

# Turkish External Orientation and Political Culture

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## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article s'attache aux défis auxquels la République turque est confrontée, les plus graves depuis son existence post-ottomane. En termes de culture politique la Turquie semble naviguer entre l'Occident et l'Asie, entre un Etat laïc et l'Islam. Le système politique montre des signes d'oscillation entre l'Islam et l'Europe, ce qui soulève des doutes sur les grandes orientations stratégiques établies par Mustafa Kemal et ses successeurs. La politique étrangère «néo-ottomane» ne peut pas être séparée de la forte influence de l'islam sur le plan interne. La politique de "zéro problèmes" à l'égard de son environnement immédiat, signifie qu'il faut mettre l'accent sur les problèmes avec les pays voisins, comme la Syrie, l'Iran et la Grèce ; cette politique inspirée par Ahmet Davutoğlu, un ancien universitaire et actuel ministre des affaires Étrangères semblait au départ prometteuse et devait porter ses fruits. Ce n'est plus le cas aujourd'hui et la Turquie doit se défendre contre les prétentions selon lesquelles celle-ci est, dans son essence, une politique néo-ottomane de domination régionale.

## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the challenges the Turkish Republic is facing, the most severe to its post-Ottoman existence. In terms of political culture Turkey appears to be dithering between the West and Asia, between a secular state and Islam. The political system is showing signs of vacillating between Islam and Europe, raising doubts about the main strategic directions established by Mustafa Kemal and his successors. In terms of foreign policy a "Neo-Ottoman" foreign policy could not possibly be separated from the strong influence of Islam internally. A "zero problem" policy towards its immediate environment, which means de-emphasizing problems with surrounding countries, such as Syria, Iran, and Greece, inspired by Ahmet Davutoğlu, a former academic and the present foreign minister of the Turkish republic, initially seemed promising and bearing fruits. This is not any more the case and Turkey has to defend itself against the claims that in its essence, it's a Neo-Ottoman policy of regional domination.

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## Introduction

Eighty-seven years after its foundation, the Turkish Republic is facing perhaps the most severe challenge to its post-Ottoman existence. The Turkish elite has begun to feel insecure and uncertain about the country's orientation and the direction it should be following.

The basic structure and main institutions of the state edifice today are being questioned: These had risen from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire, the Greek-Turkish war of 1919-1922, the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 and, most of all, cultural, social and political revolution of Mustafa Kemal (so-called Atatürk), to which the neo-Turkish state became irrevocably attached<sup>1</sup>. Turkey now appears to be dithering between the West and Asia, between a secular state and Islam. The course of Kemal's state, which for decades assumed a decidedly statist garb, and, since 1947, an unequivocally pro-western strategy as regards its security and foreign policy, is no longer stable. The political system is showing signs of vacillating between Islam and Europe, raising doubts about the main strategic directions established by Mustafa Kemal and his successors.<sup>2</sup> Since the Islamist, Necmetin Erbakan became prime minister in June 1996, the country entered a period of crisis of uncertain duration and resolution. The results of the elections of November 2002 appear to have contributed to this crisis.

Uncertainty and insecurity with regard to the direction or external orientation of the state are not new to Turkey. This has been an ongoing theme in the country's foreign relations over the last half century. Due to the crisis in Cyprus, national interests dictated a tactical change or adjustment in Turkey's commitment to the West. Its leaders decided to make an opening to the Soviets, along with a turn towards the Arab and Islamic world in 1964.<sup>3</sup> Later, during the seventies, Bulent Ecevit attempted to change Turkey's security perceptions and to widen the arena for its foreign policy. Internal unrest, which drove the country close to disintegration and the indirect, albeit succinct, changing trends in Turkey's security policy, once again in the name of Kemal Atatürk, led to the coup d'Etat of September 12, 1980. This military intervention, as with the previous ones of 1960 and 1971, was legitimized by reference to Kemal Atatürk's principles, i.e. the preservation of the secular, western-oriented Turkish state<sup>4</sup>. Today, however, the quandaries and anxieties about the situation are profound, and one might say not unreasonably so. The crisis of the Turkish political system, i.e. of Kemalism, is deep, complex and possibly incurable. For many, Kemalism has ceased to exist long ago as a social reality and philosophy<sup>5</sup> and simply existed for the purpose of political and ideological legitimation by those in power. What we

have is an expression of divergence between East and West<sup>6</sup>, between Asiatic and European social behavior, between eastern and western development modes, while at the same time, there is a conflict between the European secular political and the Islamic theocratic cultures.

Until now the creation of the great founder has shown a unique ability to endure, to survive and to adapt to new conditions, despite the internal contradictions and conflicts, and despite external pressures and problems of the regional milieu.

