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**NEO OTTOMANISM, HISTORICAL LEGACIES AND  
TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY**

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## Neo-Ottomanism, Historical Legacies and Turkish Foreign Policy

On 6 April 2009, US President Barrack Obama addressed the Turkish Parliament with carefully crafted words. ‘History’, he declared, ‘is often tragic, but unresolved, it can be a heavy weight. Each country must work through its past. And reckoning with the past can help us seize a better future’. Obama’s remarks—an exhortation to Turks to reflect on the Armenian question—were striking for several reasons. First, they underscored the growing salience of the Armenian *dossier* for Turkey’s international relations. In recent years, Turkey’s ties with the US, France, and the European Parliament (EP), among others, have been strained by the near-passage or adoption of resolutions defining the fate of the Ottoman Armenians as ‘genocide’—a position Ankara categorically rejects. At the same time, Obama’s move revealed the premium now placed by Washington on relations with Turkey. It fell well short of Armenian-American demands, and was made in the context of an historic visit to Turkey on his first tour abroad. The trip, moreover, was Obama’s first to a Muslim country, flagging the importance placed by the new administration on repairing ties damaged during the Bush era—with Turkey in particular, and the Muslim world more broadly. As such, the call to ‘confront the past’ was imbedded in a wider vision of Turkey as key partner in multiple arenas, from revitalizing NATO to building peace in the Middle East.

As it turns out, the notion that Turkey’s promise as a regional and global player is somehow related to historical legacies is not new. For some time now prominent intellectuals and politicians in the country have been revisiting the past and extracting from it lessons for the present and future. In so doing, many are challenging Kemalist historiography which sees the Ottoman past—including its turbulent twilight years—as ‘another country.’ This trend is evident with regard to the Armenian question, but also in the surge of popular interest in the final years of the Empire and early years of the Republic which has unleashed a passionate debate on the legacy of those decades. Nowhere is this more evident than in the so-called neo-Ottomanist foreign policy of the ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* AKP). What are the sources of this burgeoning propensity to revisit the historical record? What do such debates tell us about shifting alignments in Turkish society and politics? And what are the implications of all this for Turkish foreign policy?

This paper suggests that the will to revisit the past is rooted in domestic and international forces which have spurred diverse groups to question three pillars of the long dominant vision of the national project—its emphasis on a unitary identity, its understanding of secularism, and its ambivalence towards the West. This gives rise to *ad hoc* coalitions of revisionists and defenders of the status quo on an issue by issue basis.<sup>1</sup> When it comes to ‘confronting the past’ and the foreign policy implications of such an undertaking, there

<sup>1</sup> I have developed this argument at greater length in ‘Beyond Binaries: "Europe," Pluralism, and a Revisionist-Status Quo Key to Turkish Politics’, 2<sup>nd</sup> place, Sakıp Sabancı International Research Award 2009, [http://www.sabanciuniv.edu/eng/?arastirma/sakip\\_sabanci\\_uluslararasi\\_arastirma\\_odulu/2010\\_odulleri.html](http://www.sabanciuniv.edu/eng/?arastirma/sakip_sabanci_uluslararasi_arastirma_odulu/2010_odulleri.html)

appears to be some collaboration between liberals<sup>2</sup> and moderate Islamists. Liberals, it seems, problematize the official line on matters like the Armenian question as part of a bid to come to terms with the collapse of Ottoman multiculturalism; the AKP, meanwhile, is receptive to improving relations with Armenia as part of a multi-pronged strategy to assert Turkey's presence in former Ottoman territories. Their fragile coalition is arrayed against an equally counterintuitive coalition of defenders of the status quo from elements within the Islamist, Kemalist, and ultranationalist camps.

## Sources

Turks' growing will to revisit the historical record has both domestic and international sources. Domestically, it is associated with the challenge which diverse groups are increasingly mounting towards the long dominant narrative of national identity. That narrative emphasized the unitary, secular character of the Turkish nation-state, and displayed a staunch commitment to a Western anchor for Turkish identity and foreign policy, albeit for the paradoxical purpose of preserving Turkey's independence from the West. This vision emanated from the early Kemalist reading of Ottoman collapse which shaped the nation-building project back in the 1920s. According to that reading, the Empire had crumbled for at least three reasons. First, it was thought that the heterogeneous character of the Ottoman polity had made it vulnerable to ethnic and religious minority secessionism. To guard against future separatism, the early nation-builders encouraged citizens to adopt a Turkish identity regardless of their ethnic or linguistic background.<sup>3</sup> 'Turkishness' was embraced by many, including millions of Muslim refugees from former Ottoman territories in the Balkans and Caucasus. But others—like the instigators of a series of Kurdish rebellions which plague Turkey to the present—resented the Turkification of state and society.<sup>4</sup> The suppression of such rebellions contributed, moreover, to the prominent role afforded the military in Turkish politics.

A second, core element of the nation-building project was its rejection of the theocratic basis of Ottoman authority. In this respect, early Kemalists were strongly influenced by then prevalent European views of Islam as a dogmatic faith antithetical to progress.<sup>5</sup> The vista

<sup>2</sup> Many 'liberals' have leftist roots, but embraced political liberalism after facing censure in the 1971 and 1980 coups. See E. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1995), p.272. Some accordingly describe these cadres as 'liberal-leftist,' but as this is somewhat oxymoronic, I use the term 'liberal' rather loosely to indicate secularists who are committed to political liberalism.

<sup>3</sup> The Treaty of Lausanne (1923) granted non-Muslim minorities both universal citizenship rights and minority rights pertaining to matters like education in mother tongue. In practice, however, they were often excluded from meaningful participation in the body politic. For an historically informed comparison of policies towards Lausanne religious minorities in Turkey and Greece see, N. Fisher Onar & M. Özgüneş, 'How Deep a Transformation?: Europeanization of Greek and Turkish Minority Policies,' *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, forthcoming.

