



Turkey

Imperial Legacies and Neo-Ottomanism

by Gizem Gorkmaz

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Introduction

Neo-Ottomanism represents a new cultural and political trend in Turkish domestic and foreign politics associated with a deliberate revival of the Ottoman past. In domestic politics, neo-Ottomanism aims to revive the Ottoman culture and traditions, and inherits the greater political confidence and inclusive framework of the Ottoman Empire, shown by the Justice and Development Party's (AKP)¹ multi-cultural, religious, and ethnic policies toward Turkey's minority Kurds. In foreign politics, neo-Ottomanism refers to 'zero problems with neighbors' policy, which aims to improve relations with the country's neighbors.

Neo-Ottomanism first came into existence under the Ozal government in the 1980s as an ideological alternative to the founding Kemalist ideology, which refers to the principles of Turkey's founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Kemalism sought to create a homogenous, modern Turkish nation out of disparate ethnic groups to reinforce territorial integrity, and therefore pursued assimilationist



Mustafa Kemal Atatürk: Founder of Turkey and Kemalist ideology, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mustafa_Kemal_Atat%C3%BCrk.jpg, Public Domain.

policies. Above all, Kemalism followed an exclusively Western path by turning its back on the Islamic world. As part of Atatürk's reforms in 1925, all Koranic schools, religious orders, and religious educational institutions were closed; Arabic script was replaced by the Latin script; active and passive female suffrage was introduced, along with compulsory education; regulations promoting Western-style dress were passed and display of religious symbols in enclosed public places were banned.²

To counter Kemalism, neo-Ottomanism was first utilized sporadically by the Ozal administration under the Motherland Party (ANAP) in the 1980s to broaden the country's influence in the Caucasus and the Balkans, as well as to solve the Kurdish problem through administrative decentralization and stronger regional autonomy. However, the AKP era has proved itself as a more significant advocate of the concept by incorporating the 'zero problems with neighbors' policy. The AKP used Islamic populism to appeal to the Anatolian bourgeoisie that has been marginalized under a secular Kemalist political establishment.³

This research examines whether neo-Ottomanism is the new Turkish identity under the AKP government by looking at both its domestic and foreign policy implications. The research further questions the effectiveness of the concept in domestic politics by investigating how it resonates with the Turkish opposition political parties.

Factors and Strategies Behind neo-Ottoman Policies

The AKP government uses Islamic populism to promote neo-Ottoman policies both domestically and internationally such as the appointment of religious figures to important posts, the new alcohol policy, the international mosque building program, Islamic practices in education, and the increasing gender gap. The AKP makes specific references to Islam, departing from nearly a century of a Kemalist emphasis on secular governance and reintroducing a new Ottoman Islamic vision. An example to this trend is the appointment of religious figures to influential posts.⁴ The AKP dominated parliament elected Zahid Akman, a conservative director, to the powerful Supreme Board of Radio and Television Commission in 2005. Under Akman's leadership, the commission presided over state TV and radio programs that promote conservative values and seek to promulgate knowledge of Islam and Muslim heritage throughout Turkish society.⁵ Furthermore, the AKP's alcohol policy attempted to reduce or limit access to alcohol by increasing taxes and reducing licenses issued to bars and restaurants. In 2002, before the AKP came to power, the price

of a 70 cc bottle of raki was \$5.5 according to exchange rates at the time. Today, the price is about \$26.47. According to one of Turkey's top raki manufacturers, taxes on alcohol range between 65 percent to 80 percent.⁶ Similar policies, in the form of laws prohibiting smoking, and alcohol and coffee consumption, existed in the Ottoman Empire under the rule of Murad IV (1612-1640).⁷ According to the Turkish Statistical Institute data, alcohol consumption dropped 10 percent in 2013 compared to a steady increase from 2009 to 2012.⁸

Given the demonstrated Islamist-leanings of the AKP politicians, the government has placed significant emphasis on an international mosque building program. Turkey is currently building 18 large Islamic religious centers around the world including in the United States. The projects include mosques in Albania, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Philippines, the United Kingdom, the Palestinian Territories and Somalia.⁹ President Recep Tayyip Erdogan opened one of the largest Turkish mosques built outside Turkey in Maryland during his US visit in April 2016. Diyanet, Turkey's state-run Presidency of Religious Affairs, along with Turkish-American non-profit organizations, funded the mosque, which is also referred to as "Maryland Kulliye," a name used for Islamic compounds in Ottoman times.¹⁰

