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Turkey's Middle East Policies

Between
Neo-Ottomanism
and Kemalism

Ömer Taspınar

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Summary

In what represents a remarkable departure from its policy of non-involvement, Turkey is once again becoming an important player in the Middle East. In recent years, Ankara has shown a growing willingness to mediate in the Arab–Israeli conflict; attended Arab League conferences; contributed to UN forces in Lebanon and NATO forces in Afghanistan; assumed a leadership position in the Organization of Islamic Conference and established closer ties with Syria, Iran, and Iraq.

There are two main factors behind Ankara’s new activism in the Middle East: neo-Ottomanism and the Kurdish challenge. Ironically, these two drivers of Turkish foreign policy are often at odds. The Kurdish challenge is essentially defined by the Kemalist norms of the Turkish Republic which consider Kurdish nationalism to be an existential threat to Turkey’s territorial integrity and regional security. Neo-Ottomanism, on the other hand, is less obsessed with the Kurdish question and more focused on Turkey’s “soft power.” In terms of its geo-strategic vision, neo-Ottomanism is void of imperialist expansionism but determined to promote a high profile diplomatic, political, and economic role for Turkey in the larger Middle East and Europe. At peace with Turkey’s Muslim heritage and multiple identities, neo-Ottomanism is also much more ambitious and idealistic than Kemalism in projecting Turkey as a regional superpower.

In dealing with the Middle East and the Kurdish question, the challenge for Ankara will be to balance its Kemalist and neo-Ottoman instincts carefully. The Kurdish question is likely to remain the central factor in the formulation of Turkey’s regional security policy. The terrorist threat posed by the PKK will continue to play into the hands of hardliners within the Kemalist establishment. However, since military means alone will not solve the problem, it is Turkey’s soft power and neo-Ottoman self-confidence that are more likely to achieve a peaceful and pragmatic solution to the Kurdish conflict.

Introduction

After many decades of passivity and neglect toward the Middle East, Turkey is once again becoming an active player in that region. For most of its republican history, Ankara did not consider the Middle East a foreign policy priority. The official ideology of the republic, Kemalism, turned its back on the Islamic

world and pursued an exclusively Western path. This one-sided orientation began to change with the end of the Cold War, parallel to new geostrategic horizons, threats, and opportunities in regions surrounding Turkey. As a result, first under the late Turgut Özal (prime minister 1983–1989; president 1989–1993) and more recently, since 2002, under the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Turkey has become more involved in the greater Middle East. In recent years, Ankara has taken a more active approach toward the Israeli–Palestinian conflict; sent troops to the NATO mission in Afghanistan; contributed to UN forces in Lebanon; assumed a leadership position in the Organization of Islamic Conference; attended several Arab League conferences; established closer ties with Iran, Iraq, and Syria; and improved its economic, political, and diplomatic relations with most Arab and Muslim states.

Not everyone is happy about Turkey's new engagements. Turkey is deeply polarized over its Muslim, secular, and national identities, and Turkish foreign policy is certainly not immune from such divisions. In one camp, the secularist critics of the AKP government maintain that Turkey's activism in the Middle East betrays the republic's Western vocation and orientation. These skeptics usually focus on AKP's Muslim political pedigree and tend to see a hidden Islamic agenda behind openings to the Arab world. In the opposing camp are those who argue that such an Islamic agenda simply does not exist, mainly on the grounds that the AKP is the most pro-European Union political party on the Turkish scene. Despite its Islamic roots, the AKP has indeed worked much harder than previous Turkish governments to improve Ankara's chances of EU membership. Such efforts were eventually rewarded with the opening of accession negotiations between Turkey and the European Union in December 2005.

Since neither camp is able to convince the other, this polarized debate about the AKP's intentions and the future orientation of Turkish domestic and foreign policy continues. Moreover, questions raised by Turkey's new interest in the Middle East are hardly confined to the Turkish domestic debate. Ankara's Middle East policy also presents a dilemma for policy makers in Washington, who are often puzzled by Turkey's rapprochement with countries such as Syria and Iran.

