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Foreign Policy as a Contested Front of the Cultural Wars in Turkey: The Middle East and Turkey in the Era of the AKP

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the evolving discourses over Turkish foreign policy deeply entrenched within the Turkish cultural wars. It demonstrates the process and mechanisms that render Turkish foreign policy an extension of the pursuit of cultural politics and statements of identity. It also assesses how the Middle East was posited not only as a theater of diplomacy but also as a rhetorical gadget over contested Turkish identity, especially pushed by the AKP intelligentsia and policymakers and avidly defied by the secular opposition. Its emphasis is on the Arab Spring and Turkey's immersion into the Syrian civil war, as these developments exacerbated the overlap between foreign policy making and discourses on foreign policy, particularly since the AKP sought not only diplomatic opportunities but also a regional transnational realignment as a result of the Arab Spring and the regional revolutionary milieu.

Keywords: Islamism, Populism, Arab Spring, Middle East, Syrian Civil War

Türkiye'de Çatışmalı Bir Kültür Savaşı Cephesi Olarak Dış Politika: AK Parti İktidarında Orta Dođu ve Türkiye

ÖZET

Bu makale Türkiye'de dış politikaya dair dönüşen ve yaşanan kültürel savaşla iç içe geçmiş söylemleri analiz etmektedir. Aynı zamanda, Türk dış politika yapımının iç siyasetin ve kimlik tavırlarının uzantısına dönüşme sürecini ve mekanizmalarını çözümlenmektedir. Özellikle AKP entelijansiyasının ve karar alıcılarının iddialarının ve seküler muhalefetin bunlara karşıtlığının gösterdiği üzere Orta Dođu bir diplomasi sahası olmaktan öte Türk kimliği üzerine bir söylemsel araç olarak algılandı. Makale, bu süreçlerin AKP'ye diplomatik imkanlar sunmaları ve bölgesel bir ulusötesi ittifak için fırsat sağlamalarından dolayı Arab baharına ve Türkiye'nin içine çekildiği Suriye iç savaşına yoğunlaşacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İslamcılık, Popülizm, Arab Baharı, Orta Dođu, Suriye İç Savaşı

Introduction

This article engages with the evolving discourses over Turkish foreign policy prevailing in both the public debates and governmental rhetoric, and its immersion into the ongoing Turkish cultural wars. This course marked the transformation of the hitherto reigning realist paradigm into constructivist and identity-based discourses. The article also attests the process and mechanisms that render Turkish foreign policy an extension of Turkish domestic policy and statements of identity. In addition, it maintains that the Arab spring and its aftermath, and particularly the civil war in Syria, exacerbated the ideologization and even sectarianization of foreign policy cultures, debates and practice. It argues that, whereas before the 2000s, the dissenting views of socialists who advocated an alternative course during the Cold War and Islamists seeking a rupture from European linkage could be marginalized in favor of a national consensus on foreign policy (in the era of nation-states), these views could not hold by the 2000s, and not only because Islamist AKP had assumed power. This shift was yet another symptom of the cultural wars that altered Turkish society's perceptions of the nation and accordingly, its framing of foreign policy.

Turkish international relations scholarship had been long a realist bastion. Yet, diverging from the confines of Turkish international relations scholarship, new studies in the 2000s approached foreign policy orientations as extensions of discourses of national identity. Umut Uzer, Hasan Kösebalaban, İlhan Uzgel, and many others of this new generation of Turkish international relations scholars had analyzed Turkish foreign policy in relation with the constructions of identities of the institutional foreign policymakers, namely the Foreign Ministry, the army and the governing political parties. İlhan Uzgel questioned the very meaning of "national interest" and examined its appropriation by different actors in Turkish foreign policymaking (in the 1980s) within a neo-Marxist critical theory framework.¹ Umut Uzer delved into three case studies – the takeover of Hatay in 1939, the Cyprus issue from the 1950s onwards, and the post-1990 contestation over Nagorno-Karabakh – and analyzed the shaping of foreign policies in all three cases as statements of perceived national identities appropriated by the state and political elites.² Hasan Kösebalaban "aim[ed] to locate Turkish foreign policy in the domestic and international context of the politics of identity."³ In the anthology edited by Baskın Oran, doyen of the field of foreign policy in Turkey and an early neo-Marxist scholar in the field, also briefly took note of the ideational dimensions of foreign policy making in his introduction to the volume couched in neo-Marxist paradigm.⁴ Yet, although identity politics and its relevance to foreign policy making had become a new interest, changing discourses over foreign policy in popular intellectual culture and political debates only recently became a matter of interest. Burak Bilgehan Özpek, Lisel Hintz, Behlül Özkan, and others showed how foreign policy came to be deployed as a political asset and populist platform by the ruling

1 İlhan Uzgel, *Ulusal Çıkar ve Dış Politika: Türk Dış Politikasının Belirlenmesinde Ulusal Çıkarın Rolü, 1983-1991*, Ankara, İmge Kitabevi, 2004. Also see, İlhan Uzgel, "TDP'nin Oluşturulması", Baskın Oran (ed.), *Türk Dış Politikası*, İstanbul, İletişim Yayınları, 2006, p. 73-93.

2 Umut Uzer, *Identity and Turkish Foreign Policy: The Kemalist Influence in Cyprus and the Caucasus*, New York, London, I. B. Tauris, 2011.

3 Hasan Kösebalaban, *Turkish Foreign Policy: Islam, Nationalism, and Globalization*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. xiv.

4 Baskın Oran, "Giriş: Türk Dış Politikasının (TDP) Teori ve Pratiği", Baskın Oran (ed.), *Türk Dış Politikası*, p. 17-73. Also see, Selim Deringil, *Turkish Foreign Policy During the Second World War: An "Active" Neutrality*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1989.

AKP (Justice and Development Party).⁵ This article builds on similar premises but also establishes that this recent shift cannot be limited to the AKP's populist platform.

Background: Historicizing Evolving Discourses on Foreign Policy in Comparative Perspective

In the first decade of the 21st century, Turkish foreign policy became a focal marker delineating ideological and political lines. This, however, was a very recent and arguably unforeseen turn. In Turkey, before the early 2000s, foreign policy had been regarded as the exclusive preserve of "foreign policy experts" and analyzed within the confines of technical expertise rather than patrimony politics. Therefore, it belonged to the supra-political realm, better so as to be kept away from shallow political polemics. Likewise, foreign policy pundits' commentaries were left in obscurity in the international affairs sections in the middle pages of the newspapers, to be read only by the enquiring few, and remained safely removed from the outreach of politics. Thus, not long ago, international relations scholars were maintaining that Turkish foreign policy was run exclusively by a national security establishment chiefly guided by national security concerns behind closed doors unfettered from political clout.⁶

This transformation was evidently not unique to Turkey. On the contrary, it had occurred in Turkey quite late. Harking back to the 19th century, the Crimean War triggered a vibrant debate within the British public intellectual sphere. Liberals and conservatives heatedly debated the morals of siding with the Ottoman Empire in newspapers and pamphlets.⁷ This intellectual sphere brought the contestation of foreign policy on moral, ideological and political grounds to debate by conflicting parties. Yet these divisions and controversies over alternative foreign policy lines were confined to the narrow political and intellectual elite.

The rise of the socialist parties not only resulted in the exacerbation of contestation over foreign policy lines, but also rendered these divisions deeply ingrained within the larger society. The rise of Hitler and fascism had brought the left and the right to develop antagonistic positions regarding the stance, vis-a-vis Germany in particular and fascist regimes in general, broadening ideological rifts even further.⁸ Decolonization provided yet more foreign policy divisions based on ideological underpinnings. Yet the early responses of the political left towards the tormenting decolonization remained taciturn. In France, the communist party remained for long indifferent to the decolonization wars and colonial insurgencies. However, the 1960s brought the rise of colonialism and its misdemeanors as a primal agenda to be addressed among the new left. The Algerian War

5 Burak Bilgehan Özpek and Bill Park (eds.), *Islamism, Populism, and Turkish Foreign Policy*, London, Routledge, 2019; Lisel Hintz, *Identity Politics Inside Out: National Identity, Contestation and Foreign Policy in Turkey*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018; Behlül Özkan, "Turkey, Davutoğlu and the Idea of Pan-Islamism", *Survival*, Vol. 56, No 4, 2014, p. 119-140.