To the founder of the Turkish Republic, Islam represented a backward concept, both as a form of social behavior and as an ideology.<sup>7</sup>

### **Western and European Aspirations and Affiliations**

Europe represented for Turkey, according to Kemal, a civic and cultural measure of strategic importance; a political partner and a paradigm of economic success, which "ought to have been a model and an example for Turkey."<sup>8</sup> In the framework of this concept, Kemal attempted to westernize Turkish society in the cultural, social and economic sectors (where many established norms were in fact overturned), as well as to establish new institutions. At the political level however, he ruled in a rather autocratic way. After his death, and especially after the Second World War, a Turkish style democracy was set up.<sup>9</sup> A democracy of this kind could never be identified with modern western-style democracies, since it was not founded on the principles of civil society, which are at the core of the democratic system. The Turkish Republic, moreover, has for over eighty years existed under the guardianship of the military, a kind of political hostage. The latter intervened when it decided that the unity of the state or its secular foundations were threatened, and justified its action in terms of a defense of Kemalism and of the survival of Kemal's legacy, as well as of the unity of the state.<sup>10</sup> The military thus have enjoyed to this day the political and institutional framework of legitimacy to intervene in a corrective or "remedial" role, nullifying even the constitution.

Turkish foreign policy during the first period of the Kemalist rule was oriented towards independence and neutrality. It was transformed, after the Second World War and in the environment and conditions of the Cold War, into an instrument of Western strategic and political security and formed a part of the comprehensive Nuclear Deterrence Strategy opposing the Soviet Empire. Turkey fully and freely acceded to the foreign policy of the West and the strategic perceptions of NATO from the first years after the Second

World War until the first major Greek-Turkish crisis over Cyprus, in 1964. Turkey's incorporation into the western fold was in harmony with Turkish interests, not only as these emerged after the Second World War, but also with Kemal's proscription for the political and cultural orientation of the Turkish political system.

As Kemal used to say, Turkey, as part of the West, feels safe in an area of stability, power and above all progress. This, as opposed to fundamentalist Islam, which breeds instability, uncertainty, and above all backwardness, elements which bring to the surface traumatic experiences of the Turkish elite and hark back to the Ottoman Empire and its late period of disintegration.<sup>11</sup>

It is clear that the perceptions of the Turkish elite on the full and institutional integration of their nation into the European Union has as its justification the need politically and institutionally to ensure the survival of the secular, western-oriented Turkish state. This means that the Turkish national, homogeneous state today depends for its survival on advancing its institutional integration into Europe.<sup>12</sup>

For the Turkish elite, Europe and the accession to the European Union is to be taken for granted, as are the expected economic and political advantages, quite apart from questions relating to the interpretation of the real will of Kemal Atatürk. Furthermore, the Turkish leadership class sustains the notion and hope that its European accession also stands to influence Turkey positively with regard to cultural values and identity. The political leadership does not appear to have examined in depth the possible negative effects, on a number of levels, not only the social and economic, but also the domestic political, of a complete, or nearly complete, accession to the European Union.

The collapse of the Soviet Union spelled the end of the strategic clash between East and West, at the same time, bringing about a historic, stunning change of scenery in the wider region, pregnant with a series of major strategic challenges for Turkey's foreign policy.<sup>13</sup>

Turkey felt that its role, along with its ability to influence events, extends from the Adriatic and the Black Sea to the Long Wall of China. This carried the sense of a historic challenge to Turkey, and its efforts to become a great regional power or even play a hegemonic role over a wider fluid and unstable area.<sup>14</sup>

This hegemonic role that Turkey would like to play, conflicts with the great and to a certain degree impenetrable, domestic problems the country is facing. The disputes or conflicts witnessed in the Kurdish problem present Europe with a problematic and politically troubled image of Turkey, and represent an obstacle for its political legitimization as a European country.<sup>15</sup> Islam on

the other hand, expressing another dimension of the crisis, also presents a potential of disorder, and creates the perception of a country in the grip of potential instability.

### **The AKP Period. A New Paradigm**

The revival of Neo Ottoman ideas as expressed by Ahmet Davutoğlu harks back to the ideological discussions and arguments that began at the end of that century, continued with the Young Turk revolution, until the emergence of Kemal, i.e. to the founding of the modern Turkish state.

For this reason the Turks use the term “contiguous external region,” (which is reminding of Boris Yeltsin’s remarks on the role of the Russian Confederation in its own contiguous external region) or even “strategic depth”, in other words, its zone of control or sovereignty or even strong cultural and historical ties over not only the regions of the former Soviet Union but all along the territories that once belonged to the Ottoman Empire.