<sup>4</sup> Early Kurdish resistance, such as a rebellion led by Nakşibendi Sheik Said, was arguably motivated as much by discontent at the secularist revolution as at Turkification.

<sup>5</sup> S. Hanioglu, *The Young Turks in Opposition*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995).

they saw was one of secular European nation-states and non-European colonies. To ensure that Turkey ranked among the former, they enacted a cultural revolution to displace Islam from public life. The caliphate, clergy, and traditional seminaries were abolished, as were heterodox brotherhoods (*tarikats*)—the lifeline of Anatolian Islam. These were replaced by a Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) responsible to the prime ministry. As with Turkification, the cultural revolution was embraced by some, especially in urban areas. But it engendered resistance in others, and did not penetrate much of rural Anatolia whose inhabitants remained wedded to religiously-informed codes of conduct. This resulted in what Kalaycıoğlu describes as a ‘culture struggle’ (*Kulturkampf*) when, over the course of modernization, industrialization, and urbanization in the second half of the twentieth-century, the rural periphery penetrated the urban centre<sup>6</sup>. The Sunni Hanafi underpinnings of *Diyanet* prescriptions also excluded the perspectives of adherents of other sects and jurisprudential traditions such as the Alevis. As with the unitary pillar of national identity, the army has played an important role in suppressing perceived threats to secularism.

Finally, and quite ironically given endorsement of the European secular nation-state model, there was deep wariness of Western involvement in Turkish affairs. This was rooted in the memory of Great Power imposition of measures like Capitulations, and European sponsorship of Ottoman Christian separatism. Most traumatic of all was the Allied attempt through the Treaty of Sèvres to carve up and colonize the country following Ottoman defeat in World War I. This attempt was thwarted, at the price of great loss of life, by the resistance of nationalist cadres led by Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk). The experience engendered the eponymous ‘Sèvres syndrome’—collective fear that Western interest in Turkey is animated by a will to undermine the country’s territorial integrity. Thus, despite the Western anchor of the national project, there is a streak of ambivalence towards the West in Kemalism, and a concomitant premium on preserving national sovereignty in all fields at all costs. Again, this stance has served to enhance the prestige of the military. In time, however, persistent ambivalence towards the West has come to rankle with those, like many liberals, who advocate meaningful adoption of European-cum-universal norms upholding human rights and democratization. In a similar vein, liberals call for deeper integration with institutions like the EU.

As part and parcel of resurgent identity politics since the 1980s, diverse groups from Kurds and Islamists, to Alevis and liberals have become vocal challengers of these three dimensions of the nation-building project. Though moved by different agendas, all were empowered by the economic and political liberalization enacted by Turgut Özal, an eclectic figure who dominated civilian politics from 1983 till his death in 1993. Among Özal’s legacies was the enrichment of pious capital which, in turn, helped bankroll the electoral

<sup>6</sup> E. Kalaycıoğlu, *Turkish Dynamics: Bridge across Troubled Lands*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). See also Şerif Mardin’s seminal, ‘Center Periphery Relations: A Key to Turkish Politics?’ *Daedalus*, Vol.2, No.1, (1973).

success of the Islamist Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi* RP), and its more moderate successor, the AKP. As the main force in Turkish politics since 2002, the AKP has displayed revisionism towards all three dimensions of the foundational vision. This has led it to build bridges with groups likewise committed to challenging one, two, or all three of those dimensions. It has been relatively receptive, for instance, to Kurdish demands for cultural rights which challenge the unitary conception of national identity. And, in keeping with the demands of its core constituency, it has openly confronted the understanding of secularism upheld by the neo-Kemalist authors of the 1980 coup. For example, it has sought to overturn a ban on veiling in public institutions which was endorsed by the coup's mastermind, Kenan Evren. In its first term in power, the AKP also displayed unprecedented openness towards integration with the EU, opening the way for a coalition with pro-EU secular liberals. This alliance lost much of its traction when the accession process stagnated due to equivocation among actors in both the EU and Turkey.<sup>7</sup> Yet, the liberal/moderate Islamist alliance is not entirely moribund. It is discernible in the correspondence (if not convergence) of views regarding 'confronting the past', and the foreign policy implications of such an undertaking.

International factors have also been at play in the growing propensity to challenge conventional readings of the past. Certainly, the EU and the Council of Europe (CoE) have had an impact. The post-war European project was based, after all, on the logic that Europeans needed to confront and transcend their past antagonisms to ensure peace and prosperity on the continent and prevent repetition of the horrors of Nazism. This logic is imbedded in the normative foundations of the EU, and the human rights regime projected by the CoE, which emphasize pluralism, minority rights, and democracy. In 1987, Özal placed Turkey's domestic affairs under the scrutiny of these bodies by applying for membership to the then EC. Entities like the EP took the opportunity to lambast Turkey for its human rights performance and the quality of its democracy.<sup>8</sup> This initially engendered a certain defensiveness in Turkish political elites. However, the acceptance of Turkey as a full candidate for membership at the Helsinki Summit of 1999, and the decision to launch accession negotiations at the Luxembourg Summit of 2004, opened up considerable spaces for advocates of deeper integration with Europe. Further empowered by free flows of information due to new information technologies, pro-EU liberals and moderate Islamists redoubled their challenge to the unitary pillar of national identity, and the custodial role played by the military in defense of secularism.