6 Ümit Cizre, "Demythologizing the National Security Concept: The Case of Turkey", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 57, No 2, 2003, p. 213-229; Mustafa Aydın, "Determinants of Turkish Foreign Policy: Historical Framework and Traditional Inputs", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 35, No 4, 1999, p. 152186; Pınar Bilgin, "Turkey's Changing Security Discourses: The Challenge of Globalisation", *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 44, No 1, 2005, p. 175-201.

7 See Orlando Figes, *The Crimean War: A History*, New York, Picador, 2012, p. 61-99.

8 Zara Steiner, *Triumph of the Dark*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 167-171; Alastair Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 1993.

embroiled France amid a moral crisis as did the Vietnam War in the United States, both shattering the Cold War national consensuses, respectively, with many on the left opposing the wars on moral and ideological grounds.⁹ The '68 generation repudiated not only state policies but also their parents, whom they blamed as subserviently succumbing to state propaganda. The state, therefore, no longer epitomized a sacrosanct entity bearing neither the inherent ultimate goodness nor the socio-political manifestations of the nation. This myth of innocence, and the bedrock trust in the state, was undone in the tumultuous 1960s. Subsequent revelations, such as the Pentagon papers and the breakthroughs of the new investigative journalism of the 1970s, reinforced this drift even further.

This pattern resembled Turkey's path in the post-Cold War era, when the international orientation of Turkey became a topic of heated debate, with opposing alternatives invoked by different political dispositions subsequent to the expiry of the enforced Cold War consensus. The end of the Cold War was the initial stage in which once the Cold War exigencies that justified foreign policy as a matter of national security elapsed, and ideological and political proclivities were reflected in alternative foreign policy orientation offerings. Euroasianism was a newly found enthusiasm that hoped to steer a new direction for Turkish foreign policy. The newly gained independence of Turkic states precipitated a new foreign policy orientation in line with nationalist proclivities. Bosnia and Azerbaijani were new foreign policy terrains heavily fraught with identity themes that eclipsed *realpolitik*.¹⁰ That is because these issues were not confined to foreign policy, but were ideological agendas and political claims pursued and avidly discussed and contested that prompted public debates conducted in newspapers, journals, and on television. These foreign policy offerings (or non-offerings) were, in fact, efforts to transplant (or not transplant) ideological and political visions to the diplomatic realm.

Another milestone in this transformation was the heated debates over the European Union's (EU) looming opening of negotiations with Turkey.¹¹ As the Turkish candidacy to the EU became imminent, after decades of oblivion, by the late 1990s, subject to the undertaking of substantial (and controversial for the domestic audience) reforms including the permissibility of the public teaching of the Kurdish language, the hitherto "supra-political" nature of the support for Turkey's accession eroded drastically. These requirements turned membership to the EU into a controversial issue opposed by many who had been hitherto staunchly pro-EU.¹²

Whereas accession to the EU had previously been assumed as a "national" and therefore supra-political agenda as a means to demonstrate the Europeanness of Turkey, the impending requirements came to clash with the nationalistic sensitivities of many. As the political exigencies of EU integration became manifest, it became clear that foreign policy decisions were not supra-political

9 For the moral crisis of foreign policy making in the Vietnam War and post-Vietnam War era, see Michael Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson's War: America's Cold War Crusade in Vietnam, 1945-1968*, New York, Hill and Wang, 1996. Also see, Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1988. For the moral crisis and the end of the consensus over foreign policy over the Algerian War in France, see Christoph Kalter, *The Discovery of the Third World: Decolonization and the Rise of the New Left in France, c.1950-1976*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2016; Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2008.

10 Umut Uzer, *Identity and Turkish Foreign Policy: The Kemalist Influence in Cyprus and the Caucasus*, London, I. B. Tauris, 2011.

11 Ziya Öniş, "Domestic Politics, International Norms and Challenges to the State: Turkey-EU Relations in the Post-Helsinki Era", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 4, No 1, 2003, p. 9-34; Ioannis Grigoriadis, *Trials of Europeanization: Turkish Political Culture and the European Union*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

12 For an account of these in many ways hectic years see İsmail Cem, *Türkiye, Avrupa, Avrasya*, İstanbul, İş Bankası Yayınları, 2009, Vol II. Also see, Paul Kubicek, "The European Union and Grassroots Democratization in Turkey", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 6, No 3, 2005, p. 361-377.

and technical, but rather political preferences. This course also revealed that the supposedly technical experts' motivations were in fact fraught with their ideological penchants, seeing EU integration as an ideological statement on Turkey's identity. Presenting political preferences as "national" and therefore supra-political acted as a strategy to render them incontestable. Whereas the ideological nature of foreign policy decisions hitherto could be obscured in the name of bipartisan efforts for the national interest, with the opening of negotiations with the EU, foreign policy became inextricably entangled within domestic politics.¹³ The Cyprus issue, which until then had been the ultimate national cause, came to be publicly debated and its desecuritization followed suit. Since then, foreign policy became not only a matter of contestation in public debate but also an arsenal for clashing rhetoric and ideological stances. What was novel and unique in Turkey in the 2000s was the sharp ideologization of foreign policy and foreign policy debates, rendering it domestic politics by other means.¹⁴

Perceiving foreign policy as an extension of domestic policy, the AKP instrumentalized it boldly and skillfully for other ends.¹⁵ As a valuable asset in its showdown with the staunchly Kemalist military, the AKP had initially pursued a pro-Western foreign policy (2002-2010) in line with its penchant for democratization against the Turkish military's hold over governmental affairs. Wielding its foreign policy and pro-EU stance as leverage empowered the party vis-à-vis the national security establishment.¹⁶ At this stage, the employment of foreign policy as an asset in domestic politics and its desecuritization were maneuvers designed to narrow the political space of the national security establishment in a war of attrition. Therefore, its deployment was pragmatic and instrumental.¹⁷ While the military's role in politics was sidelined, and the AKP gained not only power but also self-confidence, the party introduced a new twist to its foreign policy conduct, now deeming its foreign policy course as a conduit for its ideological ends.¹⁸

Middle Eastern Dimension of Foreign Policy as a Battlefield for Turkish Identity

Political regimes justify themselves by inventing *ancien régimes* as the polar opposites of the incumbent governments.¹⁹ Kemalist Turkey had self-portrayed itself as the vigorous new regime opposed to the moribund and decayed "old Turkey" of the sultans and octogenarian pashas.²⁰ After consolidating its

13 For perceptions of EU, Europeaness and its relation to Turkish identity among the Turkish public, see Senem Aydın-Düzgüt, "Foreign Policy and Identity Change: Analysing Perceptions of Europe Among Turkish Public", *Politics*, Vol. 38, No 1, 2017, p. 19-34.

14 For an overview of the AKP's foreign policy in its different phases and a discussion of its continuities as well as ruptures from the Kemalist foreign policy tradition, see Burak Cop and Özge Zihnioğlu "Turkish Foreign Policy under AKP Rule: Making Sense of the Turbulence", *Political Studies Review*, Vol. 15, No 1, 2017, p. 28-38.

15 For an earlier study of AKP's instrumentalizing and consumption of foreign policy for its domestic agendas, see Birol Başkan, "Making Sense of Turkey's Foreign Policy: Clashing Identities and Interests", *Muslim World*, Vol. 101, No 1, 2016, p. 141-154.

16 For some first hand accounts of this tension and dynamics, see Aydın Selcen, *Gözden Irak*, İstanbul, İletişim Yayınları, 2019; Murat Özçelik, *Oyun Kuruculuktan Oyun Bozuculuğa*, İstanbul, Kara Karga Yayınları, 2018.

17 Ali Balci, "Foreign Policy as Domestic Power Struggle: The Northern Iraq as a Battlefield Between the AKP and the TAF in 2007-8", *Türkiye Ortadoğu Çalışmaları Dergisi*, Vol. 2, No 1, 2015, p. 67-94.

18 Burak Bilgehan Özpek argues that AKP approached the Kurdish problem as a means for its pursuit of power. This intent was equally vocal regardless of AKP's peaceful or bellicose attempts to encounter and resolve it. Burak Bilgehan Özpek, *The Peace Process Between Turkey and the Kurds: An Anatomy of a Failure*, London, Routledge, 2017.

19 William Doyle, *The Ancien Regime*, Basingstok, Palgrave, 2001, p. 1.

20 Doğan Gürpınar, *Ottoman/Turkish Visions of the Nation, 1860-1950*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 156-162,

power through consecutive electoral victories, perceiving its ruling majority not only permanent but also tantamount to a regime change (dubbed as “New Turkey” as opposed to “Old Turkey”, a phrase reminiscent of the Portuguese -and Brazilian- *Estado Novo*) with the demise of the old establishment and its social base, the AKP sought to draw a sharp and irreconcilable dichotomy with its *ancien régime* that was preordained to vanish in the grand theater of history with all its institutional, cultural, and ideological legacy. Foreign policy was instrumentalized in this venture.

