion. Eventually, the military unilaterally went forward with the operation in February 2008 but it did not yield the expected result (Ibid; 35). This led to a delegitimisation of the military's approach to the Kurdish question whilst Erdoğan's popularity rose. The final blow to the Kemalist establishment came with the leaking of documents in the public of a planned coup d'état, predominantly by followers of the Fethullah Güllen movement (Acar 2014). As a result, 10% of the country's top generals, half the admirals and a number of other co-conspirators were imprisoned in the case that came to be known as 'Ergenekon' (Mufti 2014; 35).

The sidelining of the military increased the AKP's permissiveness to conduct foreign policy allowing Erdoğan to test

# Identity and Turkish Foreign Policy in the AK Parti Era

Written by Alexandros Zachariades

his 'neo-Ottoman' aspirations. Turkish foreign policy begun a process of reorientation towards the Middle East. Initially, this identity driven foreign policy had liberal underpinnings both at home and abroad. A new reconciliation process with the PKK was initiated at Oslo under international supervision which was followed by a ceasefire agreement in 2013 and the establishment of a 'Wise Men' committee (Hakyemez 2017; 3-6). The role of Islam as a unifying factor in the peace process was highlighted by both parties (Mufti 2014; 36-7). In its attempt to reengage with the former Ottoman space during 2009, Turkey attempted to become the mediator in the dispute between Israel and Syria with the Assad administration acknowledging Turkey's role in the region (Today's Zaman 2009). This process, nonetheless, faltered after the raid of the Israeli Defense Forces on the Turkish *Mavi Marmara* flotilla that led to cease of diplomatic relations between Israel and Turkey (United Nations, 2011; 3-6). Turkey's honeymoon in the region continued with the outbreak of the Arab Spring protests and the rise of friendly and similar-minded governments in a number of Middle Eastern countries, predominantly in Egypt with the victory of the Muslim Brotherhood and Mohamed Morsi, gave significant rise to Turkey's stature in the region (Stein; 2013). Egypt became a focal point in Turkey's foreign policy with Erdoğan visiting the country in 2011 amidst a ceremony of grandeur reaffirming his conviction that Turkey could become the leading power in the region.

However, the fall of Morsi in Egypt and the escalation of the Syrian civil war found Turkey in an increasingly isolated position with various rather than 'zero' problems with its neighbors (Zalewski 2013). In Syria, Turkey found itself on the losing side whilst in Egypt its refusal to engage with the al-Sisi administration alienated its former Saudi and Gulf allies (Ibid). From that point onwards Turkey has followed a far more aggressive Foreign Policy that was not reminiscent of the positive, 'soft-power' policies and peaceful outlook Hugh Pope and Harjudin Somun refer to in their articles (Pope 2010; Somun 2011; 37-8). The result was a move away from the ideational and liberal drivers since Davutoğlu's foreign policy dogma was shattered whilst the 'zero problems' became 'constant problems'. The outcome was a return to a militant *Realpolitik*. This was highlighted by the downing of a Russian jet by Turkish F-16 fighters in November 2015 due to an alleged violation of the Turkish airspace by the Russian jet for 17 seconds. The downing of the Russian plane at a time when both the US and Russia were backing Kurdish fighters against ISIS was a clear signal to anyone arming the Kurds that Turkey was ready to defend its territorial sovereignty (Arango & Schmitt, 2015; Solovyov 2015). It is key to note that the renewed negotiations in the Kurdish peace process that begun in Oslo in 2009 reached a stalemate in 2013 and were effectively ended by March 2015 over a disagreement between President Erdoğan and PM Davutoğlu on a 10 point declaration concerning the future of the peace process (Başaran 2017; 132-8).

According to Ezgi Başaran (2017; 132-3) Erdoğan was furious with the HDP, the pro-Kurdish party in the Turkish parliament that was the official negotiating partner with the Turkish government. The reason was that the HDP chose to field its most popular politician, Selahetin Demirtaş as its candidate in the 2014 presidential elections instead of fielding an easy opponent against Erdoğan (Ibid; 132-3). This created a rift between Erdoğan and Davutoğlu that eventually led to the latter's resignation in April 2016. Davutoğlu's resignation was a confirmation of Turkey's authoritarian turn that begun with the violent crackdown against protesters in the Gezi park demonstration in the summer of 2013. The failed coup d'état of July 2016 led to the imprisonment of thousands of civil servants and soldiers and the censoring of the press. It allowed Erdoğan to initiate purges against all sorts of dissidents including Kemalists, Güllenists and Kurds (Letchz 2016; Keller, Mykhyalshyn & Timur, 2016). As Dalacoura (2017) rightly points this illustrates a shift from national security to regime security with regards to foreign policy decision-making due to the authoritarian nature of Turkish politics, where identity has been placed on the backburner. Erdogan's victory in the constitutional referendum in April 2017 has solidified this scenario. Turkish foreign policy decision-making will increasingly be more interested in regime survival than on Turkish national interest (Ibid; 2017). Hence, it is key to note that the 'civilizational' discourse that characterised Turkish Foreign Policy from 2009 to 2012 will no longer be at the forefront of Erdoğan's mind.