<sup>7</sup> Indicatively, in February 2009, after newspapers owned by the (relatively) liberal, secularist Doğan Media Group (DMG) criticized AKP figures for their alleged role in a corruption scandal, Prime Minister Erdoğan exhorted Turks to keep Doğan newspapers out of their homes. DGM, which owns high circulation papers like *Hürriyet* and *Milliyet*, was subsequently hit with two mammoth fines for alleged tax evasion to the sum of 592 million and 2.5 billion dollars. DGM alleges that the fines are political. Figures from the European Commission have likewise expressed concern that the government's approach sheds doubt on its commitment to 'pluralism and freedom of the press'. <<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=record-tax-levy-unleashed-against-dogan-2009-09-08>>, retrieved 17 September 2009

<sup>8</sup> İhsan Dağı, 'Human Rights, Democratization and the European Community in Turkish Politics: The Özal Years, 1983-87,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.31, No.1, (2001).

Another international impetus to ‘confronting the past’ has been Armenian pressure. Many Turks first became cognizant of Armenian demands when the Lebanon-based terrorist organization ASALA (Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia) assassinated 46 Turkish diplomats and wounded up to 300 from between 1975 and 1986. ASALA’s goals were not limited to classification of the 1915 events as ‘genocide’—it also sought reparations and made claims on Turkish territory. All three demands remain close to the heart of many an Armenian nationalist, but in recent years the Armenian campaign for legislative genocide recognition has put reparations and territorial claims in the background. To date, some twenty countries have passed such resolutions, and the French lower house went so far as to seek criminalization of denial in 2006. The upshot has been that every time a resolution is about to pass, the Armenian question jumps to the top of Turkey’s agenda. Interestingly, while Turks display a growing plurality of views on the subject, the genocide resolution campaign may be one of the few forces which can unite Turkish intellectuals and politicians across the wide and fragmented political spectrum. For even those who have sought to problematize the official line seem to believe that the resolutions counterproductively inflame strong nationalist feelings. It is also thought that the campaign is instrumentalized by actors hostile to Turkey for other reasons.<sup>9</sup> In this respect, the Armenian campaign may spur some Turks to support political forces they might not otherwise endorse. For example, although Obama was viewed by many as an attractive presidential candidate, fears that he would use the ‘g-word’ once in office spurred many Turks—and Turkish-Americans—to favor Republican candidate, John McCain who was thought less receptive to Armenian demands. Nevertheless, both liberals and moderate Islamists in Turkey are venturing into terrain that was previously taboo by confronting—*inter alia*—the Armenian chapter of the Ottoman past.

### **The Armenian question**

The Armenian debate unfolds along two main axes—relations with the Diaspora, and relations with the Republic of Armenia. At the heart of the former, is controversy over whether the term ‘genocide’, coined after World War II, can be applied retroactively to the massacres and deportations of Ottoman Armenians in the final years of the Empire. The official Turkish position acknowledges at least 300,000 deaths but maintains there was no intent to eliminate the Armenian community, a criterion of ‘genocide’ as set forth in 1948 *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* (CPPCG). Instead, the emphasis is on the context in which the events unfolded: an anarchic Anatolia wracked by inter-communal warfare, Armenian nationalists’ collaboration with invading Russian forces, the depredations of irregular militias, and the impact of famine and disease. The charge of genocide is viewed through the prism of Sèvres as a Turkophobic and Islamophobic attempt to equate Turks with Nazis, and pave the way for reparations and territorial reconfiguration. Some western scholars have also displayed ambivalence towards the term, suggesting that the

<sup>9</sup> D.A Açar & İ. Ruma, ‘External Pressure and Turkish Discourse on "Recognition of the Armenian Genocide," *Southeastern European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol.7, No.3, (2007).

word ‘ethnic cleansing’ might be a more appropriate.<sup>10</sup> Until recently there was no mention of the events in Turkish school curriculae. But as the genocide recognition campaign has gained momentum, considerable resources have been devoted to affirming the official position in, for example, textbooks and Ministry of Education directives.<sup>11</sup>

The Armenian position is that up to 1,5 million Armenians were killed over the course of a pre-conceived campaign to annihilate the Ottoman Armenian population, i.e., atrocities were not limited to the war zone in the east, but committed systematically across Anatolia. The central authorities are held accountable, especially Talat Pasha and Enver Pasha of the ruling Young Turk triumvirate. The *Meds Yeghern* (‘Great Calamity’) constitutes the focal point of modern Armenian collective identity, especially among Armenians in Western countries many of whom are descendents of surviving deportees.<sup>12</sup> The aforementioned resolutions adopted by parliaments around the globe by and large endorse Armenian claims. Though the US Congress has yet to pass a resolution using the ‘g-word’—typically due to interventions on Turkey’s behalf from the White House—presidents from Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barrack Obama have employed ever stronger language to commemorate the events. Indeed, the Turkish Embassy in Washington is said to spend some 70 percent of its time persuading prominent Americans of the legitimacy of the Turkish position<sup>13</sup>. In a similar vein, though genocide recognition is not a formal criterion for Turkish accession to the EU, the question affects Turkey’s prospects as it will be raised by both those who sincerely believe recognition is a moral imperative, and those who oppose Turkish membership on other grounds.

Despite or perhaps because of the contentiousness of the question, in recent years dialogue has begun to take place between some Turks and Armenians.<sup>14</sup> Participants in such initiatives have often been at odds as to how to proceed. Nevertheless, projects have ranged from second-track diplomacy involving prominent former officials, such as the TARC (Turkish Armenian Reconciliation Commission), to civil society encounters organized by historians and businessmen, and think tanks. A turning point was the 2005 ‘Armenian conference’ organized by a consortium of liberal universities. The move was the latest in a series of liberal activists’ efforts to problematize official narratives on the fate of Ottoman religious minorities like Greeks and Armenians.<sup>15</sup> The conference incurred the wrath of then Minister

<sup>10</sup> Canefe identifies Bernard Lewis, Heath Lowry, Justin McCarthy, and Stanford Shaw among others. N. Canefe, ‘History and the Nation: The Legacy of Taner Akçam’s Work on Ottoman Armenians,’ *South European Society and Politics*, Vol.12, No.2, (2007).