After the AKP gravitated to deploying its foreign policy course as a marker of its identity, foreign policy became such a primary asset for the AKP that Ahmet Davutoğlu, who had not been a party stalwart but was long seen as a foreign policy specialist due to his long years of service as foreign policy advisor, assumed political office in 2011, becoming a Member of Parliament (two years after he was appointed as the Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2009 while not holding a parliamentary seat which was highly unique), and rose to become AKP party chairman and subsequently Prime Minister.

The AKP’s affiliated intelligentsia sketched the main tenets of the alleged Kemalist foreign policy. For them, Kemalist/republican Turkish foreign policy had been tainted with subservience to the Western line and unconditional acceptance of Western stances. Thereby, it was non-national and even anti-national (*gayrimillî*); as such, it was detrimental to the very core of national existence. One of the main and original sins of this foreign policy involved its dissociation of Turkey from the Middle East (what was considered to be its natural habitus). This dissociation, however, stalled and doomed the prospects of Turkey’s international eminence and standing.

A frenzied public debate about the Middle East dimensions of Turkish foreign policy followed suit. This was, yet again, rather over the imageries attributed to the Middle East than the actual Middle East itself. References to the region implied tacit or overt assessments of the AKP’s foreign policy. For the AKP-intellectual-political-complex, the seculars in Turkey, tainted with an inferiority complex and embarrassed of their Middle Eastern identity, spiritually and physically repudiated their national identity and Middle Eastern affinities. For this very reason, Turkish foreign policy remained one-dimensionally headed towards the West and hence diminished in scope. This argument offered a constructivist perspective inferring that republican foreign policy was culturally determined.

Taha Özhan, the long-time chairman of the AKP-affiliated SETA think tank and later a Member of Parliament and advisor to Prime Minister Davutoğlu, in a much-quoted and tweeted article employed the metaphor of “Middle Eastern quagmire” to expose the inherent bias of the seculars. The quagmire metaphor was often used by the seculars to argue that Turkey should stay out of the Middle East so as not to be dragged into a quagmire. For Özhan, this phrase revealed the morbid mindset of the seculars; the “Middle East as quagmire” discourse was not only fraught with orientalism but also effective in discouraging any interference with the Middle East and thus dissociating Turkey from the region. Using a Saidian topos, he argued that his metaphor “reveal[ed] the self-orientalist culture immersed in the [Kemalist] elite”.²¹ Özhan took foreign policy as a function of identity. Yet, he shied away from assessing the AKP’s foreign policy according to the same criteria: identity politics. Arguing that the self-imposed orientalism of the secular elite had distorted their vision of foreign policy, Özhan shunned applying the same criteria towards the AKP foreign policy intellectuals, including himself.

Doğan Gürpınar, “Turkish Radicalism and its Images of the Ottoman Ancien Régime (1923-1938)”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 51, No 3, 2015, p. 395-415.

21 Taha Özhan, “Ortadoğu Bataklığı”, *Sabah*, 25 August 2012.

This was because he assumed that there existed only one legitimate and correct course of foreign policy, not coincidentally identical to the AKP's course. This trope, also shared by Davutoğlu and other AKP intellectuals, presumed that once the ruling elite attains self-esteem and national selfhood, Turkey would arise as a regional power and become the natural and rightful hegemon of the region. This conviction assumed that the low-key presence of Turkey within the regional and global arena had been a function of the Kemalist/republican elite's inferiority complex. Trumpeting the demise of the Kemalist guard and its replacement by a new elite as if a Moscan cycle, for them, was tantamount to the "normalization" of the Turkish foreign policy once the post-colonial and self-orientalist legacy was jettisoned.²²

The Crisis and Collapse of the Kemalist Foreign Policy Paradigm

Throughout the 2010s, the opposition to the Islamist AKP was organized over the Kemalist impulse and guided by Kemalist actors. The Kemalist critics denounced the AKP and its foreign policy as non-national or anti-national/treacherous (*gayrimillî*) mirroring pro-AKP pundits who readily indicted their critics along the same lines. For the Kemalist old guard, there could exist one single and legitimate national and rational foreign policy course that promoted and maximized the sacrosanct "national interests". This patriotic foreign policy course could only be intransigently Kemalist and an extension of the Kemalist upbringing (*Bildung*) in the diplomatic realm. This presumption rested on a particular historical perspective according to which the late Ottoman Empire, an era known as the *Tanzimat*, preceding the Kemalist revival, was associated with downright subordination to Western imperialism and interests. The Western intrusion was welcomed by the self-serving Ottoman ruling elite. This capitulation was overturned by the Kemalist victory and the subsequent Lausanne Treaty of 1923 that saved Turkey from downright surrender.²³ Therefore, for the old guard, Kemalist (that is secular, enlightened, and nationalistic) ideology and its foreign policy were the only legitimate course that secured and upheld the supreme and ultimate national interests. It rested on realist principles and only Kemalism could hold to realism and offer an uncompromising and unyielding stand. Thus, the realist paradigm was seen as indissoluble from the Kemalist *Bildung*. For Onur Öymen, retired ambassador and later Member of Parliament from the CHP (the main secular opposition party) and a public intellectual with staunch Kemalist credentials, "the republican foreign policy, realist, sturdy [and] ...fearlessly safeguarding the dignity, interests and the pride of its people..., upheld by the leadership of Atatürk will always be an inspiration for young Turkish diplomats."²⁴ For many, since the death of Atatürk there befell a gradual retreat in the diplomatic front. For Suat İlhan, a retired general and a prolific Kemalist public intellectual, "arrangements are made to compromise our independence and sovereignty with the EU and obliterate the towering pillars and quintessence of the Turkish republic founded by Atatürk."²⁵ For Atilla İlhan, "national defense, one of the three pillars of [Atatürk's] National Pact doctrine, was liquidated by Özal by deeming Turkey an accomplice of the

22 For a critique of the "secular elite" along the same lines, see Turgay Yerlikaya, "Self-Oryantalizm ve Yerli İslamofobyası", *Star Açık Görüş*, 16 June 2016.

23 For a more comprehensive assessment of this historical perspective prevalent in Kemalist and left-Kemalist, see Doğan Gürpınar, "The Making and Persistence of an Icon: The Imagery of the Tanzimat in Turkish Left (1960-2000)", *Turkish Review*, Vol. 6, No 1-2, 2016, p. 6-15.

24 Onur Öymen, *Silahsız Barış: Bir Mücadele Sanatı Olarak Diplomasi*, İstanbul, Remzi Kitabevi, 2007, p. 517.

25 Suat İlhan, *Türklerin Jeopolitiği ve Avrasyacılık*, İstanbul, Bilgi Yayınevi, 2005, p. 194.

United States.”²⁶ For these Kemalist intellectuals, it was crystal clear that the correct path of Turkish diplomacy had been established by Atatürk. Therefore, pertinence of any course of foreign policy was to be measured by its affinity to this foreign policy line. Only Kemalist foreign policy could uphold national interests.

Yet the public visibility of the Kemalist old guard and thereby its discourse came to subside. The new opposition following the 2013 Gezi riots infused with new left and liberal ethos came to dominate the new opposition discourse marginalizing the age-old Kemalist and nation-statist premises and arrived at a new formulation of Atatürkism.²⁷ Although Kemalism’s appeal endures, its hegemony within the secular intellectual public space was modified partially because the AKP government destructed the conventional media outlets that could amplify Kemalist oppositionary discourses. Organizing along another ideological line, the new post-Gezi opposition did not invoke Kemalist nation-statism at a time when nation-statist loyalties were weakened. In the post-Gezi era, opposition came to challenge the AKP’s foreign policy line not because it was anti-national but because it was self-serving to the AKP’s agenda, ideological stand, and cultural bend. Foreign policy orientations came to stand for ideological and cultural statements and for both sides of the cultural rift.