What is the reason for Ankara's new interest in the Middle East? The following study is an attempt to answer this question by looking at two driving forces behind Turkish policy that are in conflict, namely neo-Ottomanism and the Kurdish challenge. Turkey's Middle East policy is increasingly shaped by the tension between these two alternative visions and priorities. Neo-Ottomanism is at odds with the Kurdish-centric focus for a simple reason. Turkey's Kurdish challenge is defined by the Kemalist norms of the republic, which neo-Ottomanism seeks to transcend. Kemalism considers Kurdish ethnicity and nationalism as existential threats to the national and territorial integrity of the Turkish Republic. Even Kurdish language and cultural rights are deemed dangerous, on the grounds that they make the assimilation of Kurds

into the Turkish nation (the official policy of the Kemalist Republic since 1923) much more difficult. Moreover, Turkey's concern about Kurds goes beyond its own borders. The nationalist aspirations of Kurds in Iran, Iraq, and Syria pose a similar challenge for Kemalism. As a result, when the Kurdish question dominates Ankara's agenda, Turkish foreign policy becomes reactive and insecure.

Neo-Ottomanism, by contrast, seeks to rise above this Kemalist paradigm. Compared to Kemalism, neo-Ottoman instincts are more self-confident and less focused on the Kurdish threat. Neo-Ottomanism embraces a grand, geo-strategic vision of Turkey as an effective and engaged regional actor, trying to solve regional and global problems. Since the concept of neo-Ottomanism may evoke an imperial agenda, one important point needs clarification: Turkey, in this neo-Ottoman paradigm, does not pursue a neo-imperialist policy aimed at resurrecting the Ottoman Empire. Instead of imperial nostalgia, neo-Ottomanism is essentially about projecting Turkey's "soft power"—a bridge between East and West, a Muslim nation, a secular state, a democratic political system, and a capitalistic economic force. Like French Gaullism, it seeks Turkish "grandeur" and influence in foreign policy.

Today, Turkey appears torn between these two alternative visions of foreign policy. While the Kurdish challenge makes Ankara reactive, cautious, and sometimes overly insecure, neo-Ottomanism motivates Turkish policy makers to be more audacious, imaginative, and proactive. Needless to say, the secularist Kemalist mindset is very uncomfortable with the neo-Ottoman vision. It perceives it as unrealistic, adventurist, and pro-Islamic.

But perhaps more importantly, the crucial difference between these two drivers of Turkish foreign policy stems from their diverging visions of Turkey. Neo-Ottomanism wants the Kemalist republic to be at peace with its multicultural, Muslim, and imperial past. It sees such an outcome not as "Islamization" or a denial of achievements of Atatürk, but as a sign of reconciliation, normalization, and correction of excesses associated with radical Kemalism. The last point refers to the militant secularism, or *laicism*, of the Kemalist regime and its suspicion of all things Islamic. For instance, Kemalists and neo-Ottomanists sharply differ on the question of Islamic headscarves, a polarizing issue in Turkish politics. While the AKP and other conservatives see the issue in the framework of individual religious freedoms, the Kemalists consider the headscarf a symbol of political Islam and the harbinger of a fundamentalist revolution.

The domestic roots of the divergence are not confined to religion. The Kurdish question, the second most contentious issue in Turkey after secularism, is another area where Kemalists and neo-Ottomanists sharply differ. While the former emphasize nationalist assimilation and refuse multiculturalism, neo-Ottomanism is open to cultural rights for Kurds. Compared to Kemalists, neo-Ottomanists are much more willing to see Islam as a common denominator between Turks and Kurds. While Kemalist nationalism often rigidly confronts Kurdish ethnic demands, neo-Ottomanism pragmatically seeks to co-opt the Kurds.

These differences between Kemalism and neo-Ottomanism have major ramifications for Turkish foreign policy, mainly because they lead to diverging perceptions of the Middle East and the “West.” For instance, it is not lost on Kemalist hardliners that the European Union and the United States are now in favor of Kurdish cultural rights in Turkey. The Kurds of Iraq have become America’s best friends in the country, and the European Union frequently criticizes Turkey’s human rights record in the predominantly Kurdish southeast of the country. Some EU countries even advocate ethnic minority rights for the Kurds, something that the Kemalist establishment strongly refutes. Add to these Kemalist concerns the perception that Washington and the EU are too “soft” on the AKP (in their quest to promote Turkey as a model of “moderate Islam” in the Middle East), and the result is a major Kemalist frustration with the West.

