

BOOK REVIEW

Lisel Hintz, Identity Politics Inside Out: National Identity Contestation and Foreign Policy in Turkey (Oxford University Press, 2018)

Tunahan YILDIZ

PhD Candidate, Department of International Relations, Middle East Technical University, Ankara

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Uluslararası İlişkiler - International Relations
E-mail: uidergisi@gmail.com

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Identity Politics Inside Out: National Identity Contestation and Foreign Policy in Turkey

Lisel HINTZ

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Tunahan YILDIZ

PhD Candidate, Department of International Relations, Middle East Technical University, Ankara.

E-Mail: tunahan@metu.edu.tr

Orcid: 0000-0002-2516-8024

Lisel Hintz's *Identity Politics Inside Out: National Identity Contestation and Foreign Policy in Turkey* is an empirically rich and theoretically well-designed account of Turkish foreign policy and domestic politics. It is derived from Hintz's PhD thesis supervised by Marc Lynch at the George Washington University,¹ which is also partially published in the *European Journal of International Relations* in 2016.² The book's main theoretical premise is that domestic identity contestations are transferred to the domain of foreign policy when identity proposals are blocked in the domestic arena. Building on its identification of major national-identity proposals struggling for hegemony in Turkey, the book explains on this theoretical ground the Justice and Development Party's (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) early policy towards the European Union (EU) accession process and the "Ottoman Islamist" transformation of Turkish foreign policy and domestic politics. Hintz argues that when its "Ottoman Islamist" identity proposal was blocked by "Republican Nationalist" institutions in the domestic domain, the AKP moved to the foreign policy arena to weaken these institutions, overcome their blockage, and eventually, open space for its identity proposal.

Hintz's work builds on and contributes to the constructivist school of International Relations (IR) in its demonstration of the causal power of identity and its definition of foreign policy as "an arena for identity contestation" rather than being merely "a source or product of identity" (p. 7). One can identify five main elements in her "inside-out theory of identity contestation." First, there are multiple identity proposals, "suggested understandings of identity that prescribe and proscribe specific standards of behavior and compete to establish a particular national identity" (p. 4), in a country context to define the nation. Second, these identity proposals strive for hegemony or a sufficiently widespread and durable status in the domestic arena. Third, their contents often include elements of intolerability or "red lines" for

- 1 Lisel Hintz, *Fighting for Us, Inside and Out: National Identity Contestation and Foreign Policy in Turkey*, PhD Thesis, Washington, D.C., George Washington University, the Columbian College of Arts and Sciences, 2015.
- 2 Lisel Hintz, "'Take It Outside!' National Identity Contestation in the Foreign Policy Arena", *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 22, No 2, 2016, p. 335-361.

their rival proposals and thus pave the way for contestation and blockage by “identity-based obstacles” defined as established institutions (p. 23). Fourth, domestically blocked proposals “utilize an ‘inside-out’ strategy of contestation” (p. 84) and are externalized in the foreign policy arena. Finally, this all culminates in domestic politics, where “foreign policy practices shape the contours of identity debates back home” (p. 18). Eventually, Hintz does not simply test a set of well-known constructivist hypotheses in the case of Turkish foreign policy but rather develops a middle-range constructivist theory.

Building on its contribution to the debates on the inside-outside relationship and to a constructivist redefinition of the foreign policy arena, Hintz’s book joins a growing trend of “Turkey-based theory development.” While it is unexceptional in several articles and dissertations to employ the cases of Turkish foreign policy for the sake of theory testing, we have also witnessed an increasing number of studies utilizing, among others, Turkish foreign policy to build theories.³ Hintz’s generalizable theory is a fresh contribution to this burgeoning literature. The author indeed further elaborates on the replicability of her theory when she extrapolates her theoretical findings toward different country contexts and non-state actors in her penultimate chapter, offering a set of preliminary answers to the question of “how well her theory travels” (p. 127). That said, a main strength of her theoretical contribution may also be a point of its vulnerability: it attempts to demonstrate the continual currency or agency of identity (i.e. the salience of “Ottoman Islamist” identity proposal in her case) when it is seemingly absent (i.e. the nominal nonappearance of that proposal in the early 2000s). Such an account would draw criticism for assuming, not demonstrating, the constitutive power of identity.

The book also offers a rigorous operationalization of the ambiguous concept of identity. It substantially follows the sociological work of Abdelal, Herrera, Johnston, and McDermott, which identifies four components in any identity content, namely constitutive norms, social purposes, relational meanings, and cognitive worldviews.⁴ Translating this work into comparative politics and IR and operationalizing the first premises of her theory, Hintz maps four main identity proposals in Turkey in Chapter 3: Republican Nationalism, Ottoman Islamism, Pan-Turkic Nationalism, and Western Liberalism. It is “the four understandings of identity most widely held in Turkey’s contemporary society” (p. 33) that have their own “red lines” in seeing each other and have struggled for hegemony in Turkey. A major strength of Hintz’s argument is that it is far from being speculative or hypothetical, but rather the author thoroughly retraces those proposals, with her incorporation of several kinds of empirical evidence from novels and TV series to elite interviews and public statements. As such, Hintz also skillfully operationalizes bottom-up and top-down perspectives to map identity proposals and their contestations and in this way, avoids the elitism of the conventional identity studies in IR that often rely excessively on elite speeches.