The AKP's neo-Ottoman vision can also be seen in the new educational curriculum that came with the government's education reforms. The new education system and content emphasize the country's Ottoman past and conservative Islamic values. When the AKP was first elected in 2002, 65,000 students studied in imam-hatip schools where imams are trained under the curriculum promoting Pan-Islamism as a core element of the Turkish identity. That number grew to 685,000 in 2013 and 932,000 in 2015. In May 2015, Bilal Erdogan, the President's son, who is in charge of the Turgev foundation that is directing the expansion of imam-hatip schools, announced that the number of students studying in these schools had reached one million.¹¹ Furthermore, under the AKP leadership, female students are encouraged to defy the longstanding Kemalist legal ban against wearing the Islamic headscarf in state schools.¹² Additionally, Erdogan vowed to make Ottoman-era Turkish a compulsory course in Turkish high schools. Addressing the Fifth Religion Council, the president announced that "Ottoman will be taught and learned in this country whether they like it or not."¹³

Erdogan's conservative government has also curtailed women's civil liberties in a manner reminiscent of Ottoman rulers, in contrast with Kemalist reforms that improved the status of women. Speaking at the 2014 International Women and Justice Summit, the President declared

that women are not equal to men and cannot be treated equally as it is against the laws of nature.¹⁴ Erdogan has also drawn the ire of feminist groups for declaring that every woman in Turkey should have at least three children, and asking to limit abortion rights, birth control pills, and caesarean sections because they are “unnatural.”¹⁵ Furthermore, Turkish First Lady Emine Erdogan has praised the Ottoman harem, saying that it was a school for female members of the Ottoman dynasty, and an educational establishment preparing women for adult life.¹⁶

The AKP strives to shape a new Turkish identity through television shows and movies in order to portray a positive image for the Ottoman sultans, and through the crackdown on opposition journalists in order to curb any resistance to the neo-Ottoman policies.

The AKP’s use of neo-Ottoman policies to appeal to conservative Islamic circles coincides with its curb on freedom of expression and rule of law in the country.

The AKP uses TV shows and movies to promote neo-Ottoman principles. The country has invested heavily in its visual arts industry, and had significant payoffs such as Turkish TV series “Magnificent Century,” a show about the life and times of the 10th Ottoman sultan, Suleiman the Magnificent.¹⁷ The show is neo-Ottoman in the sense that it emphasizes the advantage of “one strong, just leader,” and depicts the Ottoman Empire as the superpower of the world where European states are helpless against the Ottomans’ absolute power.¹⁸ The series has set records in Turkey with earnings of \$50 million in 2010 and 70 shows being broadcast in more than 20 countries, largely in the Middle East and Balkans.¹⁹ Moreover, “Conquest 1453,” a movie about Mehmed the Conqueror’s conquest of Istanbul has recouped its \$18.2 million budget, grossing \$40 million in Turkey and Europe.²⁰ Furthermore, Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) airs the show “Resurrection Ertugrul” about the grandfather of the founder of the Ottoman Empire and his fight against the Crusaders with an audience rarely dipping below 30 percent. This viewership indicates substantial interest in the Ottoman past.²¹

The AKP’s use of neo-Ottoman policies to appeal to conservative Islamic circles coincides with its curb on freedom of expression and rule of law in the country. According to a 2015 Freedom House report, Turkish media freedom has deteriorated as new laws increased the government’s censorship power over websites and news media. Although Turkey is categorized as “not free” on

press freedom, overall it is a “partly free” country.²² Additionally, the pressure on journalists has risen in the country. In 2015 alone, 14 journalists were jailed. The government’s most recent move has been to seize the opposition news organization Zaman, which is closely linked to the Hizmet Movement of influential US-based cleric Fethullah Gulen,²³ a former Erdogan ally.²⁴

A Political Conundrum: Strong Presidential System under the AKP

Erdogan’s determination to transform the country from a parliamentary democracy, which evolved under Ataturk, to an all-powerful presidential system signifies a broader sense of neo-Ottomanism, advocating ‘restoration rather than reform.’