<sup>11</sup> B. Cooper & T. Akçam, ‘Turks, Armenians, and the “G-word,”’ *World Policy Journal*, (2005).

<sup>12</sup> R. Panossian, ‘The Impact of the Genocide on Armenian National Identity,’ *Armenian Weekly*, Vol.73, No.16, 21 April 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Osman Bengür, ‘Turkey’s Image and Armenian Question,’ *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol.8, No.1, (2009).

<sup>14</sup> The term ‘dialogue’ itself has proven controversial. For some Armenians, for instance, it suggests that genocide recognition is not *sine qua non* for rapprochement.

<sup>15</sup> In 1912, Christians constituted 20 percent of the population, whereas by 1927 they represented only 2 percent. S. Çağaptay, ‘Race, Assimilation and Kemalism: Turkish Nationalism and the Minorities in the 1930s,’ *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.40, No.3, (2004), p.86.

of Justice, Cemil Çiçek, a migrant to the AKP from the right-wing nationalist wing of another political party. Yet, it was supported by other party leaders such as Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan and then Foreign Minister, Abdullah Gül who sent a letter of encouragement to the organizers. The conference thus affirmed the awkward coalition of liberals and moderate Islamists. The hostile responses it engendered likewise testified to the emergence of a counter-coalition of defenders of the official line from across religious, ultranationalist, and Kemalist lines.

This pattern of alignment was evident in the debate over Article 301, an item in the penal code which was frequently invoked with reference to liberal revisionism on the Armenian question. Article 301 criminalized ‘insults to Turkishness’ with jail sentences of up to three years. In the wake of the Armenian conference, a group of ultranationalist lawyers launched a campaign on Article 301 ground against figures who had engaged Armenian claims such as novelists Orhan Pamuk and Elif Şafak, and Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink. The lawyers’ campaign was, in effect, a response to Çiçek’s call for the censure of ‘traitors’ on the Armenian question.<sup>16</sup> Prominent figures such as Onur Öymen, Vice Chairman of the Kemalist Republic People’s Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* CHP) likewise defended Article 301, arguing that it protected the Turkish people from ‘slander’ on the part of liberal agents of Turkey-hating elements abroad.<sup>17</sup> By way of contrast, Erdoğan went out of his way to congratulate the likes of Şafak on her acquittal. Testifying, however, to the fragile and circumstantial nature of the liberal/moderate Islamist alliance on ‘confronting the past’, the AKP leadership deferred to Çiçek’s faction when it came to liberal (and EU) demands that Article 301 be struck, only revising the item in a limited fashion in 2008.<sup>18</sup>

The move came too late to help Dink, one of the few figures found guilty on Article 301 grounds. He was fatally shot by an ultranationalist youth on 19 January 2007. The event catapulted the debate on the Armenian question to a new level. On one hand, it sparked widespread soul-searching. Some one hundred thousand people attended the funeral bearing placards declaring ‘We are all Armenians’ and ‘We are all Hrant Dink’. This spurred at least as many to rally around the killer—photographs were even leaked of the assassin receiving a hero’s welcome from police officers and his act was later linked to elements within the state. A profusion of memorial events and workshops ensued, leading to the publication of

<sup>16</sup> Çiçek had called the conference a ‘dagger in the back of the Turkish nation.’ He went on to declare: ‘We must put an end to this cycle of irresponsibility, lack of seriousness, treason and insult, and propaganda conducted against this nation by those who carry this nation’s identity cards.’ Cited in Zühtü Arslan, ‘Government and National Security,’ Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), <[http://www.dcaf.ch/\\_docs/turkey\\_almanacEN2005/file07.pdf](http://www.dcaf.ch/_docs/turkey_almanacEN2005/file07.pdf)>, retrieved 12 July 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Press conference by Onur Öymen 19 October 2006 <<http://onuroymen.com/docs/Öymen-Basın%20Toplantısı-19%20Ekim%202006.doc>>, retrieved 26 July 2008.

<sup>18</sup> On 29 April 2008, the AKP-dominated parliament voted to change the article after years of equivocation. Jail sentences for insulting the ‘Turkish nation’ (as opposed to ‘Turkishness’) are now limited to two instead of three years, leniency is proscribed for first time offenders, and cases can only be opened with the permission of the Minister of Justice. Few cases have been filed since, though Turkish and international human rights activists have called the changes superficial.

numerous academic and journalistic pieces on aspects of the Armenian question. Then, in the fall of 2008, 200 prominent intellectuals and around 30,000 ordinary people signed an internet declaration apologizing, in the first person, for the ‘Great Calamity.’<sup>19</sup> The move testified yet again to the fragile nature of the liberal/moderate Islamist alliance. Erdoğan dismissed it by saying Turks had nothing for which to apologize, while Gül asserted in a neutral fashion that anyone could express their opinion in Turkey.<sup>20</sup> As might be expected, the campaign garnered intense criticism from the cross-cutting coalition of defenders of the official line. Nevertheless, less than three years after Dink’s murder, the public prosecutors office investigating complaints filed on Article 301 grounds concluded that there was no case for criminal prosecution as ‘opposing opinions are also protected under freedom of thought in democratic societies.’<sup>21</sup> Although that ruling was later overturned and cases are still pending, the apology campaign reveals the degree to which diverse groups are challenging core elements of the national project as it was conceived in the 1920s. For the genocide debate not only calls into question the primacy of ‘Turkish’ subjectivity in the national consciousness; it also requires that Turks’ read international pressure on the Armenian front as well-meaning if at times counterproductive, rather than as part of a plan to divide and dismember the country.