3 See Ziya Öniş and Mustafa Kutlay, “The Dynamics of Emerging Middle-Power Influence in Regional and Global Governance: The Paradoxical Case of Turkey”, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 71, No 2, 2017, p. 164-183; Seçkin Köstem, “When Can Idea Entrepreneurs Influence Foreign Policy? Explaining the Rise of the ‘Turkic World’ in Turkish Foreign Policy”, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 13, No 3, 2017, p. 722-740.

4 Rawi Abdelal, Yoshiko M. Herrera, Alastair Iain Johnston and Rose McDermott (eds.), *Measuring Identity: A Guide for Social Scientists*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Hintz does not claim that her discussion of four identity proposals is exhaustive, but it suffers from some empirical and analytical problems. Importantly, the author sacrifices the interval variations within and the interactions between these categories to their mutually exclusiveness. For example, one would not find in her analysis an elaboration on conservative/religious nationalism, a stronger variant than “Pan-Turkic Nationalism,” and it would be difficult to subsume the former under “Ottoman Islamism.” Furthermore, the author underestimates the early history and impact of what she calls “Western Liberalism,” and particularly, its interaction with Islamism. What is missing in her analysis is that not only did “Western Liberalism” interact and ally significantly with a supposedly liberal Islamism or so-called “post-Islamism” until recently, but also it indeed constituted part of an academic and political paradigm, namely post-Kemalism, until its recent demise.⁵ Relatedly, whether the book reproduces the decades-long center-periphery thesis⁶ should be in question. Moreover, one would be curious about how Hintz would explain the recent political alliance between “Ottoman Islamism” and some segments of “Republican Nationalism,” represented by several public intellectuals, veterans, and politicians, if those red lines strictly separate these two identity proposals.

Finally, resting on its historicization of the institutional hegemony of “Republican Nationalism” at home and the incapability of the “Ottoman Islamist” identity proposal until the early 2000s, the book offers a theoretical insight into an oft-cited empirical fact: the AKP’s instrumentalization of the EU accession process. After many years of naïve and paradigmatic optimism describing the AKP’s first term, as the heydays of Turkey’s democratization and “de-Kemalization” and of Islamism’s liberalization, moderation and “post-Islamization”, several scholars have already pointed out the instrumentalist/strategic nature of the AKP’s EU policy.⁷ What Hintz contributes to these debates is mainly her explanation based on a testable, generalizable, and comparable theoretical reformulation. Accordingly, her theory informs that the AKP, aware of the identity-based domestic (“Republican Nationalist”) obstacles to its “Ottoman Islamist” identity proposal, took its identity contestation to the foreign policy domain and selectively operationalized an EU-oriented foreign policy to circumvent and counter-attack these obstacles. Subsequent to the mitigation and elimination of these obstacles, “the AKP has enacted major changes in domestic and foreign policy in line with behaviors prescribed by Ottoman Islamist identity content” (p. 149).

In this way, Hintz’s book also falls within the ongoing debates on neo-Ottomanism, notwithstanding her reluctance to employ the term. Considering Wastnidge’s recent critique of the literature’s overstated focus on the foreign policy dimensions of neo-Ottomanism,⁸ Hintz offers a balanced account of neo-Ottomanism, combining and double-checking its inside and

5 See İlker Aytürk and Berk Esen, *Post-Post-Kemalizm: Türkiye Çalışmalarında Yeni Arayışlar* [Post-Post-Kemalism: New Searches in Turkish Studies], İstanbul, İletişim Yayınları, 2022.

6 See Onur Bakiner, “A Key to Turkish Politics? The Center–Periphery Framework Revisited”, *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 19, No 4, 2018, p. 503-522.

7 See, for example, Menderes Çınar, “Turkey’s ‘Western’ or ‘Muslim’ Identity and the AKP’s Civilizational Discourse”, *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 19, No 2, 2018, p. 176-197; Isabel David, “Strategic Democratisation? A Guide to Understanding AKP in Power”, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Vol. 24, No 4, 2016, p. 478-493.

8 Edward Wastnidge, “Imperial Grandeur and Selective Memory: Re-assessing Neo-Ottomanism in Turkish Foreign and Domestic Politics”, *Middle East Critique*, Vol. 28, No 1, 2019, p. 7-28.

outside aspects. Eventually, the author provides a coherent answer to her initial question of why the AKP changed its EU-oriented foreign policy, although there was no significant shift in regional and global dynamics at the time. As its intended empirical puzzle is this transformation, the book does not discuss any other period of Turkish foreign policy in detail. Therefore, the book's empirical elaboration as it relates to Turkish foreign policy is limited compared to its major effort for theory building, its diligent identification of identity proposals in Turkey, and its engagement with the early foreign policy of the AKP. One may also bring Turkey's pre-AKP multi-party years up for discussion in terms of identity contestation debates. In any case, Hintz's book is a multifaceted contribution to several fresh debates on IR and Turkish Studies and therefore, deserves further testing and elaboration.