In the eyes of Turkey’s secularist nationalist establishment, the West is therefore on the wrong side of the Kurdish issue and political Islam—the two redlines of Kemalism. This situation has effectively turned Turkey’s domestic cleavages and foreign policy division upside down. The formerly pro-Western Kemalist circles have increasingly turned anti-American and anti-EU, while former Islamists have, by and large, become supporters of good relations with Brussels and Washington. In that sense, the two camps have traded places. This amounts to an important realignment of Turkish politics and foreign policy.

Turkey’s Kemalist Identity and the Middle East

Unlike other personality cults in the Middle East, the veneration of Atatürk in Turkey is remarkably genuine. Such adulation primarily stems from the fact that Atatürk saved his country from occupation and subjugation. Turkey’s independence, sense of national pride, dignity, and sovereignty are therefore clearly associated with the founder of the republic—a military hero turned visionary statesman. An equally important, yet more problematic, dimension of Atatürk’s legacy is his ideology, known as “Kemalism.” Kemalism, which became the official ideology of the republic, has two main pillars, the first of which is a revolutionary and militant version of secularism. To establish a secular and Western republic, Atatürk had to abolish the Ottoman sultanate and dispose of the caliphate, Arabic letters, Islamic education, and Sufi brotherhoods. Kemalism had a “civilizing mission” that was highly influenced by the French Revolution, especially the French anticlerical tradition of *laïcité*, a particularly active form of state-enforced secularism.

Not surprisingly, in both France and Turkey, religion became a symbol of the *ancien régime* and opposition to the republic. Laicism became the dividing line between enlightened and obscurantist; progressive and conservative; modern and traditional. Fervently committed to assuming progressive roles against reactionary enemies, the proponents of French *laïcité* and its Kemalist

equivalent, *laiklik*, were keen on taking religion out of the public sphere. This is why both countries, even today, have similar secular reactions to the issue of headscarves in their public schools. France banned them in public high schools in 2005, and Turkey has a ban in both secondary and higher education.

Turkish laicism, however, is at an earlier stage in its evolution than in France. It still seeks to control the religious sphere rather than separating state and religion—something that France achieved in 1905. Kemalist laicism has grafted itself onto a longstanding Ottoman tradition of state hegemony over religion. Ottoman sultans frequently enacted laws outside the realm of Islamic sharia, based on political rather than religious principles. When Islam and the Ottoman Empire's political and national interests clashed, the sultans always opted for the political imperative (*raison d'état*). The new "secular" Turkish Republic maintained this political tradition by establishing a firm control over the Islamic establishment. Like western orientalisks, Kemalists saw the power of Islam as a major cause of social, cultural, political, and economic decline. To avoid such decay, religion had to be controlled by the secular state. As a result, modern Turkey monopolized Islamic functions and incorporated religious personnel into the state bureaucracy. To this day, the directorate of religious affairs supervises and regulates Islam throughout Turkey, appoints and pays the country's imams, and issues standardized sermons to be read out in thousands of mosques each Friday.

The second pillar of Kemalism is assimilationist nationalism. Modern Turkey actively sought to assimilate all of its Muslim minorities. "Turkishness" came to be defined as a common national, linguistic, and territorial identity. Taking France as its model again, the Kemalist regime rejected the concept of multiculturalism; no communal structure would stand between the republic and its citizens. Unlike the Ottoman elites, the Kemalists rejected multiethnic and multinational cosmopolitanism. The new Turkish Republic recognized non-Muslims as Turkish citizens but engaged in *de facto* discrimination against them, banning Armenians, Greeks, and Jews from holding government jobs. Thus, ironically, the "secular" Turkish republic turned out to be less tolerant of its non-Muslim minorities than the "Islamic" Ottoman Empire had been of its minorities, partly because Turkishness was still associated with being Muslim.