The second axis of the Armenian question is relations with Armenia proper. Tensions are animated, above all, by the unresolved status of Nagorno-Karabagh, an Armenian-occupied enclave that *de jure* remains part of Azerbaijan. Turkey, which had been one of the first states to recognize Armenian independence, closed the border in 1993 when Armenian forces advanced into Nagorno-Karabagh and surrounding areas, occupying one-fifth of Azerbaijani territory. This led to the displacement of one million people of whom some 600,000 were ethnic Azeris.<sup>22</sup> Due, however, to what Ambrosia calls the ‘permissive international environment’ available to Armenian irredentism in light of Yerevan’s connections in Washington (and Moscow), it is Azerbaijan which has born the brunt of a Congress-imposed US aid embargo.<sup>23</sup> Azerbaijan and Turkey retaliated with their own embargos, crippling the Armenian economy. Turkish solidarity with Azerbaijan is animated not only by linguistic and cultural affinities epitomized in the slogan ‘one nation, two countries’, but also by hard interests with regard to pipeline politics. Ankara and Yerevan are also at odds over the familiar trinity of demands for genocide recognition, reparations, and territory. That said, genocide politics are said to be less central to the identity of Armenians within the country than for members of the Diaspora. This is because, as eastern rather than western (Anatolian) Armenians, many citizens of Armenia do not have ancestors with direct experience of 1915.

<sup>19</sup> The text read: ‘My conscience does not accept the insensitivity showed to and the denial of the Great Catastrophe that the Ottoman Armenians were subjected to in 1915. I reject this injustice and for my share, I empathize with the feelings and pain of my Armenian brothers and sisters. I apologize to them.’

<sup>20</sup> It could be argued that at times Erdoğan and Gül act like a tag-team, with the former’s statements aimed at domestic audiences, while the latter caters to international opinion.

<sup>21</sup> R. Ellis, ‘Tackling the Turkish Taboo,’ *The Guardian*, 29 April 2009.

<sup>22</sup> BBC news analysis, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/world/analysis/72268.stm>>, retrieved 27 August 2009.

<sup>23</sup> T. Ambrosia, *Irridentism: Ethnic Conflict and International Politics*, (Westport: Praeger, 2001).

They also continue to live in their traditional homeland, to which considerable material benefits would accrue if the border were to be re-opened.<sup>24</sup>

Since the mid-2000s, officials in both countries have made tentative efforts at reconciliation. Erdoğan, for one, in a 2005 overture to both the Diaspora and Yerevan, proposed a joint committee of historians to examine the Ottoman archives. Though viewed by some Armenians as a form of ‘denialism,’ the move was reciprocated by then Armenian president Robert Kocharian—a figure hardly known for his fondness of Turks or Turkey. Kocharian likewise proposed to create an intergovernmental committee to revisit the historical record, and to explore ways to restore relations. This was followed by a series of low profile talks which eventually went public, culminating in the ‘football diplomacy’ of autumn 2008. On 6 September of that year, Turkish President Abdullah Gül accepted an invitation from his Armenian counterpart, Serzh Sarkisyan to watch a World Cup qualifying match between the two nations’ teams. Building on momentum from the visit, negotiators began to hint of a roadmap for rapprochement. Just two days before 24 April 2009, the date on which Armenians—and US presidents—commemorate the *Medz Yeghern*, Turkish and Armenian officials announced that a ‘comprehensive framework’ had been initialed without revealing its content. Some interpreted this to mean that Turkey had renounced its precondition that the conflict in Nagorno-Karabagh be resolved before the border could be opened. The move angered Azeri leader Ilham Aliyev, who declined to attend a high profile conference in Istanbul. Azerbaijan also hiked up natural gas prices to Turkey, and signaled that it was contemplating realigning its foreign and energy policy towards Moscow. Erdoğan was soon on a plane to Baku to placate Azeri sentiment. Meanwhile, the rapprochement process with Armenia generated considerable backlash among nationalist cadres in Turkey. Having overcome the hurdle of 24 April, and in the face of these multiple sources of resistance, many believed AKP officials had dropped the ball on further pursuit of rapprochement with Yerevan.

Then, on August 31, it was announced that a Protocol had been initialed between Turkey and Armenia. Striking aspects of the document were its affirmation of the territorial status quo, and stipulation for the creation of a commission of Armenian, Turkish and international experts to examine the historical record. If the document is ratified by both countries’ parliaments following a period allotted for consultations with domestic political actors, then the border will be re-opened and diplomatic relations re-established. In the words of Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, if ‘everything goes as planned, if mutual steps are taken, the borders could be opened around New Year.’<sup>25</sup> The announcement was lauded by many a Turkish liberal, as well as by the EU and OSCE for contributing to the stability of the region. Yet it also generated criticism from all sides. Armenian detractors, especially in the Diaspora,

<sup>24</sup> Panossian.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Turkey Hopes to Open Armenian Border by Year-End,’ Reuters, 1 September 2009 <http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSTRE5802WR20090901>.

expressed concern that the establishment of a History Commission would undermine the genocide recognition campaign by suggesting there is substance to Turkish arguments. In this respect, it was felt that the Armenian government had given away something for nothing. Interestingly, the sentiment was shared by Turkish critics of the Protocol who argued it netted Turkey only modest gains, while costing dearly in terms of relations with longstanding ally and energy partner Azerbaijan. The specter of history loomed particularly large for right-wing nationalists who accused the government of caving into ‘neo-imperialist’ American and European pressure on the Armenian question in a reenactment of Ottoman capitulations a century earlier. Interestingly, the reaction from Baku was relatively muted with the foreign ministry declaring simply that re-opening the border prior to a solution in Nagorno-Karabagh went against Azerbaijani national interest. Baku’s restraint may have been related to the assurance offered by Erdoğan on 1 September that the (AKP-controlled) Turkish parliament would not ratify the Protocol if there were no progress on Nagorno-Karabagh. In light of parallel OSCE-mediated negotiations in the conflict-ridden enclave, one can expect that the AKP will be pushing for a breakthrough on Nagorno-Karabagh through further intensive, backdoor diplomacy in the months ahead.