The AKP promotes the transformation of the government system from a parliamentarian to a strong presidential one in order to further the political success of the AKP leadership. Erdogan’s determination to transform the country from a parliamentary democracy,²⁵ which evolved under Ataturk, to an all-powerful presidential system²⁶ signifies a broader sense of neo-Ottomanism, advocating ‘restoration rather than reform.’ Analyst opinion states that Erdogan wants to turn his de facto power into a constitutional reality.²⁷ Erdogan’s response to a question about Turkey’s ability to retain a unitary structure under a presidential system with an example from Hitler’s Germany received backlash from the domestic and international media.”²⁸ Additionally, the political circles in Turkey see the recent resignation of Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu as an expression of disapproval of Erdogan’s proposed presidential system.²⁹ The recent appointment of Minister of Transport, Maritime and Communication Binali Yildirim as the new Prime Minister signifies another tactical move by Erdogan.³⁰ Yildirim is a capable technocrat without any visible position on controversial issues. Furthermore, he has an unwavering loyalty to Erdogan and is devoted to the president’s ultimate goal of changing the form of government.³¹

Foreign Policy Implications of Turkish neo-Ottomanism



Kremlin.ru, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Participants_at_the_2015_G20_Summit_in_Turkey.jpg, CC BY 4.0

The AKP improved Turkey's diplomatic and military cooperation with Somalia in the Red Sea region. However, the AKP failed to broaden Turkey's diplomatic relations with the states that were formerly under the rule of the Ottoman Empire- Syria, Israel, Iran, Egypt, Iraq, and Bosnia- as well as Russia and the European Union (EU) despite initial attempts to appeal to these countries. Currently, no visible signs of progress are present in Turkey-Israel and Turkey-EU relations although Turkey tries to improve relations with Israel through trade deals, and with the EU through the refugee deal.

Turkey-Somalia Relations

The Ottoman Empire left its architectural legacy in Somalia, with water channels, castles and mosques. Turkey under the AKP government is dedicated to reviving its historical links with Somalia. In this regard, Erdogan visited Somalia in 2011 when there was a deadly drought, which forced thousands of Somalis to leave their homes and flee to the capital Mogadishu.³² Turkish

citizens donated as much as \$400 million to Somalia via both government institutions and non-governmental organizations. The money was used for humanitarian aid and technical development assistance.³³ The Turkish government also spent \$70 million on full scholarships for over 1,000 Somali students to study in Turkish universities.³⁴

On the political and military fronts, Erdogan recently announced that Turkish business and political leaders are planning to visit Uganda, Kenya, and Somalia to promote closer cooperation with Turkey's regional allies.³⁵ Turkey is also preparing to open a military base in Somalia. The base will be used to train soldiers from Somalia and other countries combating terrorist organizations.³⁶

Turkey-Syria Relations

The AKP government was initially able to act as a peace broker between regional powers given the country's new neo-Ottoman vision facilitated by its geostrategic location and rapid economic growth. Turkey declared its willingness to broker a peace agreement between Israel and Syria in 2008 if both countries were willing to resume the stalled initiative. Then-Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu voiced Turkey's willingness to support "every step in the direction of peace."³⁷ Furthermore, then-Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan met with President Bashar al-Assad of Syria in April 2008 to discuss rising prospects for Syrian-Israeli peace, and stressed that Turkey's mediation was part of wider efforts to bring peace to the Middle East. Moreover, President Assad underlined the crucial role Turkey played as a facilitator to lay the groundwork for Syria's direct talks with Israel.³⁸

Syrian-Turkish relations shifted back to the old patterns of confrontation after the Arab upheaval.³⁹ Trying to maintain Turkey's regional image, Erdogan decided that Assad's days were numbered, and the Syrian president would eventually have to leave power just as Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi did. Therefore, he asked Assad to step down for the sake of Syrian citizens.⁴⁰ During an interview with NBC News, Erdogan claimed that the Assad regime fired chemical weapons at his citizens, and as a result crossed President Obama's "red line," referring back to the President's 2012 speech that Assad's use of chemical weapons would warrant US military action.⁴¹ Similarly, Assad accused Erdogan of

supporting the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria after Morsi came into power in 2012 and trying to control the region as if it were an Ottoman Caliphate.⁴²