Predictably, assimilationist nationalism and militant secularism faced violent resistance and opposition from ethnic Kurds and Islamists, especially in the semi-autonomous Kurdish provinces of southeastern Turkey, which had had little exposure to centralization, state institutions, and nation-building during Ottoman times. Moreover, Kurdish tribal and religious leaders (sheikhs) considered the Islamic caliphate as a symbol of unity and harmony under the Ottomans. Now that Atatürk abolished the caliphate and adopted Turkish nationalism, the social contract between Istanbul and Kurdistan was broken. In fact, Kemalist supremacy was finally established only after the military suppressed more than a dozen Kurdish uprisings that raised the Islamic banner in

the 1920s and 1930s. These Kurdish–Islamic rebellions traumatized the young republic's military leaders and created their suspicion of all things Kurdish and Islamic, which endures to this day. They also reinforced the feeling that the new republic was and would remain vulnerable to breakup. This sentiment was already rooted in the Western powers' attempts to carve up the Anatolian remains of the Ottoman Empire in the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres. Henceforth, the Kemalist generals and state officials concluded they would have to act as the resolute custodians of secularism and nationalism.

In foreign policy, these Kurdish insurrections tempered Ankara's territorial ambitions toward Mosul and Kirkuk, two former Ottoman provinces eventually included in the British mandate of Iraq. Although Atatürk wanted these two provinces to be included in Turkey's borders, he came to realize that his armies would have enough difficulties controlling Kurdish provinces of eastern Anatolia. Ever suspicious of Western imperialism, the Kemalist founding fathers were strongly convinced that Kurdish insurrections had been fomented by Britain to weaken the new Turkish Republic. In fact, even today, more than the loss of Mosul and Kirkuk, it is the alleged role played by Britain that still resonates in Turkish collective memory. As a result, Western imperialism came to be seen as the most important factor behind Kurdish separatism. Today, the sight of Kurds and Americans cooperating in Iraq triggers similar memories among Turkish nationalists and fuels anti-American and anti-Kurdish feelings. In any case, having witnessed the daunting challenge of establishing law and order in their own Kurdish provinces, the founding fathers realized that they needed to pursue a very cautious foreign policy. They thus eschewed any foreign policy adventures with irredentist or Ottomanist undertones. The fledgling republic focused all of its energy on its cultural revolution at home.

Despite an attitude in Ankara that can be best described as “benign neglect” toward the Middle East during its founding decades, one of the few occasions in which Turkey decided to take a regional foreign policy initiative indirectly involved the Kurdish question. Although no specific mention of the Kurds was made, the 1938 Saadabad Pact signed in Tehran among Iran, Turkey, Iraq, and Afghanistan implied that the countries would cooperate in suppressing any subversive movement or communist infiltration associated with ethnic minority demands. After World War I, the Kurds who had been formerly under the Ottoman empire were divided into three newly formed states: Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. Turkey, Iraq, and Iran had the largest Kurdish populations, and one of the main objectives of the pact was to contain the Kurdish challenge under the mantle of an anticommunist alliance.

Soon after World War II, with the Cold War looming, international dynamics came to impinge on Turkish foreign policy. Fearing the Soviets who wished to project their power south toward the Mediterranean, the leaders in Ankara hurriedly lined up alongside the “free world” and became NATO's southern bulwark against Moscow. Turkey fell neatly into the bipolar configuration of

the Cold War. As the southern bastion of NATO against the Soviet Union, Turkey's Western credentials grew undisputed, and thorny questions concerning Turkey's human rights standards and Muslim identity were rarely raised. Cold War *realpolitik* dictated Turkey's inclusion in the West.

But the Cold War also helped Turkey enter the age of democracy. The prospect of joining NATO and qualifying for U.S. assistance under the Marshall Plan encouraged Ankara to hold the country's first free, multiparty elections in 1950, which the opposition Democrat Party won in a landslide. Over the next 40 years, Turkish politics evolved along ideological right-wing/left-wing lines. The main threat was no longer Islam or Kurdish nationalism, but communism. The presence of the Soviet Union at Turkey's borders altered the political fault lines at home. Kurdish dissent found a new home in Turkey's fledgling socialist movement and evolved into class struggle, while political Islam joined conservative anticommunist political parties. Ideology appeared to trump identity.