When pursuing pro-Western foreign policy and staunchly espousing EU integration, these orientations were concomitant with the AKP’s self-fashioning as a pious but progressive party. This was partly a ploy and a strategic maneuver against its increasingly anti-Western and xenophobic Kemalist adversaries. Subscribing to the Kemalist souverainism and anti-imperialism, the Kemalist opposition to the AKP had been organized and built on anti-Western premises. It had associated any move away from overcentralization as compromising national sovereignty to the imperialist West and shattering the Kemalist republic.²⁸ Yet with the AKP’s detour from the Western line, and with high ambitions in the Middle East, the opposition to the AKP inevitably gravitated from anti-imperialist bombast to pro-Western and pro-U.S. stands. This was a corollary of the liberal turn of the secular opposition subsequent to the Gezi protests and the new hegemonic discourse instigated by it. Therefore, foreign policy preferences came to self-consciously stand for and imply projections of political and ideological statements and were incorporated into the rubric of the cultural wars.

Ideologization of Foreign Policy Discourses: The Impact of the Arab Spring and Syrian Civil War

As argued at the beginning of the article, Turkish foreign policy had been long seen as the prerogative of an exclusive state elite. It was to be conducted professionally to advance the specific national interests, and thus had to be received with national backing across the political spectrum. However, that presumption withered sharply, and alternative foreign policy schemes came to be contested in the public debate incorporated into the culture wars. They became, in other words, rhetorical arsenals for the culture wars. Yet it was the Arab spring that had radically polarized foreign policy polemics and incited an impassioned debate over the mainstays of Turkish foreign policy.

26 Attila İlhan, *Dönek Bereketi*, İstanbul, İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2005, p. 56. Also see Erol Manisalı, *AKP, Ordu, Amerika Ekseninde Türkiye*, İstanbul, Truva Yayınları, 2008.

27 Doğan Gürpınar, *Kültür Savaşları: İslam, Sekülerizm ve Kimlik Siyasetinin Yükselişi*, İstanbul, Liberplus, 2016, p. 199-236

28 For the outlines of the secular nationalist (*ulusalcı*) opposition discourse against AKP in the 2000s, see Doğan Gürpınar, *Ulusalcılık: İdeolojik Önderlik ve Takipçileri*, İstanbul, Kitap Yayınları, 2011.

The finest hour of Tayyip Erdoğan's and the AKP's foreign policy came when Erdoğan called Mubarak to step down as the protests in al-Tahrir square were mounting but seemed not yet adequate to topple Mubarak. Turkey emerged as an avid sponsor of the high tide soaring in the streets of the Arab capitals. This tide arrived when people took to Damascus' streets after Mubarak and Ben Ali were toppled and other dictators appeared to be in their death throes. Yet high hopes were dashed, as Syria descended into a brutal civil war in which Bashar al-Asad's violent crackdown was countered by radicalized jihadists recruited from all corners of the Islamic world.²⁹ Although Erdoğan had fostered amicable relations with Asad's Syria, and sought to negotiate a compromise in the first months of the protests, Turkey emerged as a staunch backer of the Syrian opposition as the civil war escalated. Although Erdoğan and Davutoğlu gambled on the imminent fall of Asad, hoping that a Turkey-sanctioned government in Damascus would make Turkey a game-changer in the Middle East,³⁰ the civil war turned into a nightmare. As the Syrian secular opposition and Free Syrian Army collapsed and jihadist militants took over the opposition, the support for the Syrian opposition became increasingly controversial in Turkey. The AKP initially sought to organize the Syrian opposition around the Muslim Brotherhood-dominated-Syrian National Council, presuming that the Muslim Brotherhood's interests and the AKP's as a political party coincided and overlapped with Turkish national interests. Their impeccable coalescence was a mainstay of the AKP's ideological crux. This presumption became more intricate once this policy alienated the United States and Western anti-Asad allies and therefore arguably worked against national interests. AKP decisionmakers, however, persevered in assuming that Turkish national interests corresponded and immutably correlated with the AKP's ideological crux. Their indissolubility was an ideological prerequisite for AKP intelligentsia.

Turkey's contacts with jihadist groups, including Ahrar-al-Sham and more provocatively and speculatively the Al-Qaida affiliate Al-Nusrah, were vehemently denounced by the secular opposition. This denunciation was furthered by accusing the government of supporting ISIS, which was immediately denied by the government.³¹ This contestation was brought to new heights when weapons were discovered in lorries en route to Syria allegedly run by the Turkish intelligence agency. The government prosecuted the journalists and state officials involved in the exposure with high treason. Yet this leak further exacerbated the resentment towards the government and its foreign policy. Both sides charged each other with treachery to the sacrosanct national interests of Turkey perceived as ontological and perpetual.³²

Hafaz al-Asad had elicited no sympathy in Turkey. Syria had been the backer of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), the Kurdish separatist terrorist organization, until 1998, the year when PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was forced to flee Damascus. The Syrian regime had allowed the PKK to run its headquarters and military camp at the Syria-controlled Bekaa Valley in Lebanon. For these reasons, Syria was a dictatorship notoriously hostile to Turkey in the eyes of the Turkish mainstream. Asad's family's Alawi identity and the Syrian Baathist party's Alawite character were non-issues in Turkey. The only exception occurred when Recai Kutan, then the chairman of the Islamist Virtue

29 For an overview of the Arab spring and subsequent Arab fall, see James L. Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2015; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2014; Mark Lynch, *The New Arab Wars*, New York, Public Affairs, 2016.

30 "Sancılı Süreç Çok Uzun Sürmez", *Sabah*, 25 August 2012.

31 "Erdoğan'ın Emri ile IŞİD'e Silah Gönderildi", *Cumhuriyet*, 23 July 2014.

32 "Cumhuriyet'e TIR Soruşturması", *Sözcü*, 29 May 2015; "BM Harekete Geçebilir", *Cumhuriyet*, 29 May 2015.

Party, had defined the Syrian regime as governed by “a minority that follows the perverted belief of Alawism”.³³ Kutan encountered a massive uproar. As an exception proving the rule, Kutan apologized and backed down immediately from his provocative and sectarian statement. This was a time when Syria was seen as an archetypical Arab autocracy and downright enemy of Turkey, not only because of its support for the PKK but also due to the disputes over water resources and distribution of the Euphrates and Tigris basins.³⁴ Yet when Syria descended into a sectarian civil war among Alawites, Sunnis, foreign jihadists, Kurds, Christians and the Druze, Syrian sectarian conflicts and tensions fomented instability and shattered ethnic and confessional fault lines in Turkey.

Hatay, one of Turkey’s 81 provinces, borders Syria on the Mediterranean coast. Yet it is unique in that it was incorporated to Turkey only in 1939, after being snatched from Syria, then a French protectorate.³⁵ A substantial part of the local population is of Arab descent with Alawite faith. While they steadily vote for the CHP (the main opposition party with Kemalist and staunch secularist credentials), seeing the party as a bulwark of secularism against the religious Sunni majority, local Sunnis (both Turkish and Arab) vote predominantly for the AKP. This demographic chasm unleashed confessional tensions in the province. Many Alawites began to express their sympathies to Asad openly as their Nusayri brethren, as the Alawi identity of the Asad family and the Syrian regime became more overt.³⁶ Yet Hatay was but a microcosm of Turkey in terms of the demographic fault lines afflicted by the Syrian mayhem.

The CHP rank and file originating from the province became active in outlining the CHP’s position with regard to Syria, which was not later pursued further, partially due to the AKP’s near criminalization of any discontent regarding foreign policy. A CHP delegation, mainly composed of Turkish Arab Alawite MPs, had visited Bashar Asad twice during the civil war, officially for taking over Turkish hostages but practically to challenge the AKP’s avid support of Syrian opposition.³⁷ This visit ensued harsh criticism from AKP intelligentsia enthusiastic to find an alibi for their indictment of CHP with sectarianism. Although pro-AKP critics argued that this notorious visit disclosed the CHP’s true face, in fact, it marked a major departure from the party’s conventional foreign policy line. Traditionally, the CHP had been the epitome of alleged *raison d’état* and home of retired diplomats for whom foreign policy should be detached from ideological and political agendas and concerns.³⁸

Alevis’ preeminence in intraparty affairs was recent (and brief). Until 2010, the CHP was headed by Deniz Baykal, a staunch Kemalist representing the old guard Kemalist establishment within

33 “Kutan’dan Alevi Gafi”, *Sabah*, 7 October 1998.

34 Ayşegül Kibaroğlu, “Politics of Water Resources in the Nile, Jordan and Euphrates-Tigris: Three Rivers, Three Narratives”, *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 12, 2007, p. 143-164.