This essay has argued that between 2009 and 2012 identity was a key driver in Turkish foreign policy. The successful rejuvenation of the Turkish economy in conjunction with the blunders of the Kemalist military establishment and the imprisonment of leading military men in the 'Ergenekon' case, allowed the AKP to pursue a foreign policy driven by neo-Ottoman and Islamist values. This policy aimed at the reintegration of Turkey as a key player in the Middle East. Despite its initial success; the reversal of the Arab Spring by 2013, the miscalculation of the AKP in the Syrian civil war and the faltering of the Kurdish peace process led Turkey to rethink its foreign policy and

# Identity and Turkish Foreign Policy in the AK Parti Era

Written by Alexandros Zachariades

return to a realist paradigm. However, since the Gezi Park protests Turkey has been set on a path towards authoritarianism. The ongoing purges and the reform of the constitution have to be understood within this framework. Henceforward, Turkish foreign policy will be primarily interested with regime security instead of national security. As for Islam and Neo-Ottomanism; they have taken the backseat. This does not mean that Turkey will not seek to play a greater role in the area, often defying the West, as evidenced by the confrontation with the USA over the Kurdish issue (Shelton, 2018). However, this anti-Western stance will have its limits because of strategic considerations. Turkey's military is almost exclusively Western built, hence, Turkey will have to maintain its relationship with the West to ensure its fighting capabilities.

## Bibliography

Arango, T. (2014). *Turkish Leader Disowns Trials That Helped Him Tame Military*. [online] Nytimes.com. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/27/world/europe/turkish-leader-disowns-trials-that-helped-him-tame-military.html> [Accessed 22 Jan. 2018].

Arango, T. and Schmitt, E. (2015). *Turkey Uneasy as U.S. Support of Syrian Kurds Grows*. [online] Nytimes.com. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/30/world/middleeast/turkey-uneasy-as-us-support-of-syrian-kurds-grows.html> [Accessed 22 Jan. 2018].

Başaran, E. (2017). *Frontline Turkey*. 1st ed. London: I.B. Tauris.

Çağaptay, S. (2017). *The new sultan*. 1st ed. London: I.B. Tauris.

Cizre, U. and Çinar, M. (2003). Turkey 2002: Kemalism, Islamism, and Politics in the Light of the February 28 Process. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 102(2-3), pp.309-332.

Cook, S. (2007). *Ruling, but not governing*. 1st ed. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Dalacoura, Katerina (2017) *A new phase in Turkish foreign policy: expediency and AKP survival*. Future notes, 4. Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Rome, Italy.

Davutoğlu, A. (2010). *Turkey's Zero-Problems Foreign Policy*. [online] Foreign Policy. Available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/05/20/turkeys-zero-problems-foreign-policy/> [Accessed 21 Jan. 2018].

Davutoğlu, A. (2013). *Στρατηγικό Βάθος: Η διεθνής θέση της Τουρκίας*. 1st ed. Athens: Poiotita Publications. [in greek]

Hakyemez, Serra Makbule (2017). Turkey's Failed Peace Process with the Kurds: A Different Explanation. *Middle East Brief*. (pp 1-9). Crown Center for Middle East Studies.

Kiper, C. (2013). *Sultan Erdogan: Turkey's Rebranding Into the New, Old Ottoman Empire*. [online] The Atlantic. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/04/sultan-erdogan-turkeys-rebranding-into-the-new-old-ottoman-empire/274724/> [Accessed 18 Jan. 2018].

Mufti, M. (2014). The AK Party's Islamic Realist Political Vision: Theory and Practice, *Politics and Governance*, vol. 2, no. 2 pp. 28-42.

Pope, H. (2010). *Pax Ottomana?*. [online] Foreign Affairs. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2010-10-21/pax-ottomana> [Accessed 21 Jan. 2018].

Robins, P. (2007). Turkish foreign policy since 2002: between a 'post-Islamist' government and a Kemalist state. *International Affairs*, 83(2), pp.289-304.

# Identity and Turkish Foreign Policy in the AK Parti Era

Written by Alexandros Zachariades

Shelton, T. (2018). *'Playing with fire': Turkey and Russia oppose US-led border security force in Syria*. [online] ABC News. Available at: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-01-16/us-led-syria-border-force-faces-regional-backlash/9331222> [Accessed 18 Jan. 2018].

Solovyov, D. (2015). *Russia hosts pro-Kurdish Turkish politician who condemns Ankara*. [online] Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-turkey/russia-hosts-pro-kurdish-turkish-politician-who-condemns-ankara-idUSKBN0U60P220151223> [Accessed 22 Jan. 2018].

Somun, H. (2011). Turkish Foreign Policy in the Balkans and "Neo-Ottomanism": A Personal Account. *Insight Turkey*, 13(3).

Stein, A. (2013). *Turkish Double Speak: Realism Trumps Idealism in The AKP Era*. [online] Council on Foreign Relations. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/blog/turkish-double-speak-realism-trumps-idealism-akp-era> [Accessed 22 Jan. 2018].

Walker, Joshua W. (2011) *Turkey's global strategy: introduction: the sources of Turkish grand strategy – 'strategic depth' and 'zero-problems' in context*. IDEAS reports – special reports, Kitchen, Nicholas (ed.) SR007. LSE IDEAS, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK.

Yeldan, E. (2002). *BEHIND THE 2000/2001 TURKISH CRISIS: Stability, Credibility, and Governance, for Whom?*. [online] Yeldane.bilkent.edu.tr. Available at: [http://yeldane.bilkent.edu.tr/Chennai\\_Yeldan2002.pdf](http://yeldane.bilkent.edu.tr/Chennai_Yeldan2002.pdf) [Accessed 22 Jan. 2018].

Zalewski, P. (2013). *How Turkey Went From 'Zero Problems' to Zero Friends*. [online] Foreign Policy. Available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/22/how-turkey-went-from-zero-problems-to-zero-friends/> [Accessed 21 Jan. 2018].

United Nations (2011). *Report of the Secretary-General's Panel of Inquiry on the 31 May 2010 Flotilla Incident*. New York: United Nations.

Written by: Alexandros Zachariades  
Written at: London School of Economics and Political Science  
Written for: Fawaz Gerges  
Date Written: January 2018