The Turkish military remained involved in politics throughout this period as the guardian of the Kemalist system. It intervened three times, in 1960, 1971, and 1980, to "correct" perceived wrongs—redlines associated with communism, political Islam, or Kurdish demands. Unlike their Latin American counterparts, however, Turkish generals never stayed in power longer than three years. After each coup, the soldiers returned to their barracks. They associated themselves with the "realm of the state" rather than "the realm of politics." They therefore tried to stay above the daily bickering of political parties.

The first free elections were held in 1950 and put an end to the single-party rule of the Republican Peoples Party (RPP). The Democrat Party, a more conservative and populist political formation than the RPP, won all elections between 1950 and 1960. This was hardly surprising, since the RPP had stayed in power for almost 30 years and was perceived to have an "elitist disconnect" with the pious masses. After all, the motto of the RPP during the Kemalist cultural revolution was "For the people, despite the people." Although the Democrat Party was more conservative than the RPP, its foreign policy was still closely associated with the West and showed similar disdain for the Middle East. Especially after becoming a NATO member in 1952, Ankara increasingly identified its national interests with those of the West, particularly the United States.

Ironically, this strong identification with Western perspectives and policies came during the administration of Prime Minister Adnan Menderes (1950–1960), whose historical mission had been to tame Turkey's radical secularism. Turkey zealously pursued a policy of defending Western interests without being sensitive in the least to its southern neighbors' pan-Arab concerns and aspirations. A series of policies, such as becoming the first Muslim state to recognize Israel, voting in favor of France at the United Nations during the Algerian war of independence, and allowing American marines to use the Incirlik air base during the Lebanese crisis of 1958, did great damage to Turkey's relations with the Arab Middle East. Relations with Syria were already marked by ill feelings

arising from the French grant of Turkish sovereignty over Alexandrette (the Hatay province on the Turkish–Syrian border) in 1939. This border city remained a disputed territory in the eyes of Damascus for a long time. Only recently has Turkish–Syrian rapprochement convinced Damascus to change the history books and official maps that used to show the province as part of Syria.

The United States attempted to construct an anti-Soviet alliance in the Middle East by bringing together Turkey and Egypt in 1951, but there was little enthusiasm for this option in either country, since relations between Turkey and Arab countries were strained by Turkey's recognition of Israel. Determined to tighten the Western security chain around the Soviet Union, Ankara signed a treaty of cooperation with Pakistan in 1954 and a treaty of cooperation and mutual assistance with the Kingdom of Iraq in 1955. Turkey took an active role in the creation of the ill-fated Baghdad Pact of 1955. The Baghdad Pact, which included Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey, and the United Kingdom, was flawed from the beginning, since the United States, which had urged it, did not join. This was partly for fear of irreversibly alienating Nasser's Egypt, which maintained neutrality in the Cold War and controlled the Suez.

In 1955, Turkey told the Jordanian government that if Jordan did not join the Baghdad pact (it never did), Turkey might find itself one day fighting on the side of Israel. This threat led Washington and London to warn the Turks against further alienating pro-Western Arab states. Even so, similar Turkish actions that provoked Arab ire, included massing troops on the border with Syria in 1957, when the communist party there seemed poised to seize power, and calling for Western military intervention in Iraq to restore the monarchy after its overthrow in 1958.¹

Turkey's identification with the West and diplomatic distance from the Arab Middle East slowly began to change in the second half of the 1960s. This gradual change of heart essentially grew out of the first Cyprus crisis of 1964 and the American reluctance to support Turkey. Ankara gradually moved toward a more pro-Palestinian policy to generate Arab support for the Turkish position on Cyprus. But domestic politics—the growing saliency of Islamic and leftist movements in national politics—also played a part in Turkey's shift.

Gradually, Turkey tried to undo the damage inflicted on Turkish-Arab relations. For example, on the eve of the Six-Day War in 1967, Turkey sided with Egypt and refused to join the group of maritime powers demanding the reopening of the Gulf of Aqaba to Israeli shipping. In its first major break with secular principles in international relations, Turkey participated in the proceedings of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in Rabat in 1969 and became a full member of the organization in 1976. During the 1973 Arab–Israeli war, Ankara denied Washington the use of American bases in Turkey for the resupply of Israel, while allowing Russian planes to use Turkish airspace to support the Syrians. Turkey's pro-Arab tilt continued in 1979 with the opening of a Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) office in Ankara, which was given quasi-diplomatic status.