35 For the controversial takeover of the then-Sanjak from the French protectorate Syria, see Sarah D. Shields, *Fezzes into the River*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2011. For the Turkification policies implemented in the newly acquired region, see Levent Duman, *Hatay’da Uluslaştırma Politikaları*, İstanbul, İletişim Yayınları, 2016.

36 Currently Yael Navaro is working on her upcoming book on the radically transforming political, cultural and social landscape of Hatay with the hardening of identities and Alawite revival as a sequel of the Syrian civil war. Talk with Yael Navaro, Cambridge, 25 January 2017.

37 “CHP Heyeti Esad’ı Ziyaret Etti”, *Milliyet*, 7 March 2013; “Üç Aydır Tutsaktı, CHP Heyeti Teslim Aldı”, *Hürriyet*, 18 November 2012.

38 For an overview of the Kemalist paradigm entrenched in the republican diplomats seeing themselves as the gatekeepers of the transcendental father-state, see Doğan Gürpınar, “Reinvention of Kemalism: Kemalism Between Elitism, Anti-Elitism and Anti-Intellectualism”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 49, No 3, 2013, p. 461-463. Also see, Hüseyin Sert, *An Evaluation of Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1960-1980): An Adaptive Cold War Institution*, Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Boğaziçi University, 2018.

the party. As a Kemalist devoted to the nation-statist credo, he was steadfast in his hostility towards sectarian and ethnic networks active within the party as well as their left-leaning identity politics. The Kurdish wing had been forced to leave the party to establish an exclusively pro-Kurdish party in the early 1990s.³⁹ Yet after the forced resignation of Deniz Baykal in 2010 and his replacement with Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, himself an Alevi, Alevism became more prominent within the party's commanding heights and hence its policy-making offices and ideological setup.⁴⁰ The leftist wing also became more active. The new party top brass was more congenial to leftist politics (Alevism leaning to the left of the CHP mainstream) as well as Alevi networks. The CHP's rapprochement with the pro-Kurdish HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party) followed suit, appalling the Kemalist wing. Although the purported pro-Asad tendency was marginally renounced by the Kemalist guard, AKP intelligentsia found a gold mine in such an attribution for stigmatizing CHP as sectarian and non-national enhancing the "cultural divide".⁴¹ The AKP tacitly or openly associated the CHP with Alevism in a sectarian effort to reinforce the divide and depict the CHP as severed from the national core, despite the fact that Kemalism and CHP as a Kemalist bastion had been resolutely anti-sectarian, seeing itself as the state incarnate. The AKP's change of the form of CHP-bashing was an adaptation to the changing political milieu and age of cultural wars. This was followed by the AKP's propaganda machine's stigmatization of the CHP as allied with PKK as partners in their cultural war against Islamic and national sensitivities.

Turkey had vigorously posited itself within the Sunni axis (as led by the Muslim Brotherhood tide) against the Shiite "axis of resistance" (or "Shia crescent" as first coined by King Abdullah II of Jordan⁴²) led by Iran. This realignment complied with the AKP's cultural proclivities. The Muslim Brotherhood promised a transnational Sunni revival, and the AKP perceived itself an active agent of this regional historical shift. A comparable bent, however, applied not only to the Islamists and seculars but also to Alevism, Kurds and other identity clusters.⁴³ The CHP's departure from its traditional foreign policy line, which had treated foreign policy as a non-partisan issue and *raison d'état* not to be interfered with domestic politics and impaired by petty interests, was a sequel to the changing political and cultural environment.⁴⁴ It is no coincidence that this shift was molded by identity concerns and ideational predispositions concomitant with the transformation of the culture of the AKP's foreign policy-making.

39 For the workings of the CHP intra-party Alevi network, and Baykal's suppression of this network, see Derya Kömürçü, *Türkiye'de Sosyal Demokrasi Arayışı*, İstanbul, Agora, 2010; Harald Schüler, *Türkiye'de Sosyal Demokrasi: Particilik, Hemşehrilik, Alevilik*, İstanbul, İletişim Yayınları, 2002; Hakkı Uyar, *Karadenizli Bir Politikacı: Aytekin Kotil (1934-1992)*, Ankara, Anka-Ha, 2014.

40 Doğan Gürpınar, *Kültür Savaşları: İslam, Sekülerizm ve Kimlik Siyasetinin Yükselişi*, p. 185-186.

41 For the rise of Alevi identity, sectarianism and AKP's politics, see Ayfer Karakaya-Stump, "The AKP, Sectarianism, and the Alevi' Struggle for Equal Rights in Turkey", *National Identities*, Vol. 20, No 1, 2017, p. 53-67. It should be noted, however, the preponderance of Alevism ceased in the next years of Kılıçdaroğlu's chairmanship. That is another story beyond the scope of this article.

42 Christopher Phillips, *Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2016, p. 21.

43 Interestingly, the case was not that different in the Arab Middle East despite the deep-seated grievances between the Sunnis and Shia. It was only in 2008 that "in a poll of 4,000 Arabs from Egypt, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Lebanon and Jordan...the three most popular leaders were Hasan Nasrallah of Hezbollah, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Bashar al-Assad, two Shia and an Alawi. However, a regional sectarian narrative had now been established and, to an extent, normalized." Christopher Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, p. 21.

44 For CHP's opposition to AKP's foreign policy line, see Esen Kırdış, "The Role of Foreign Policy in Constructing the Party Identity of the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP)", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 1, No 2, 2015, p. 188.

Secular public intellectuals and the CHP steadily depicted AKP's foreign policy in alliance with Saudi Arabia and Qatar as sectarian. They considered this policy to be selectively overlooking the strain with Saudi Arabia over ideological and political issues as well as over Turkey's pro-Muslim Brotherhood line. The inherent tensions between the AKP and Saudi Arabia were exposed to the Turkish secular- and non-secular-mainstream only by Saudi Arabia's ultimatum to Qatar in 2017 and the crisis between Turkey and Saudi Arabia over the violent killing of Jamal Khashoggi in 2018. Turkey's swift rapprochement with Iran after Qatar reconciled with Iran by 2018 as an ally against the increasingly bellicose Saudi Arabia showed that the extent of Sunni sectarianism was not that enduring. Yet attributing sectarianism (and an overblown Sunni identity vis-à-vis Shiites) to the AKP's transnational Islamism was self-serving for the opposition in an era of identity politics. This was an age in which foreign policy preferences became extensions of identity politics and predispositions. Foreign policy turned into ideological clashes by other means.

As ISIS rose as a formidable power in Eastern Syria and Western Iraq, leaving the Iraqi army and the Iraqi Kurdistan stranded, the only military body that could resist and challenge ISIS emerged as the PYD (Democratic Union Party), the Syrian branch of PKK. As ISIS sieged PYD-governed Kobani (the Kurdish town straddling the border between Turkey and Syria) in fall 2014, this siege ignited a heavy outburst in Kurdish populated southeastern Turkey.⁴⁵ In the intra-Kurdish clashes that erupted between PKK sympathizers and Kurdish Islamists (Hüda-par, previously known as Kurdish Hizbullah notorious for violent killings throughout the region⁴⁶) during the Kobani siege, a total of 52 people from both sides were killed. The pro-Kurdish HDP steadily blamed the AKP for supporting ISIS against the "Kurds".⁴⁷ This denunciation found resilient backing as it could address the Kurdish constituency's resentments and further mobilize them towards the Kurdish left-nationalist line. That was partially due to the fact that the Syrian policy opening intra-Kurdish fault lines between left-nationalist Kurds and conservative Kurds supporting the government. The internationalization of Kurdish politics meant that any foreign policy line cannot be dissociable from the state's Kurdish policies whether securitized or liberal. The Syrian civil war shattered Turkish society, as its cultural clusters (e.g., ethnic, confessional) elicited not only diverging but also contrasting loyalties, sympathies, and affinities towards the war.

Domestic Uses of Foreign Policy

The Arab Spring also radically transformed the geopolitics of the region. Iran became increasingly concerned with the Sunni "awakening"/mobilization, which could upset the vulnerable balance within the region and thereby weaken its regional power. Therefore, Iran masterminded a united Shi'a front against the Muslim Brotherhood tide with its Arab allies, namely Bashar Assad, Hezbollah, Yemeni Houthi militia, Iraqi Shias and others, and became the ultimate nemesis in the eyes of the Arab street. The growing prominence of the Muslim Brotherhood also boosted the prospects of the

45 For the Kurdish bent of support towards ISIS in Turkey, see Doğu Eroğlu, *IŞİD Ağları*, İstanbul, İletişim Yayınları, 2018. It is remarkable to observe in this comprehensive and meticulous documentative study of ISIS networks in Turkey that the majority of the sympathizers and recruits in even cities lacking significant Kurdish population like Konya are heavily Kurdish.