Turkey-Israel Relations

Under a neo-Ottoman vision, Turkey's ties with traditional allies have cooled. Turkey's relations with Israel⁴³ deteriorated when Israel started its land, air, and sea blockade on the Gaza Strip, beginning in 2007.⁴⁴ In the 2009 World Economic Forum at Davos, Erdogan stormed out of a debate after he clashed with Israeli President Shimon Peres over Israel's offensive against Gaza. Erdogan claimed that Israel was violating humanitarian codes, and he highlighted that he would not be returning to Davos after this incident.⁴⁵ Adding more tension and complexity to the Israel-Turkey bilateral relations, Israeli soldiers killed nine Turkish civilians in a flotilla who were on their way to break the Gaza blockade, an incident later came to be known as "Mavi Marmara." Erdogan described the incident as "state terrorism" and Davutoglu referred to it as "banditry."⁴⁶ After five years of enmity, Israel and Turkey are currently seeking to restore ties out of necessity. Turkey needs to seek alternative energy resources and to strengthen its hand in Syria after a crisis with Russia.⁴⁷ Similarly, Russia's involvement in Syria has upset Israel, which is also inclined to see the Assad regime fall.⁴⁸ As a result, Israel agreed to establish a compensation fund for those who were killed in the Mavi Marmara incident, and Turkey agreed to drop all legal claims against Israel. Additionally, they will soon begin discussions about a natural gas pipeline between the countries as well as the sale of natural gas from Israel to Turkey.⁴⁹

Turkey-Iran Relations

As part of its 'zero problems with neighbors' policy carrying neo-Ottoman elements, Erdogan called for closer economic ties with Iran in 2010. In doing so, he ignored Western pressure for tougher action against Iran's nuclear activities. He also suggested the creation of a mechanism for unrestricted trade with Iran similar to the one Turkey has with Europe.⁵⁰ In 2010, Turkey voted against imposing new sanctions on Iran through United Nations Security Council resolution.⁵¹ Moreover, according to 2012 Pew Research Global Attitudes Survey, only 34 percent of Turkey's

population approved of tougher sanctions on Iran, compared to 52 percent Turks disapproving of sanctions.⁵²

The Arab Spring in 2011 made differences between the two countries more clear. In the Syrian Conflict, Iran supported the Assad regime, whereas Turkey took the side of the opposition providing resources to oust the regime.⁵³ Furthermore, Iran overcoming its differences with the US over the nuclear deal became a source of concern for Turkey, as the country felt threatened by Iran's sectarian ambitions to change the regional order.⁵⁴ Davutoglu visited Tehran following the crisis with Russia in order to seek Iranian support in the economic field, and to steer away from the Sunni-oriented sectarian foreign policy impression.⁵⁵

Turkey-Egypt Relations

Erdogan established a close relationship with Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood as part of Turkey's wider neo-Ottoman vision in the region.⁵⁶ Turkey pledged \$2 billion in aid to Egypt in 2012, and endorsed the controversial constitution⁵⁷ that President Morsi pushed through to strengthen his power. Furthermore, Erdogan supported the vision of a Brotherhood-ruled Syria, which failed because of the movement's weakness in Syrian politics.⁵⁸ However, Turkey-Egypt relations began to collapse after the Morsi government was overthrown by a coalition led by Egyptian Army Chief General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Erdogan referred to Sisi as "a tyrant" and accused him of practicing "state terrorism."⁵⁹ In return, Egyptian media accused Turkey of supporting a terrorist campaign against the Egyptian security in the Sinai Peninsula.⁶⁰ Egypt consequently expelled Turkey's Ambassador to Cairo declaring him "persona non grata," which in diplomacy refers to a person who is prohibited by that country's government to enter and remain in that particular country.⁶¹ Erdogan recently approved ministerial level talks between the two countries. However, he said he will not recognize the new Sisi government unless former president Morsi's death sentence is lifted.⁶²

Turkey-Iraq Relations

Neo-Ottoman good-neighbor policy has never been completely applicable to Turkey's relationship with Iraq. In 2011, Turkey reached separate agreements with the Kurdistan Regional

Government (KRG) on the sale of Kurdish oil and construction of a new pipeline between northern Iraq and Turkey, without consulting Iraqi officials.⁶³ Protesting Turkey's action, the Iraqi government refused Turkish Energy and Natural Resources Minister Taner Yildiz's entry into Iraqi airspace, forcing him to return to Turkey.⁶⁴ Tensions rose again in December 2015 when Turkey deployed 150 soldiers and 25 tanks to the Bashiqa base in northern Iraq without the authorization of the central government to reportedly train Peshmerga and Arab forces fighting ISIS.⁶⁵ The Iraqi government referred to Turkey's military presence in the country as "an incursion," and threatened to take the matter to the Security Council if Turkish troops were not withdrawn in 48 hours. According to an analyst opinion, the motive behind Turkey's action was to counter the influence of the Iranian-supported Shiites as part of its pro-Sunni foreign policy.⁶⁶