The oil crises of the 1970s were another important factor fostering Turkish rapprochement with the Middle East. Turkish governments endeavored to meet its rising oil bills by expanding Turkey's exports of goods and services to the Arab world and Iran, more than doubling them from \$2 billion in 1975 to \$4.9 in 1980. Trade with the Middle East continued to explode throughout the 1980s, when the region briefly surpassed Europe as Turkey's number-one trading partner. This mainly reflected exceptionally high exports to Iraq and Iran, which were locked in a war between 1980 and 1988. Turkey's policy of neutrality during the war paid off economically.

Despite these improvements in diplomatic and trade relations, a series of other developments pushed Ankara to reconsider its Middle East policy during the second half of the 1980s. An obvious source of discontent was the failure of the Arab countries and the PLO to support Turkey's Cyprus policy. Neither at the United Nations nor at the OIC had the Arab world recognized the Turkish Cypriots' demand for self-determination. Many Arab states enjoyed cordial relations with the Greek Cypriots and recognized the Greek government as the only legitimate administration on the island. Another grievance was the Arab camp's attitude toward Bulgaria's treatment of its Turkish minority. More than 300,000 ethnic Turks fled to Turkey following Sofia's forced assimilation campaign in 1986–1987. Turkey called for the international isolation of Bulgaria. Counting on the support of its Muslim neighbors and partners, Ankara prepared a draft resolution denouncing Sofia's behavior at the OIC summit of 1987. To Ankara's dismay, Algeria, Syria, and the PLO refrained from supporting the resolution so as not to offend Bulgaria and its Soviet patron.

In the meantime, Turkey's bilateral relations with Syria and Iraq began to deteriorate following initiation of the ambitious Southeast Anatolia Project (GAP) in 1983. GAP called for irrigating 1.6 million hectares of Turkish farmland through the construction of 21 dams and 19 hydroelectric stations on the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. Not surprisingly, these works greatly heightened Iraqi and Syrian concerns over the future quantity and quality of the flow of water downstream to them. Since 1983, both Damascus and Baghdad have been demanding a trilateral water-sharing treaty for the Euphrates and the Tigris, so far without result.

The Re-Emergence of the Kurdish Problem

With the end of the Cold War, Turkey's right-wing and left-wing ideological politics also began to unravel. As a result, the identity problems related to Islam and Kurdish nationalism slowly reappeared. Unlike the 1960 military intervention that had leftist inclinations, the 1980 military coup (the second was the 1970 coup by memorandum) brutally suppressed Kurdish and leftist activists and exacerbated the situation. The social base of the separatist PKK expanded due to the military rule's use of torture and repression in Diyarbakir and other Kurdish provinces.

During the second half of the 1980s, the Kurdish question gained an international dimension as well, as it emerged as the single most important factor influencing Turkey's bilateral relations with Syria, Iraq, and Iran.

By 1984, Ankara was facing a Kurdish nationalist guerilla insurrection within its borders, and the leader of the PKK, Abdullah Ocalan, found safe haven and political support in Damascus. The PKK had become Damascus's Kurdish card against Turkey's leverage over water resources.

Things did not look any better in northern Iraq, where two Iraqi Kurdish groups grew in strength and the PKK found a haven in the aftermath of the first Gulf War of 1991. There were also growing signs in Iran of Kurdish activism and sympathy for the PKK. Finally, to the dismay of Ankara, many European countries looked at Turkey's conflict with the Kurds as the oppression of an ethnic group whose cultural and political rights were being denied by an authoritarian state.

Feeling isolated and encircled, Ankara signed a military cooperation treaty with Israel in 1996. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu promised to provide Turkey with key military equipment often denied by the West because of Turkey's human rights record. The partnership sent a strong signal to Syria and also strengthened Turkey's hand against the powerful Armenian and Greek lobbies in Washington. As Turkey's relations with Europe and its neighbors—Syria, Iraq, and Iran—worsened, Israel and the United States increasingly came to be seen as its only reliable partners. Earlier in the decade, the first Gulf War had already served as a catalyst for Ankara's reentry into the Middle East and given an additional impetus for Turkish–American–Israeli rapprochement.