46 For the Kurdish Hizbullah, see Mehmet Kurt, *Türkiye'de Hizbullah*, İstanbul, İletişim Yayınları, 2015; Ruşen Çakır, *Derin Hizbullah*, İstanbul, İletişim Yayınları, 2016.

47 "Demirtaş: IŞİD, Türkiye'den Kobani'ye Saldırıyor, Görüntüleri Var", *Cumhuriyet*, 30 November 2014.

AKP leadership. Turkey found itself in the midst of a mounting sectarian Cold War as an aftereffect of the ousting of Saddam Hussein, which amounted to a geopolitical disruption throughout the region as well as an intra-Sunni Cold War between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Qatar resolutely encouraged and sponsored the Muslim Brotherhood tide throughout the Middle East, not only against Iran but also increasingly against Saudi Arabia and its regional anti-Muslim Brotherhood clientele.⁴⁸

This regional polarization went hand in hand with the sharpening cultural war in Turkey, especially following the Gezi riots in June 2013. This massive protest erupted when a small number of youngsters “occupied” Gezi Park in Taksim, located at the very center of Istanbul, to halt the construction of a planned mall over the park. After four days and nights of “occupation”, the police ousted the youngsters with force. Yet, the tension swelled. When the police responded with brutality and tear gas, the resistance only increased. Tens of thousands of youngsters joined the protestors. After a night of clashes between the police and the protestors exposed to tear gas, the police became reluctant to allow the “reoccupation” of the park, but now with thousands of jubilant protestors. Although the protest had originated as an environmentalist cause with miniscule following, the excessive police violence and the fact that the planned mall was a pet project of Erdoğan to symbolically take over the prestigious and hip Beyoğlu hub of bohemia and entertainment, the protest turned hostile, targeting exclusively Erdoğan and his cultural politics.⁴⁹ The crisis brought the imagination of two moral communities, whose breach is insurmountable based on their contradicting visions of Turkishness. Their diverging national visions were also reflected in Turkey’s international positioning and international priorities, which trivialize realpolitik exigencies.⁵⁰

The Gezi riots became a milestone in Turkish politics in terms of discursive political space. It was the first time that the secular opposition gained a victory, albeit an ephemeral and symbolic one. It also exposed the severity of the lack of cultural capital that the AKP and the Islamic establishment entertains. Furthermore, it elicited a major crisis of moral legitimacy that had to be immediately mitigated. This moral crisis prompted the AKP leadership to seek alternative claims to legitimacy and a moral upper hand. The Middle East became a ground to “export” righteousness and the rhetoric of victimhood. Auspiciously, just one month after the outbreak of the Gezi riots and protestors enjoying high moral ground, the military in Egypt toppled the Muslim Brotherhood after a series of anti-Muslim Brotherhood protests held in Tahrir Square led by the Tamarod movement, thereby partially serving to justify the military coup. Misrepresenting the Egyptian military as the bastion of secularism as an equivalent of the now politically moribund Turkish military, the AKP leadership used this attribution to discredit the Gezi protestors. Guilt by association, this linkage implied that Gezi protestors were pro-militarist and anti-democratic like their Egyptian protesting brethren despite their self-styling as peaceful, progressive and democratic.⁵¹

48 For the Turkish-Qatari regional alliance, see Birol Başkan, *Turkey and Qatar in the Tangled Geopolitics of the Middle East*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016. For the Turkish-Qatari alliance in the Syrian civil war, see Christopher Phillips, *Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the Middle East*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2016, p. 125-146. For an interpretation of AKP’s new Middle East policies in the age of the Arab Spring, see Aaron Stein, *Turkey’s New Foreign Policy: Davutoğlu, the AKP, and the Pursuit of Regional Order*, London, Routledge, 2015. Also see Birol Başkan, *Turkey and Qatar*.

49 For the 2013 Gezi riots and its repercussions, see Doğan Gürpınar, *Kültür Savaşları: İslam, Sekülerizm ve Kimlik Siyasetinin Yükselişi*, p. 199-236; Umut Özkırımlı (ed.), *The Making of a Protest Movement in Turkey*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2014; Emrah Göker, Vefa Saygın Öğütle (eds.), *Gezi ve Sosyoloji*, İstanbul, Ayrıntı Yayınları, 2014.

50 Doğan Gürpınar, *Kültür Savaşları*, p. 311-334.

51 Yasin Aktay, “Darbecilerin Kardeşliği”, *Yeni Şafak*, 27 July 2013.

Furthermore, as the Arab Spring challenged and toppled Baathist, secular (and some left-leaning) dictatorships and nurtured the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, the dichotomy between the Baathist dictatorships and the Muslim Brotherhood was rendered absolute overlooking all other popular grievances. Subsequently, this dichotomy was applied/exported to the Turkish context.⁵² The Muslim Brotherhood was equated with the democratic aspirations of the masses and hence the “national will” (*milli irade*). This was tantamount to the AKP’s self-portrayal as the bearer of the national will and political body of the Turkish people (as an organic community) organized against the usurper secular elites, as expressed most blatantly by one AKP public intellectual and member of parliament: “We have seen the true face and spirit of those who had praised the ‘spirit of Gezi’ and had delivered sociological justifications in the case of Egypt. Take aside scant genuine environmentalists from Gezi, what remains is outright coup d’etat mongering temper.”⁵³

Thereby, the political divide, vocabulary, and themes in Turkey were expanded to the Middle East. The AKP demonized and associated its domestic foes with its international foes, delineating an axis of evil comprised of international foes such as Asad, Israel, Iran, and domestic foes such as the secular opposition party CHP, Gezi protestors, and the now-notorious Gülen group, depicting them in close collaboration running an impossible alliance. The seculars were equated with the Baathists and Middle Eastern dictatorships, most vocally by one AKP public intellectual and ex-director of the state news agency: “We have a fight with the baltagiya in Egypt, with the shabihis in Syria, with the [Shiite] sectarians in Iraq, and with the pro-Gezi people, Gülenists and Kobanists in Turkey.”⁵⁴ In contrast, the AKP was amalgamated into a transnational network with common sensitivities, agenda, and destiny. Yasin Aktay, the chairman of a pro-AKP think tank (SDE) and later the AKP’s chief foreign relations officer, welcomed the Arab Spring as heralding the unification of the region under the aegis of the Muslim Brotherhood:

“Soon, the Muslim Brotherhood will most likely become the preeminent power in all the Middle Eastern countries. This preeminence will also likely lead to the inevitable unification of those countries that will be refurbished by the [Arab] Spring. That means ‘regional unification.’ Turkey’s strategic objective for years is now finding fertile ground thanks to the Muslim Brotherhood’s vision of foreign relations. It would not be misleading to opine that the new sympathy harbored for Turkey derives from the crescendo of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood is already assuming power in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.”⁵⁵

Mohammad Morsi and Khaled Mashal (of Hamas) became regular guests in AKP party congresses, invited not only to display the new region-wide solidarity and transnational politics but also to demonstrate that the AKP was part of the transnational Islamic solidarity run by the Muslim Brotherhood network.⁵⁶ Yet, again, Rashid Gannushi, the leader of the Tunisian an-Nahda spoke from the rostrum in a local pre-election AKP rally in Adıyaman, a minor city.⁵⁷

52 Ibid.; Yasin Aktay, “Mısır’da İflas Eden Batılı Demokrasi”, *Yeni Şafak*, 8 July 2013; Yasin Aktay, “Mısır’ı Kim Kazandı, Kim Kaybetti?”, *Yeni Şafak*, 15 July 2013; Yasin Aktay, “Adeviye’de Teselli Arayan Şaşkın Darbeci”, *Yeni Şafak*, 22 July 2013.

53 Mehmet Metiner, “Türkiye’nin Baltacıları Darbe İstemiyor mu!”, *Yeni Şafak*, 20 August 2013.

54 Ali Nur Kutlu, “Bizim Kavgamız”, *Yeni Şafak*, 3 December 2014.

55 Yasin Aktay, “Hasan el-Benna ve İhvan Kimliği”, *Yeni Şafak*, 7 May 2012. Also see, Yasin Aktay, “Hasan el-Benna ve İhvan Sempozyumu”, *Yeni Şafak*, 5 May 2012.