Turkey-Bosnia Relations

The Balkans have been an important and stable area of the Ottoman Empire. Today, the Balkans and modern Turkey share a connection through their attachment to Europe, the Balkans serving as a physical bridge for Turkey's accession to the Euro-Atlantic institutions. Turkey focuses exclusively on Bosniak-Muslim interests in the Balkans.⁶⁷ Two Turkish-run universities, consisting mostly of Turkish student bodies, have opened in Sarajevo, Bosnia's Ottoman influenced capital. The International University of Sarajevo is backed by Turkish businessmen who are close to Erdogan's AKP. Opened in 2004, the university has 1,500 students, 65 percent of whom are Turkish. The other Turkish-run university, International Burch University, opened in 2008 with connections to Fethullah Gulen.⁶⁸

Turkey's growing presence in the country has upset Bosnian Serbs who denounced President Abdullah Gul's 2010 visit to Sarajevo as Turkey having a "hidden agenda" for the Balkans. According to a Bosnian Serb politician, Turkey's goal is to create a Bosniak Islamic state in the Balkans.⁶⁹

Turkey-Russia Relations

Turkey developed and expanded its economic and political ties with Russia as part of its neo-Ottoman goals in 2003. However, Russia-Turkey relations became contentious after Russian intervention in the Syrian conflict. On 24 November 2015, Turkey shot down a Russian warplane

near the Syrian border. Erdogan said that the plane was shot down because it did not answer Turkey's warnings. He further accused it to be targeting Turkmens, an ethnic minority of Turkish descent. Russian President Vladimir Putin, on the other hand, protested Turkey's action, calling it "a stab in the back by terrorist accomplices," and warned that the downing of the plane would have "serious consequences for Russia's relationship with Turkey."⁷⁰ Following this incident, Russia announced economic sanctions banning imports from Turkey. Putin also warned Russian citizens not to go to Turkey, canceled charter flights, excluded Turkish companies from tenders and terminated military cooperation between the two countries.⁷¹ In the period following the crisis, from 24 November to the end of December 2015, trade between both countries dropped 38 percent.⁷²

Turkey-EU Relations

One of the cornerstones of the AKP's neo-Ottoman strategy has been to reestablish the process for Turkey's EU accession. According to Davutoglu, "EU membership is a strategic goal and an integral part of Turkey's historical efforts for further modernization and transformation."⁷³ Although the EU has long been delaying the accession process, Turkey found considerable leverage in Syrian refugees. Under the EU-Turkey refugee deal, irregular migrants crossing from Turkey to Greece are sent back.⁷⁴ In return, the EU promised visa free travel for Turkish citizens inside the Schengen area,⁷⁵ and to pay the country \$6.8 million.⁷⁶ Once a staunch opponent of Turkey's EU membership bid, German Chancellor Angela Merkel has been the leading proponent of the refugee deal as she staked her political future on a promise to reduce the number of refugees entering Germany.⁷⁷ Merkel's recent visit to a refugee camp on the Turkish-Syrian border⁷⁸ and her decision to allow the prosecution of a German satirist who insulted Erdogan⁷⁹ came under heavy criticism by the German public who accused the chancellor of sacrificing European values over the refugee deal.⁸⁰

Opposition Parties on the Kurdish Problem and the Syrian Conflict

Opposition parties' reactions to neo-Ottoman policies vary. This can be demonstrated through the use of two issues – the Kurdish problem and the Syrian conflict. The pro-Kurdish People's

Democratic Party (HDP)⁸¹ and the Kemalist and social democratic Republican People's Party (CHP)⁸² initially supported the government's Kurdish and Syrian policy. However, these parties became highly critical of the government when both of these policies failed. Conversely, the ultranationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP)⁸³ initially opposed both Kurdish and Syrian policy, and then supported the government after those initiatives failed.