During the first Gulf War, President Özal threw Turkey's full political and economic support behind the U.S. military campaign. Ankara enforced UN sanctions by cutting off the flow of Iraq's oil exports through Turkish pipelines, deployed 100,000 troops along the Iraqi–Turkish border, and allowed the United States to fly sorties into Iraq from Turkish bases. Despite its partnership with Washington, Turkey paid a high economic price after the war. It lost an estimated \$35 billion in pipeline fees and foregone trade with Iraq during the next decade. In addition, the American-encouraged, ill-fated 1991 Kurdish rebellion in northern Iraq against Baghdad led to a humanitarian crisis after Saddam Hussein's forces crushed it. Fleeing the Iraqi army, 450,000 Kurdish refugees crossed the border and took refuge in Turkey. Together with Washington's failure to compensate Turkey for its economic losses, this experience would be foremost in Turkish minds a decade later, when the United States made new promises to compensate Turkey for the collateral economic costs of a proposed invasion of Iraq.

At home, Turkey faced a major escalation of its Kurdish problem in the 1990s. The establishment of a de facto Kurdish protectorate in northern Iraq under Western tutelage gave new impetus to Kurdish nationalism and provided

a logistical base for the PKK in Iraq. Things went from bad to worse after President Özal's death in 1993. Özal was an unconventional Turkish politician and an early proponent of what later came to be known as neo-Ottoman policies. He wanted to transcend the Kemalist paradigm of confrontation with the Kurds. His main goal was to co-opt, rather than destroy, Kurdish dissent. To do so, he became an early supporter of Kurdish cultural rights in Turkey. Özal also established working relations with Iraqi Kurdish leaders and even allowed them to travel with Turkish diplomatic passports.

Late in life, Özal appeared to possess a vision of Turkey characterized by administrative decentralization and stronger regional autonomy. Fifteen years after his death, these are issues still deemed too risky to discuss in Turkish politics. His unconventional views on the Kurdish question were matched by an equally bold vision of peace and economic interdependence in the Middle East and the Black Sea region. Özal was the intellectual godfather of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization, established in 1989. He was also a strong advocate of the "Water for Peace" project, which envisaged the transportation of Turkish water through pipelines to Syria, Jordan, and Israel. A pious and at the same time modern man, Özal established good relations with the Arab world and became the first sitting Turkish president to go to the haj. Not unlike the AKP's ability to follow a balanced East–West policy, Özal also strongly supported and actively worked for Turkey's EU membership. In fact, Turkey applied for full membership under his government in 1987. In short, Özal's policies vis-à-vis the Middle East, Europe, and the Kurds had strong traits of neo-Ottomanism.

Shortly after his death, in addition to intensification of the war against the PKK, political Islam—the second most important threat to Kemalism—came to dominate the national agenda. The Welfare Party of Necmettin Erbakan, an Islamist political movement often referred to as the predecessor of the AKP, won local and general elections in 1994 and 1995. The electoral victory of the Welfare Party was a protest vote to worsening economic and political conditions and a reaction to the corruption of other more secular political parties.

For Turkey's Kemalist political regime, this ascendancy of Islam parallel to the Kurdish conflict was the perfect storm. It seemed as if the Turkish republic was back in the 1920s and 1930s, once again facing the Kurdish and Islamic dissent that had defined its founding years. Moreover, this time, after the end of the Cold War, both Kurdish separatism and political Islam appeared to have strong regional dimensions. The PKK had safe havens in Syria and Iraq, while Turkey's Islamic movement seemed to benefit from Iranian support. Radically different as the international context was compared to the 1930s, Ankara's response to Kurdish dissent and political Islam came in traditional Kemalist form: an authoritarian determination to crush dissent and reject compromise. The result was the "lost decade" of the 1990s—a decade of war with Kurdish separatists, polarization between secularists and Islamists, economic turmoil,

and systemic corruption. The timing of all these problems made things worse. Ankara had applied to the European Union in 1987 for full membership and was therefore under strong democratic scrutiny by Brussels.