A “Neo-Ottoman” foreign policy could not possibly be separated from the strong influence of Islam internally. This of course is not only limited to the increasing strength of the Justice and Development Party. The process of Islamization has gripped a wide segment of the population, including party activists and sympathizers. This trend became particularly enhanced among certain social strata during the 90s as well as into the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

It is obvious that a conflict is in progress between Secularists and Islamists that will have an impact on the fate of the very structure of the state, while at the same time, the old differences between Alevis and Sunnis also are being revived.<sup>16</sup> The tide for the moment seems to have changed in favour of Political Islam, but the balance between the regime established by the A.K.P. after 2002, can, at any time change back, especially since the meteoric rise of the “Islam-Democrats” was to a very large extent, based on the charismatic personality of its leader, today’s Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

It is corruption across the largest part of the political spectrum of Turkey, along with the debilitating economic crisis of 1999-2000 that led to the landslide victory of the Justice and Development Party, in November 2002 and the virtual extinction of the traditional political formations and figures, since then.

The eighty seven year old Turkish state has, on a number of occasions, faced the dilemma between democracy and transformation of the regime on one hand, and preservation of the Kemalist status quo on the other. Every time

there arose doubt about the Kemalist creed, the military, as guardians of the principles and the heritage of Kemal, intervened to readjust or to redress the situation, forcing at times, as in 1960 and 1980, major constitutional-civic changes.<sup>17</sup>

What is important is that Turkey has managed to convince the international community that it is in a position to play effectively multiple roles as a hegemonic factor of stability in the unstable, fluid and geopolitically critical zone of the Middle East, the Balkans, Central Asia and the Caucasus but lately also of the Islamic World at large.<sup>18</sup>

The conflict between the forces of the Kemalists and the Islamists climaxed, reaching dangerously tense levels, since the military and its leadership began to express concern over the fate of the secular state regime in various ways.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the Kemalist political parties, such as they are, and the Western-oriented elite are seriously alarmed about the possibility of a structural transformation of the state, or some form of military comeback. This would cause great problems to the country's foreign relations, leading it at least to a temporary isolation of relations with Europe and unpredictable internal developments.<sup>20</sup> The military, which during the last fifty years have intervened three times in the political affairs of the "Turkish Republic" as a guardian of the principles of Kemal Atatürk and of the structure of the Turkish state itself, found its patience taxed. While contemplating a repetition of its old "modernizing" interventions, the military not only orchestrated a post-modern electronic coup and set down groups or plans, like "Ergenekon" and "Balyoz", but also have led to radical changes in the political system and the country's international standing. It appears however that, for the present, the military has chosen not to depart from constitutional or parliamentary norms.

It prefers to seek political solutions to the quandaries resulting from Kemalism and the Islamic turn taken by much of authority in Turkey, through manipulation and close supervision of the political system.<sup>21</sup> Such was the case in the past, with the "solution" sought by the famous National Security Council Memorandum issued on February 28, 1997, which the Erbakan government was forced to accept in principle before being outlawed in January 1998.<sup>22</sup>

This, however was not the case since 2002, when gradually but steadily, based on the substantial percentages it managed to gain in the subsequent elections, both Parliamentary and Municipal, the Islamic "Justice and Development Party", under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, achieved to confront the Military, and the rest of the Kemalist bureaucracy successfully, by way of infiltrating the structures of the state, and by "leaking" to the public all the military misgivings.

Thus, the Turkish Republic has come to a point, where a seemingly unchallenged government composed by politicians, considered to be the outcasts by previous standards, feels strong enough to detain and imprison a large number of former and acting military officials, on charges of trying to subvert a legally elected government, and of constituting what is widely known to be the "Deep State" within the State. Benefiting also from a steady upward trend in the economy, the AKP government has succeeded to muffle almost any opposing political party in the Turkish Parliament, a fact augmented by the lack of serious opposition leadership.

In terms of Turkey's external orientation, much has happened since 2002. The AKP government, initially integrated into its program pro-European rhetoric, thus posing as a pro-European, political party, set to be the champion of human rights and promising the restoration of a state of righteousness and justice. Within a decade Turkey has found more supporters of its case within the E.U., some of them stemming from the newer member states. On the other hand, the shifting of political balance within large European states, such as France and Germany, deprived the Turkish European membership campaign of its most advent supporters. Proposals such as the "Mediterranean Union", after 2007, were dealt with anger by the Turkish political leadership, which saw in these proposals, some measure of political scheming against an outright legitimate Turkish claim.

Regarding Turkey's relations with the West in general, the Turkish denial to the American request of 2003 to open a "northern front" against Iraq, has set a new trend in the relationship between the two parts, heavily influenced, by the deterioration of the Turkish-Israeli relationship, from 2009 on. A "zero problem" policy towards its immediate environment, which means de-emphasizing problems with surrounding countries, such as Syria, Iran, and Greece, inspired by Ahmet Davutoğlu, a former academic and the present foreign minister of the Turkish republic, initially seemed promising and bearing fruits, projecting Turkey into a position of leadership within the region, but the recent changes in the Arab World, the West's confrontational stance against Iran, and of course the fact that Turkey has not moved back an inch in its claims towards Greece and Cyprus, have outlined the feebleness and weaknesses of such a policy, which has to defend itself against the claims that in its essence, it's a Neo-Ottoman policy of regional domination.