Turkish Opposition Leaders, respectively, CHP Leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu, HDP Leader Selahattin Demirtas, and MHP Leader Devlet Bahceli: Sources: Ziya Koseoglu, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AKemal_K%C4%B1%C4%B1%C3%A7dar%C4%9Flu_3_\(cropped\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AKemal_K%C4%B1%C4%B1%C3%A7dar%C4%9Flu_3_(cropped).jpg), Public Domain; Mahmut Bozarslan, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ASelahattin_Demirta%C5%9F_2015-12-18.jpg, Cropped, Public Domain; and Ziya KOSEOGLU, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ADevlet_Bah%C3%A7eli_ve_Kemal_K%C4%B1%C4%B1%C3%A7dar%C4%9Flu_\(cropped\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ADevlet_Bah%C3%A7eli_ve_Kemal_K%C4%B1%C4%B1%C3%A7dar%C4%9Flu_(cropped).jpg), CC BY-SA 2.0.

The HDP was initially receptive to the AKP's Kurdish Peace Process.⁸⁴ The party, however, has become one of the vocal critics of the government when the initiative failed in July 2015. Accusing the AKP of making a "U-turn,"⁸⁵ HDP Co-Chair Selahattin Demirtas invited the relaunch of the peace process and named the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan as the most qualified person to negotiate a ceasefire with PKK militants.⁸⁶ Furthermore, HDP Co-Chair Figen Yuksekdag defined the isolation of Ocalan in Imrali Island where he is serving a life sentence as a political problem, and called for the end to this isolation and return to the negotiation table.⁸⁷

The HDP approached the AKP's regional policies, especially the Syrian conflict, through the lens of the Kurdish problem, arguing that the AKP should do more to help Syrian Kurds fight ISIS.⁸⁸ The party protested the AKP's reluctance to defend Syrian Kurds in the border town of Kobanî by spearheading countrywide anti-government protests.⁸⁹ Furthermore, after the Suruc bombing, where 33 of the group of people who had gathered to help rebuild the Syrian Kurdish city of Kobani were killed, Demirtas claimed that the Turkish state was involved in the organization of the attack, and called on the AKP to clarify its position on ISIS.⁹⁰

The CHP initially welcomed the AKP's Kurdish initiative. However, it became one of the AKP's most vocal critics after the Kurdish peace process failed. The CHP leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu clarified that he is not against talks with the PKK in principle, as long as the dialogue was transparent.⁹¹ When the peace process was called off, however, Kilicdaroglu became highly critical of the AKP's Kurdish policy. He kept reiterating that the solution to the problem was not a military campaign but a special commission in the parliament. Accordingly, the CHP proposed a council of experts made up of all four parties and non-governmental organizations to end the violence and terror activities in the country.⁹²

The CHP criticized the failure of the 'zero problems with neighbors' policy in Syria. CHP Research and Policy Development Department published a report focusing on the AKP's erroneous policies and miscalculations in Syria.⁹³ Furthermore, Kilicdaroglu accused the AKP for "dragging Turkey into the Middle Eastern quagmire" and departing from Turkey's traditional foreign policy. However, he has avoided any conciliatory tone toward the Assad government.⁹⁴ Lastly, CHP Deputy Chair Haluk Koc stated that the AKP approached the Syrian conflict on sectarian basis, siding with Sunni terrorist groups.⁹⁵

The MHP expressed its fierce opposition to the Kurdish peace process when the official framework was set in 2013. The party, however, softened its critical tone of the government when the process was called off by Erdogan in July 2015. In 2013, MHP leader Devlet Bahceli referred to the peace process as "kneeling before terror" yet he was careful not to associate all Kurds with the PKK.⁹⁶ After the Kurdish peace process was called off, the MHP aligned with the ruling AKP in the fight against the PKK. The MHP also supported an AKP proposed bill, which aims to strip certain opposition party legislators of immunity from prosecution. The bill primarily targets the

pro-Kurdish HDP party. The AKP-MHP coalition in the parliament helped the bill pass, and opened the door to a string of court cases against members of the HDP.⁹⁷

The MHP consistently expressed its concerns about the AKP's foreign policy initiatives in Syria. Bahçeli expressed "those who supported ISIS in Syria are now primarily responsible for the blood that is being shed."⁹⁸ However, Bahçeli's attitude changed when he began recruiting AKP support to suppress the political rebels in his own party.⁹⁹ He regarded the Syrian Democratic Union Party's (PYD) plan to have a Kurdish corridor along the border as a direct attack against Turkey's territorial unity and national existence. The MHP's current position is to provide unequivocal support for the government operations in Syria.¹⁰⁰

Conclusions and Future Trends

The AKP's failure to find a peaceful and democratic solution to the Kurdish problem has not only reignited the PKK insurgency in the country, but also complicated the war against ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Similarly, the AKP's 'zero-problems with neighbors' foreign policy strategy has failed in formulating a realistic foreign policy calculus. In short, Turkey's neo-Ottoman dream has been a failure in both domestic and foreign politics, leading to varying reactions from the opposition parties.