### **Neo-Ottomanism**

Multi-dimensional negotiations along these lines have in fact become a trademark of AKP statecraft in recent years. For if liberal revisionism on the Armenian question is part of a broader bid to come to terms with the collapse of Ottoman multiculturalism, AKP policy towards Armenia is but one face of the party’s neo-Ottomanist foreign policy which emphasizes ‘zero-problems’ with all of Turkey’s neighbors. As with the genocide debate, there appears to be some convergence between liberal and moderate Islamist views on neo-Ottomanism, though the doctrine also appeals to actors like nationalist Islamists and, to some extent, right-wing nationalists. Nevertheless, neo-Ottomanism was first articulated in the early 1990s by liberal, secular intellectuals in collaboration with Özal.<sup>26</sup> In this early incarnation, neo-Ottomanism touted the multi-ethnic composition of Ottoman society and the relative tolerance of Ottoman Islam as sources of pluralism and openness for domestic social and political life. In so doing, it challenged the unitary plank of national identity, and the strict secularism of the early nation-builders. Internationally, it emphasized linguistic, cultural, and religious ties with newly independent states in Caucasus and Central Asia, as well as with former Arab dominions. It therefore also challenged the narrow, if often ambivalent, western orientation of foreign policy during the early Republican and Cold War periods. But Neo-Ottomanism was not enthusiastically received by its intended audience. Turkey’s resources at the time were simply not commiserate with its rhetoric of regional leadership. Moreover, there was resentment of the somewhat paternalistic tone of neo-Ottomanist overtures. This was especially the case in the Arab world where the Ottoman legacy—and the Kemalist cultural revolution—is regarded with ambivalence. Nevertheless,

<sup>26</sup> The doctrine was first articulated by prominent liberal, secularist journalist Cengiz Çandar.

the doctrine marked a paradigm shift from earlier foreign policy which, by and large, eschewed involvement to the east and south.

Over the course of the 1990s, Turkey began to pursue a more assertive role in these directions. Interestingly, agents of such activism could be moved by very different motives. The overtly Islamist RP government, for example, saw Turkey as a ‘big brother’ to the Arab-Muslim world, and sought to turn the country away from the West through high profile visits to Tehran and Tripoli. By way of contrast pro-Kemalist governments in cooperation with the military, sought to bolster Turkey’s diluted Western credentials in the post-Cold War era by cooperating with Washington and Israel in the Middle East. Notably, all of these approaches emphasized Turkey’s geostrategic importance—a theme that has run through foreign policy rationales since at least the 1940s.<sup>27</sup> With the rise to power of the AKP, proactive regional policy and geostrategic thinking were fused under the rubric of a reinvigorated neo-Ottomanism.

Davutoğlu, who served as Erdoğan’s foreign policy advisor from 2002-2009 and was appointed foreign minister on 1 May 2009, is widely acknowledged to be the author of AKP neo-Ottomanism. Since his days as a professor of international relations, Davutoğlu has argued that all too often Turkish political elites are blind to the neo-Ottoman potential of Turkish foreign policy. This is because they are beholden to an Orientalist epistemology which dooms Muslim Turkey to second-class status.<sup>28</sup> Combining pan-Islamist, post-colonial, and pragmatic geostrategic rationales, he argued that a Turkey unfettered by Eurocentrism could play a more constructive role in multiple regions. This, in turn, would enhance Turkey’s relations with the US, Brussels, and European capitals, in that Turkey could serve as a ‘bridge’ between the West and those regions with which it is organically contiguous: the Balkans, Caucasus, and Middle East.<sup>29</sup> With its emphasis on a multi-layered identity the underpinnings of which are furnished by Muslim subjectivity, in tandem with its call for greater activism in the Middle East, Davutoğlu’s neo-Ottomanism challenged all three dimensions of the old national project and approach to foreign policy. It accordingly piqued strong resistance among many Kemalists,<sup>30</sup> but has captured the imagination of other

<sup>27</sup> P. Bilgin, ‘Only Strong States Can Survive in Turkey’s Geography’: The Uses of “Geopolitical Truths” in Turkey,’ *Political Geography*, Vol.26, No.7, (2007).

<sup>28</sup> Former students describe Davutoğlu as taking a de-centered, multi-disciplinary approach to teaching which incorporated historical, philosophical, and artistic insights. He assigned, for example, long neglected literary tomes to expose students to and contextualize alternative ways of thinking about Turkey’s role in the world. Interview with Selçen Öner, 15 July 2009.

<sup>29</sup> A. Davutoğlu, ‘Medineyetler Arası Etkileşim ve Osmanlı Sentezi,’ in *Osmanlı Medeniyeti: Siyaset, İktisat, Sanat*, Ç. Çakır (Ed.), (Klasik: İstanbul, 2005).

<sup>30</sup> A persistent civilizational subtext to Davutoğlu’s reasoning is a prime source of discomfort for some secularists. This logic was perhaps most salient in his 1998 article entitled ‘The Clash of Interests: An Explanation of the World (Dis)Order.’ The piece is built around a sophisticated rebuttal of Francis Fukuyama’s ‘End of History’ and Samuel Huntington’s ‘Clash of Civilizations’ theses as Eurocentric fallacies. Yet, it echoes elements of Huntingtonian essentialism by suggesting that Turkey can serve as a bridge between the ‘West’ and ‘Islam.’ This, in effect, puts a positive spin on what is ultimately a reductivist approach to ‘inter-civilizational’

commentators across the political spectrum. These include some liberals who give credence to the claim that AKP neo-Ottomanism is added-value rather than alternative to Turkey's European and Western vocation(s).