56 Birol Başkan, *Turkey and Qatar...*, p. 92, 100. In fact, King Abdullah II of Jordan had spoken of “Muslim Brotherhood Crescent” referring to the ideological convergence and collaboration between the MB of Egypt and AKP of Turkey. See *ibid.*, p. 107.

57 “Ak Parti’nin Adıyaman Mitingi”, *Radikal*, 9 May 2015.

The AKP associated its self-portrayal as personifying the nation that moved from the periphery to the center (i.e. state), as the new and organic hegemon that rules the nation with the radically new and self-assured foreign policy of Turkey. Erdoğan argued: “we had imagined a Turkey that is self-standing, self-respectful, bearing an ambition and decrying ‘I am here’ out of a Turkey that had been both domestically and internationally humiliated and pilloried.”⁵⁸ As the AKP posited itself as an ardent backer of the street protests in the Middle East, domestic foes were also associated with the partisans of the dictatorships from Egypt and Tunisia to Yemen and Syria. Thereby, the national divide between the “national will/nation” and the loathed “secular elite” was exported and projected to the Middle East. The domestic divide was to be further justified with references to regional controversies and rifts. Kemal Öztürk [Ali Nur Kutlu] argued: “We don’t keep cats or dogs; we don’t cry for seals; we don’t campaign for the rights of homosexuals. Instead, we raise pious children at home; we cry for our deceased Syrian brethren and campaign for the 528 innocents sentenced to death sentence [in Egypt].”⁵⁹ Comparing the actual sufferings of the Middle East with the snobbery of the Gezi protestors, whose agenda and priorities including queer and animal rights and sexual freedom, he ridiculed the shallowness of their demands and how they are out of touch with the people and the social reality. The “democratization” in Turkey and the imminent democratization within the broader region were amalgamated not only in terms of its proponents but also regarding its foes, as noted by Yalçın Akdoğan, a close and influential consultant of Erdoğan and public intellectual: “The intolerance against the partial democratization of Egypt is an indication of the age of the ascendancy of popular politics [in the Middle East, as like what is happening in Turkey].”⁶⁰

In this imagination, the divide between domestic and foreign faded as artificial borders drawn by the notorious Sykes-Picot secret deal between Britain and France had collapsed. As 2016 was the centennial of the notorious Sykes-Picot Agreement, this theme was a bounty to those readily trumpeting the return of Turkey to the Middle East, after a century of oblivion subsequent to its disengagement from the region devised by imperialist scheming. Davutoğlu, then prime minister, argued that;

“When we look at the map [drawn at Sykes-Picot], we immediately fathom the objectives of the underlying mentality behind the agreement; to tear off Anatolia from Mesopotamia, to tear off Tigris and Euphrates from [the western Anatolian river of] Sakarya; to isolate the spirit of Mesopotamia from the spirit of Roumelia and Caucasia.”⁶¹

Yet, one century later, things seemed to have changed. Whereas Turkey had been resurrected after decades of isolation thanks to the AKP’s assumption to power, the Middle East as a whole was simultaneously undergoing an era of revival. It was breaking the shackles of Sykes-Picot that had “imposed the imperialist tutelage” over the peoples of the Middle East. This was not merely a coincidence. The fortunes of Turkey and the Middle East are inextricably amalgamated. Thereby, not coincidentally, their prospects are thriving simultaneously. The Sykes-Picot theme also allowed the essentialization and historicization of the AKP narrative.⁶²

58 Quoted in Yasin Doğan, “Siz Kimsiniz?,” *Yeni Şafak*, 2 July 2014.

59 Ali Nur Kutlu, “Merkez Kim, Çevre Neresi? Anadolu İnsanı mı, Beyaz Türkler mi?,” *Yeni Şafak*, 16 April 2014.

60 Yasin Doğan [Yalçın Akdoğan], “Rejim mi İhraç Ediyoruz?,” *Yeni Şafak*, 21 August 2013.

61 “Başbakan Davutoğlu: Kut’ül Amare’yi Anlamayan 23 Nisan’ı Anlamaz,” *Hürriyet*, 29 April 2016, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/basbakan-davutoglu-kutul-amareyi-anlamayan-23-nisani-anlamamaz-40096971> (Accessed on 1 September 2019).

62 For some ruminations over the Sykes-Picot theme, see Akif Emre, “Post-Sykes Picot Modeli mi?” *Yeni Şafak*, 13 October 2015; Yasin Aktay, “Yüz Yıl Sonra Yeni bir Sykes Picot mu?” *Yeni Şafak*, 24 October 2015; Erhan Afyoncu, “İşte Ortadoğu’yu Kan Gölüne Çeviren İki Batılı: Sykes ve Picot,” *Sabah*, 7 February 2016.

Another “timely” and extremely expedient centennial celebrated with fanfare was the First Battle of Kut, fought in today’s Southern Iraq during the First World War, in which the Ottoman army defeated British troops and took the British commander General Charles Townshend hostage. A pseudo-historiography of the commemoration of the battle was devised according to which the battle was deliberately obliterated to erase the Turkish nexus to the Middle East by obscuring Ottoman victories either a-) by the Kemalist regime or b-) as demanded by the British after Turkey joined NATO.⁶³ Then Prime Minister Davutoğlu argued in the commemoration of the battle: “The battle of Kut is not a victory that deserves obliteration. Yet, the old Turkey mentality (*eski Türkiye anlayışı*) for years shunned from evoking this battle and, on the contrary, persistently aimed to erase its memory.”⁶⁴ *Derin Tarih* (Deep History), an Islamist popular historical magazine, devoted one of its cover issues to the battle, consecrating it as an obscured Ottoman victory.⁶⁵ The battle was also incorporated into the new school curriculum with due space designed by the Ministry of Education in 2017.⁶⁶

The unfolding anti-immigration discourse towards Syrian refugees in Turkey, who exceeded three million and a half by 2019, suffused with racism and contempt for Arabs, a prevalent Kemalist trope associating Islam or the “adulterated” practice of Islam with Arabic uncivilization, was exhaustively consumed by the AKP-affiliated intelligentsia and politicians. For them, these demeaning rants exposed the inherent racism and contempt of the secular elite towards the Middle East, yet another strategy of associating the Kemalist/secular elite with Arab dictators. Whereas the conservatives were welcoming – hardly true given the shared disgruntlement with Syrian refugees – towards Syrian refugees (like *ansar*, the 7th century Medinans welcoming the prophet and Meccan exiles), the seculars despised them with racist grunt.⁶⁷ This contemptuous attitude towards Syrian refugees was also inevitably linked with the contemporary Europeans fraught with racism and anti-immigrationism, Islamophobia being their common denominator.⁶⁸

The party leadership and political-intellectual complex also argued for the “ethical” nature of the AKP’s foreign policy. This ethical dimension allegedly posed a contrast with the non-moral (or immoral) nature of the foreign policy of its predecessor (“old Turkey” of Kemalism). The reference to the immoral or opportunistic foreign policy, in fact, implied the Kemalist establishment’s foreign policy priorities, proclivities that did not coincide with the mores and cultural texture of Turkish society. This breach posed a contrast to a foreign policy that now favored the Islamic human geography, prospects and expectations. The AKP leadership tacitly equated “moral foreign policy” with siding with the Islamic world, partially stemming from the presumption that Muslims are relentlessly facing injustices and sufferings globally. Myanmar’s persecution of the Rohingya, Somalian turmoil, and Moros in Philippines all became causes championed by the AKP, as showcasing its humanitarian and moral foreign policy as well as an act of transnational Muslim solidarity. Hence, this moral stance is to be juxtaposed against a foreign policy that does not respect moral obligations and remains indifferent

63 Yıldırım Oğur, “Unuttuğumuzu Unutmanın Hikayesi”, *Karar*, 10 February 2018.

64 “Başbakan Davutoğlu: Kut’ül Amare’yi Anlamayan 23 Nisan’ı Anlamaz”.

65 Mustafa Armağan, “Kütü’l-Amâre Zaferi Neden Unutturuldu?”, *Derin Tarih*, No 49, April 2016, p. 3-4

66 “MEB’in yeni ‘Değer’i Cihad”, *Cumhuriyet*, 15 January 2017.

67 Ali Nur Kutlu, “Merkez Kim, Çevre Neresi?...”; “Erdoğan Bu Kez Nobel’i Fırçaladı”, *Cumhuriyet*, 16 October 2015; Turgay Yerlikaya, “Self-Oryantalizm ve Yerli İslamofobyası”.