AKP leadership used Islamic populism to appeal to peasants, members of religious orders, and especially the Anatolian businessmen who were marginalized by, and weary of, elitist Kemalism.¹⁰¹ The party also emphasized an active role in foreign relations. These policies did not yield the expected results due to the Turkish leadership's political ambitions and strategic choices, including miscalculations and misconceptions about its partnerships in the Middle East. These positions are most controversial in three areas: developments in Syria, the Kurdish problem, and Erdogan's presidential system.

Turkey regards the Syrian Kurdish groups PYD, and its armed wing the People's Protection Units (YPG), as terrorist organizations directly linked to the PKK. The country believes that the PYD is trying to unite the conjoined Kurdish border cantons of Kobanî and Jazira with the separate Afrin canton. If these cantons are united, they will form a Kurdish corridor on the Syrian border.¹⁰² Turkey regards this potential development as unacceptable and threatening to its territorial integrity. In fact, Turkey's recent anti-ISIS operation in Syria was directed against Kurdish

Rojava,¹⁰³ and it ended up weakening the Kurdish presence in northern Syria and prompting the rebel gains.¹⁰⁴

The Turkish government called off its peaceful Kurdish initiative after the AKP failed to capture a parliamentary majority in the June 2015 elections. The AKP, in this way, strategically convinced its base that the country would be further destabilized if the AKP lost the majority. This strategy succeeded when the AKP won 49 percent of the popular vote in the November 2015 snap elections.¹⁰⁵ As part of its efforts to crackdown on the Kurdish rebels and the pro-Kurdish HDP, the AKP recently passed a bill to lift the lawmakers' immunity from prosecution.¹⁰⁶ The bill deliberately aims to remove HDP members from the parliament on terrorism-related charges. This situation is likely to exacerbate the security situation in Turkey, with PKK increasing its attacks within the country. This will also likely spread into Syria where Turkey is expected to ramp up its attacks against the Syrian Kurds, delaying the long-awaited peace and stability in the region.

Erdogan's proposed presidential system is another controversial case. Erdogan seeks a presidential system with no checks and balances, nor a separation of powers, reminiscent of an Ottoman-era sultan. Determined to change the form of government, he dismissed Prime Minister Davutoglu who was reluctant to push for the presidential system,¹⁰⁷ and picked a devout supporter, Yildirim, in this place.¹⁰⁸ Currently, the AKP is 13 seats short of having the necessary parliamentary support to take the proposed constitutional change to a referendum.

Turkey seems to be left with little political capital to expand its influence in the Middle East. Its 'zero problems with neighbors' policy has slowly turned into 'zero neighbors without problems.' This foreign policy posture has put Turkey at odds with its western partners in Syria, Iran, Iraq and Israel. Ultimately, however, a politically stable, cooperative and strong Turkey can play a constructive role in reshaping the Middle East.

Endnotes

¹ The Justice and Development Party (AKP) is the ruling Turkish government with a social conservative background. The former leader of the party, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is the current Turkish president.

² Karakas, Cemal. "Turkey: Islam and Laicism between the Interests of State, Politics, and Society." *Peace Research Institute Frankfurt Reports* No. 78 2007.
<http://www.hsfk.de/fileadmin/HSFK/hsfk_downloads/prif78.pdf>

³ Islamic populism refers to the methods employed by Erdogan to appeal to the Muslim businesspeople who had been marginalized by a Kemalist political establishment favoring a secular bourgeoisie. Erdogan capitalized on historical grievances under Kemalist governments, and was able to capture the votes of marginalized masses.

⁴ Kemalism, founded by the Turkish leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, refers to the founding ideology of the Republic of Turkey. It implemented political, social, cultural and religious reforms to separate the new Turkish state from its Ottoman predecessor, and embraced a Westernized way of living. The ideology emphasizes nationalism and secularism as inseparable parts of the new Turkish society.

⁵ Baran, Zeyno. 2010. *Torn Country: Turkey Between Secularism and Islamism*. Hoover Press.
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⁸³ The Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) is a Turkish far-right political party that adheres to Turkish nationalism and Euroscepticism.

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