The main thrust of Davutoğlu's thought is set forth in *Strategic Depth* (2001) which has gone into 30 editions and sold over 300,000 copies.<sup>31</sup> Here, Davutoğlu argues that Turkey—at the interstices of numerous 'chokepoints'<sup>32</sup> of global geopolitics—can be more than the 'wing' player it was during the Cold War. It should strive instead to become a 'pivotal' or 'central' state with regional, even global reach. The key is to draw upon what Davutoğlu terms Turkey's historical and geographical depth. Historical depth is defined as being at the 'epicenter' of historic events, a characteristic shared by former imperial states such as Britain, France, Russia, and China. Turkey's historical depth is also constituted by its geographic depth, i.e., its comparative advantage compared to 'any old Mediterranean country' in that it is at once a 'Middle Eastern and a Caucasian country...[and] as much a European country as an Asian one.'<sup>33</sup> Turkey can maximize its strategic depth, Davutoğlu argues, by upholding five principles. One of these is the prerogative of 'balancing freedom and security'. It is through this prism that the AKP has sought to grapple with the domestic and international aspects of the Kurdish question—distinguishing between PKK terrorism, and Kurdish demands for cultural and linguistic rights which it tolerates by emphasizing the 'overarching' Muslim character of both Kurdish and Turkish identity. A second precept aspires to 'zero-problems with neighbors', an approach which further relies upon the principles of 'multi-dimensional and multi-track policies', 'firm flexibility,' and, 'rhythmic diplomacy' understood as sustained multilateral diplomacy and proactive involvement in international organizations. Davutoğlu's neo-Ottomanism thus goes beyond traditional bilateralism to advocate a foreign policy predicated on 'mutually reinforcing and interlocking processes.'<sup>34</sup> It also emphasizes 'geo-economics' understood as developing trade networks in regions heretofore untapped by Turkey. It thus emphasizes diplomatic, economic, and cultural channels to enhance the prestige, prosperity, and stability of Turkey, as well as its neighbors and region(s). Neo-Ottomanism is accordingly credited by some with having, at

relations. The same logic infuses the post-9/11 initiative of the Spanish and AKP-led Turkish governments to launch an 'Alliance of Civilizations.'

<sup>31</sup> 'Bakan Oldu, Kitapları Çok Satanlar Listesine Girdi,' *Zaman*, 12 May 2009.

<sup>32</sup> A geopolitical term referring to narrow points through which traffic must pass.

<sup>33</sup> Cited in A. Murinson, 'The Strategic Depth of Turkish Foreign Policy,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.42, No.6, 2006.

<sup>34</sup> Z. Öniş & S. Yılmaz, 'Between Europeanization and Euro-Asianism: Foreign Policy Activism in Turkey during the AKP Era,' *Turkish Studies*, Vol.10, No.1, (2009), p.9.

least partially, transformed Turkey from a Hobbesian into a Kantian foreign policy actor,<sup>35</sup> a wielder of ‘soft’ as opposed to coercive power.<sup>36</sup>

AKP overtures to Armenia therefore must be read as part of a broader strategic culture aimed at resolving outstanding issues with former nemeses in order to enhance both Turkish and regional prospects. The approach was also evident in AKP support for the Annan plan on Cyprus, and its maintenance of cordial relations with Greece which had been launched by a previous government. Neo-Ottomanism, in tandem with energy politics, has likewise driven economic and political cooperation with Georgia. This is evident in the whopping 230% increase in bilateral trade volumes in the past five years;<sup>37</sup> as well as Turkey’s use of Batumi airport as a domestic portal.<sup>38</sup> Neo-Ottomanism further dictates deepening cooperation with Russia. This is a difficult balancing act given both states’ aspirations as regional powers. Turkey, for instance, has close ties with Georgia and Azerbaijan, compared with Russia’s links to Armenia. Significantly, on 6 August 2009, Russian leader Vladimir Putin and Erdoğan signed a series of energy-related agreements including provisions for alternative pipeline projects and Russian-Turkish cooperation in the construction of Turkey’s first nuclear reactor. The move was a striking act of ‘balancing’ in that it came shortly after the sealing of a deal for the Nabuco pipeline which bypasses Russia but bolsters Turkey’s bid to become a regional energy hub.<sup>39</sup>

The bulk of AKP energy, however, appears to be devoted to normalizing relations with Iran and the Arab world through a flurry of bi- and multilateral economic, diplomatic, and cultural exchanges. This disturbs many westernist secularists who suspect a hidden agenda to Islamize state and society. This includes some liberals who lament the loss of momentum behind the EU accession process. Suspicion of the AKP agenda is particularly pronounced when the party reaches out to the likes of Hamas, or Sudan’s Omar al-Bashir, a figure who the International Criminal Court (ICC) charges with genocide in Darfur. These initiatives likewise perturb Turkey’s partners in Washington and, above all, Tel Aviv, with whom relations have become increasingly tense, not least due to Erdoğan’s January 2008 outburst at Davos towards Simon Peres over Israeli conduct in Gaza. For Soner Çağaptay, senior

<sup>35</sup> F. Türkmen, ‘Turkish-American Relations: A Challenging Transition,’ *Turkish Studies*, Vol.10, No.1, 2009. See also Ö. Taşpınar, ‘Turkey’s Middle East Policies: Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism,’ <[www.CarnegieEndowment.org/pubs.](http://www.CarnegieEndowment.org/pubs.)>, retrieved 14 August 2009.