68 Talip Küçükcan, “Avrupa İslamofobiye Teslim mi?”, *Star Açık Görüş*, 6 December 2009; Murat Güzel, “ABD Seçimleri ve İslamofobi”, *Star Açık Görüş*, 28 May 2016; “Prof. Talip Küçükcan: Avrupa Ülkeleri ‘Suçun Şahsiliği’ İlkesini Unutmamalı”, *Star*, 12 January 2015; Hilal Barın, “İslamofobi Pazarı”, *Star Açık Görüş*, 10 May 2015.

to Muslim sufferings. Thus, it is simultaneously rendered non-ethical and non-national (*gayrimilli*). Another expedient theme was Turkey's welcoming of more than three million Syrians, a magnanimity that should be awarded with a Nobel Peace Prize if the Nobel committee was not so hypocritical.⁶⁹

Even the very rhetoric of the dichotomy of national will vs. tutelage (*vesayet*) was adapted and transplanted to the foreign policy arena. Accordingly, the AKP "liberated Turkish foreign policy from tutelage", supplanting the pro-Western Turkish foreign policy devised by the (secular) insulated, old state elite. The course of the AKP's foreign policy, on the contrary, was presented as the natural extension of the national/ popular will.⁷⁰ Erdoğan not only openly lampooned Turkish diplomats as "*mon chers*" (a derogatory phrase referring to the aristocratic manners of the Turkish diplomats⁷¹) but once infamously disparaged the Turkish ambassador to Berlin during his Berlin visit for his "*mon chér*" manners.⁷² The AKP's populism ensued derision of diplomats as members of a "superwesternized elite alienated from the values of the nation".⁷³

Likewise, after regimes hostile to Turkey endured (Syria) or took over (Egypt, Iraq, Libya), which isolated Turkey from the region, the AKP outlined a new discourse of "precious loneliness" (*değerli yalnızlık*). This was first articulated by İbrahim Kalın, then an advisor to the prime minister and a heavyweight AKP foreign policy maker. He argued that the hostile attitudes of the Middle Eastern regimes were not detrimental to Turkey because Turkey was siding with the region's peoples, which would inevitably empower Turkey thanks to the deep sympathy of the Arab street.⁷⁴ As prime minister, Davutoğlu argued along the same lines:

"We were committed to close the parenthesis [the artificial disengagement of Turkey and Middle East imposed with Sykes-Picot]...via establishing good relations with the states [of the region] but the nature of our partner states didn't allow us to succeed. Now we are aiming to do the same by directly addressing the peoples [of the region]."⁷⁵

Thus, Turkey will reap the benefits of its principled, ethical, and righteous foreign policy in the future. Turkey was sponsoring "national will" against insulated elites and "tutelary regimes" regionwide, renouncing the realist paradigm in foreign policy in favor of an idealist one, and overturning state-to-state diplomacy. In the Middle East, one previously had to negotiate and come to terms with iron-fist dictators regardless of their ideological orientations. Yet the Arab Spring meant that non-state and sub-state actors (from Iraqi Kurdistan to Lebanese sectarian parties and Muslim Brotherhood network) became partners that canceled out states as the sole and major foreign policy makers. That also meant ideologies and convictions could easily precede supposed realpolitik agendas.

These rhetorical ploys were less musings over foreign policy matters but more discourses aimed at domestic audience and ends. Foreign policy served merely as another outlet for these

69 "Erdoğan Bu Kez Nobel'i Fırçaladı", *Cumhuriyet*, 16 October 2015, http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/siyaset/389091/Erdoğan_bu_kez_Nobel_i_fircaladi.html (Accessed on 1 September 2019).

70 Mehmet Emin Birpınar, "Restorasyonun Yeni Mimarı: Ahmet Davutoğlu", *Star Açık Görüş*, 25 October 2014.

71 For a satire of the diplomats as *mon chers*, see Cemil Ünlütürk, *Monşerler: Hikaye-i Hariciye*, Ankara, İsim Yayınları, 2011.

72 "Uygulamada Bir Yanlılık Olabilir", *Hürriyet*, 27 May 2006.

73 For the popular depiction of Turkish diplomats as aloof from Turkish society and its moral universe, see Doğan Gürpınar, *Ottoman Imperial Diplomacy*, London, I. B. Tauris, 2014, p. 226-227. For a classic book of this genre, see Ergun Göze, *Dışişleri Kavgası*, İstanbul, Ser-Da, 1975.

74 Zeynep Gürcanlı, "Dış Politikada 'Değerli Yalnızlık' Dönemi", *Hürriyet*, 21 August 2013.

75 "Ahmet Davutoğlu: Yüzyıllık Parantezi Kapatacağız", *Yeni Şafak*, 1 March 2013.

apparatchiks to draw clear-cut divisions, forge identities, develop arguments, and debunk political adversaries. No visible demarcation between foreign policy and domestic agendas were observed in these bravados.

Conclusion

The growing preeminence of “politics” and ideology over imagined sacrosanct state interests was observed much earlier in the United States and Western Europe.⁷⁶ The replication of this pattern became possible in Turkey after the demise of the national security establishment in the 2000s. Yet the Turkish trajectory was not a mere duplication of the Western pattern. The escalation of cultural wars transformed many issues into fronts of this showdown, including foreign policy, which became a battleground for contesting Turkish identity.

Foreign policy became even more contested terrain with the unfolding Arab Spring, which unleashed an escalating regional war fought via proxies between Saudi Arabia and Iran but also between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. This mayhem also affected Turkish ethnic, confessional, and political rifts. Refusing to draw a clear distinction between domestic politics and foreign policy, the AKP determined its foreign policy course accordingly. The Turkish position in the Syrian civil war revealed this shift, as the government failed to wield consensus with regard to its Syrian policy. The nation-statist culture of consensus in Turkish foreign policy dissolved.

Following blunders in the course of its overambitious and overstretched Syrian policies and elsewhere in the Middle East, Turkey reverted to a give-and-take realist foreign policy, restlessly seeking close relations not only with Russia but also with Iran. Meanwhile, relations with Saudi Arabia deteriorated severely. The overambitious pro-Muslim Brotherhood stand dwindled as the Syrian opposition was squeezed. The Sunni fervor juxtaposed against the Shiite surge also evaporated as new geopolitical alignments dictated it. The AKP recalibrated its Syrian policy reconciling it with the Russian line following the blunder in Syria. Yet the AKP did not abandon its resolutely anti-Assad line despite its succumtion to Russia, rejecting to establish any dialogue with Damascus. Likewise, the AKP denied any dialogue with the Sisi regime as signaling its firm pro-Muslim Brotherhood and transnational Islamist line. These show that despite pragmatism, an extensive room for populist posture and ideological conviction remained. The Turkish intervention in Syria was to be the showcase of a new foreign policy in accordance with the AKP’s ideological proclivities and intellectual penchants, challenging and diverting from the long-standing Turkish republican foreign policy practice. It was hoped to ascertain the moral and realpolitik superiority of the AKP’s alternative statecraft and cultural paradigm, which should supplant the Kemalist ones. This symbolic challenge was a major reason why it became a hotly contested terrain between two cultural camps.

The discourse on foreign policy and the AKP’s portrayal of it do not necessarily comply with its practice. Davutoğlu was embarrassingly ousted from the prime ministry in 2016 followed by the debunking of his hubris and “absentminded ambitions” in the governmental press and outlets. The failed overambitious Middle Eastern policy was retrospectively attributed to Davutoğlu’s illusionary adventurism by AKP-affiliated intelligentsia, tantamount to a sweeping denunciation of the half-

76 For the politicization of bureaucracy in the late 20th century, see Ben Young, Robert Hazell, *Special Advisers: Who They Are, What They Do and Why They Matter*, Portland, Hart Publishers, 2014, p. 205-206.

decade course of AKP foreign policy. Yet the AKP continues to own its foreign policy as one of its main identifiers, notwithstanding the backpedaling in its foreign policy. Its foreign policy rhetoric can hardly be dissociable from its populist rhetoric. Unflinching faith completely overlapping the AKP's ideological commitments and national interests continues to hold. This continues to be met with an equally tense and resilient opposition to the AKP's foreign policy that conceives foreign policy as a continuation of domestic politics once the clout of the Kemalist state elite's grip over Turkish secular opposition lost its discursive hegemony. In the age of post-truth, in which populism thrives and there is a lack of informed and bipartisan public debate culture and media, it seems that this highly partisan debate over foreign policy and its employment as a populist platform will endure.