Turkey's crisis regarding its orientation and strategic direction is furthermore worsened and burdened by the refusal of the European states to recognize its "European status." In other words, they refuse to accept the philosophical-cultural and political-economic place of Turkey within the

European entity, or to confirm its course to join it.<sup>23</sup> The stance of the Europeans vis-à-vis Turkey, with regard to its course towards joining Europe, is clouded and confused, since many members consider Turkey, economically and geo-strategically an integral part of Europe, but still feel equally concerned about the accession of a Muslim state into the European Union.<sup>24</sup>

### NOTES

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2. *Financial Times*, May 2, 1995. Also, A. Kourkoulas, "Turkey Collapsing" (in Greek), *Kathimerini*, December 1, 1996.
3. F. Ahmad, *The Turkish Experiment in Democracy 1950-1975* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1977), 403-411, 413-416, 421-424.
4. W. Hale, *Turkish Politics and the Military* (London: Routledge, 1994), 215-241.
5. A. Paresoglou, "The Turkish Political System," in *Turkey Today* (Athens: Papazisis-ELIAMEP, 1995) 104-109.
6. A. Mango, *Turkey: The Challenge of a New Role* (The Washington Papers) (London: Praeger, 1994), 1-4.
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8. Stephanos Pesmatzoglou, *Europe-Turkey. Reflections and Deflections. The Strategy of Texts* (in Greek), (Athens: Themelio, 1993), 194-196.
9. Neocles Sarres, *Foreign Policy and Political Developments During the First Turkish Republic* (in Greek) (Athens: Gordios, 1992), 41.
10. Ahmad, *The Turkish Experiment in Democracy*, 407-411.
11. Pesmatzoglou, *op. cit.*, *Europe-Turkey*, 101-155.
12. However, the large majority of Greek and foreign analysts maintains that, "Turkey, is not willing to make even minor concessions either in the field of internal democratization, or in the field of Greek-Turkish differences". See G. Kapopoulos, "The European Realism of Ankara" (in Greek), *Kathimerini*, July 12, 1998.
13. Mango, *op. cit.*, *Turkey: The Challenge of a New Role*, 94-109.
14. *Ibid*, 111-121.
15. Pesmatzoglou, *op. cit.*, *Europe-Turkey*, 80-89.



16. Pesmatzoglou, *op. cit.*, *Europe-Turkey*, 215-230. For a more up to date and detailed analysis of the Alevi issue see: Theodoros Tsakiris, *The Third Controlling Factor. Identity, Deflections and Development Potential of the Alewite Phenomenon in Modern Turkey* (in Greek) (Athens: EKOME, 1998).
17. Mehmet Ali Birand, *At Your Orders, Commander* (in Greek) (Athens: Floras, 1992), 335-337.
18. M. E. Ahrari, "The dynamics of the new great game in Muslim Central Asia," in *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 13 no. 4 (1994), 525-539.
19. H. Pope, "Turkey's Military Flexing its Muscle, Voices Concerns on Islamists, Greece," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 25, 1997.
20. A letter by Suleyman Demirel, president of the Turkish Republic, to Prime Minister Necmetin Erbakan expresses, in a terse and succinct manner, concerns and fears over the emergence of "radical-retrograde tendencies" and warns him against allowing further erosion or change in fundamental Kemalist principles, on which is based the "Democratic, Popular and Social State of Justice," *Hurriyet*, February 28, 1997, 1. In the same context, the National Security Council of Turkey, in a special session held on February 28, 1997 and following long hours of deliberation with Erbakan, issued a twenty point memorandum, in which, among other admonitions, it was emphasized that "no deviation from the Turkish state's modern principles will be tolerated from now on." The famous Memorandum of the Security Council included a full paragraph on how important it is for Turkey to put an end to concepts, which "place in doubt its democratic status and tarnish its image abroad." See details of the twenty point Memorandum of the National Security Council, in *Hurriyet*, March 2, 1997, as well as in *The Wall Street Journal* (Europe), March 9, 1997.
21. *The Wall Street Journal* (Europe), March 9, 1997.
22. Sami Kohen, *Milliyet*, March 2, 1997.
23. *Kathimerini*, March 2, 1997, p. 6.
24. Celestine Bohlen, "Fragile Mosaic: In a Search for 'Turkishness', Turks Reveal Their Diversity," *The New York Times*, May 18, 1996.

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