<sup>36</sup> That said, figures within the AKP camp have intermittently called for a neo-Ottomanism with harder, neo-imperial overtones. Çiçek, for example, has asserted that Turkey, like former imperial powers Britain and France, should create Commonwealth with its former colonies. The suggestion was roundly ignored by Davutoğlu and the AKP leadership.

<sup>37</sup> E. Fotiou, ‘Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform’: What is at Stake for Regional Cooperation?’ CBSS Policy Brief, No.16, June 2009.

<sup>38</sup> Öniş & Yılmaz, p.9.

<sup>39</sup> Some analysts feel Turkish policy-makers gave too much away for too little. See, for example, S. Kardas, ‘Turkish-Russian Grand Bargain in Energy Cooperation’, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol.6, No.152, Jamestown Foundation <[http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=35388](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=35388)>, retrieved 29 August 2009.

research fellow at a pro-Israeli US think tank, such policies, ‘Rather than being neo-Ottoman in a "secular" sense’, are asymmetrically focused on Arab Islamists in particular and the Muslim Middle East more generally...The AKP views the world as composed of religious blocks, and this disposition colors its views of the Middle East and the world.’ Citing a series of ‘anti-Western, anti-U.S., and anti-Israeli initiatives,’ Çağaptay concludes that ‘instead of looking after the interests of the Euro-Atlantic community, Turkey is looking after the interests of the "Muslim world.’<sup>40</sup>

The AKP counters charges of anti-Westernism and militancy by asserting that it engages actors like Hamas for the express purpose of encouraging their moderation. It also points out that until the EU offers Turkey credible prospects of accession—something unlikely so long as anti-Turkish Christian Democrats are in power in France, Germany, and elsewhere—then political will is better spent on enhancing Turkey’s credentials as a regional security provider. And the only way to do this, it is argued, is to transform the Middle East, lest developments in the turbulent region continue to undermine Turkey’s stability.<sup>41</sup> Thus, whilst Turkey may have paid for its rapprochement with Iran and Syria in its (already estranged) relations with the Bush administration, it gained in pledges from Tehran and Damascus to no longer deploy the Kurdish card in interactions with Turkey. Improved ties have also paid off in economic terms. In the case of Iran, for example, trade jumped from \$1.2 billion in 2002 to \$6.7 billion in 2006.<sup>42</sup> Much of this was due to gas and pipeline deals which further enhance—not to mention complicate—Turkey’s energy hub aspirations. Similarly, prolific contacts with the Arab world more broadly have resulted—*inter alia*—in the appointment of a Turk to the secretary generalship of the Organization of Islamic States (OIS), and an influx of Arab investment in Turkey. In light of the balance sheet, and in keeping with the fragile and *ad hoc*, liberal/moderate Islamist alliance,<sup>43</sup> quite a few liberal commentators appear to favor the AKP’s neo-Ottomanism. That said, they also continuously caution that the EU anchor and westernized, secular, democratic features of Turkish social and political life are crucial elements of the AKP’s power of attraction in the Middle East and beyond.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup> S. Çağaptay, ‘AKP’s Foreign Policy: The Misnomer of "Neo-Ottomanism,’ opinion/editorial, www.<<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC06.php?CID=1270>>. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy helped forge the Turkish-Israeli alliance in 1990s.

<sup>41</sup> T. Oğuzlu, ‘Middle Easternization of Turkey’s Foreign Policy: Does Turkey Disassociate from the West?’, *Turkish Studies*, Vol.9, No.1, (2008).

<sup>42</sup> Taşpınar, p.24.

<sup>43</sup> The alliance completely collapses, for example, when it comes to issues which are not sanctioned by the Islamic canon such as gay rights or post-sexual revolution sexuality.

<sup>44</sup> Indicatively, Taşpınar calls for a balance between neo-Ottomanism and elements of the Kemalist paradigm of non-intervention with regard to, say, involvement in Sunni/Shia sectarian politics in Iraq, (Ibid.) Öniş and Yılmaz, cited above, likewise emphasize that successful ‘soft EuroAsianism’ is as contingent on the European as the Asian side of the equation.

## Conclusion

This paper explored the sources of and patterns associated with a growing propensity on the part of some Turks to ‘confront the past.’ It suggested that in so doing, they are seeking to rewrite national identity, and by extension, foreign policy. Broadly, they challenge three aspects of the national project as it was conceived in the 1920s—the unitary pillar of national identity, the strict interpretation of secularism, and the paradoxically Western yet anti-Western anchor of identity and policy. When challengers’ agendas converge they may form *ad hoc* coalitions, as appears to be the case with liberal and moderate Islamists’ readings of the Armenian question and neo-Ottomanism. That said, the former seem more concerned with the genocide debate, while the latter see rapprochement with Armenia as part and parcel of a broader strategy of consolidating Turkey’s position as a regional power.

With regard to Turkey’s relations with the West, however, neo-Ottomanism appears to be in sync with the priorities and style of the Obama administration. In fact, it could be argued that Obama embodies in his own person the dynamism which can infuse a society that critically reflects upon historical legacies. By way of contrast, many actors within the EU appear to be stuck in a ‘logic of identity’ rather than the ‘logic of interests’ or ‘logic of cosmopolitan rights’<sup>45</sup> or, indeed, the ‘logic of reconciliation’ upon which the EU project was originally founded. Rather, ‘the more Europeans have begun to see Islam as an existential threat in the post-September 11 era, the more they tend to identify Turkey as one of the ‘others’ of the emerging European identity.’<sup>46</sup> The question is whether European actors will be able to capitalize on the fruits of Turkey’s proactive foreign policy and likely collaboration with the United States in pursuing peace in the region. The answer may depend on whether Europeans, too, prove capable of confronting the historical baggage that too often appears to color their perceptions of Turkey.

<sup>45</sup> Oğuzlu, p.13.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.