Turkey's lost decade of the 1990s came to a close in 2000 with a semblance of stability, mainly because the military effectively subdued Islamists and Kurdish separatists. In 1997, the military forced the coalition government of Prime Minister Erbakan to resign in what came to be called the "soft coup," because the military did not seize power itself. Shortly after taking the upper hand against political Islam, the Turkish military this time took a radical step against Kurdish separatism. The army had already engaged in several cross-border operations in northern Iraq. Going one step further, in 1998, the Turkish military publicly threatened to invade Syria for supporting the PKK. Isolated after the collapse of the Soviet Union and worried by Turkish-Israeli strategic cooperation, Syria yielded to Ankara and forced Abdullah Ocalan out of Damascus. After leaving Syria for several locations, Ocalan was finally captured in 1998 and incarcerated in a remote prison island off Istanbul. As a result, by the end of the decade, both political Islam and Kurdish nationalism seemed to be on the defensive.

The soft coup of 1997 had major, if unintended, consequences. It paved the way for soul-searching among Turkey's Islamists, eventually causing a generational and ideological rift within their movement. When Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Abdullah Gul founded the AKP in 2001, they refused the label of "Islamic" and described the ideology of this new party as "conservative democracy." The 1997 coup had convinced the moderate and reformist wing of the Welfare Party to take another look at the benefits of liberal democracy and Turkey's EU membership.

After participating in democratic politics for over three decades, Turkey's Islamist politicians had learned to temper their views to gain electoral and political legitimacy. Equally important in the AKP's new ideology was the role of Turkey's capitalist transformation beginning in the early 1980s. The gradual economic, social, and political opening of Turkey under Prime Minister Özal during the 1980s had created a pro-capitalist and pragmatic Muslim bourgeoisie in cities such as Kayseri, Denizli, Gaziantep, and Malatya. These entrepreneurial Muslims were globally integrated in terms of business but socially and culturally more conservative when compared to the secular elites in Istanbul and Ankara. In time, these small and medium-sized entrepreneurs—the "Anatolian tigers," as political economists called them—created their own financial and political networks and challenged the supremacy of the large industrial conglomerates based in Istanbul. The growth of Anatolian capitalism therefore helped the emergence of AKP's conservative democracy with an emphasis on political and economic stability.

The Post September 11 Era and AKP Foreign Policy

Capitalism, globalization, and Turkey's aspirations to join the EU proved crucial in helping the AKP shed its Islamist past and rebrand itself as a pro-market and pro-Western conservative democratic party at the turn of the millennium. International dynamics also helped. Shortly before the AKP was founded, the EU leaders finally certified Turkey's full eligibility for membership. The leader of the AKP, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, was astute enough to understand that the EU reforms would consolidate democracy at the expense of the military and broaden the AKP's power base. The AKP wisely placed EU membership at the very top of its domestic and foreign policy agenda. In so doing, it earned the support of Turkey's business community, many liberal intellectuals, and the majority of the middle class. The AKP even gained grudging respect from some members of the secularist military. Europe, after all, had been the ultimate prize in Atatürk's vision of a truly Westernized Turkey.

The AKP won the 2002 general elections in a landslide. Soon after coming to power, the new government passed a significant set of reforms to harmonize Turkey's judicial system, civil-military relations, and human rights practices with European norms. AKP policies were openly designed with EU accession in mind. But shortly after the September 11 attacks, Turkey's domestic and foreign policy orientation gained importance for the United States as well. In the post-September 11 world of polarization between the West and the Islamic world, the symbolism of a Muslim country seeking membership in a Western organization with a predominantly Christian population acquired global significance. Since Turkey challenged preconceived notions of a "clash of civilizations," Washington tended to present Turkey as a "model" for the Islamic world.

Yet the main question was, and remains, whether the Arab countries themselves viewed Turkey and the Turkish experience in positive terms, let alone as a model to follow. At one level, stereotypes dominate the debate. The popular image is one of deep-rooted ill-feeling between Turkey and the Arab world. Many Turks still harbor resentment that the Arabs "stabbed the empire in the back" in the First World War by siding with Britain. Similarly, many Arabs openly consider the centuries of Ottoman rule as imperious, repressive, and unenlightened. As Graham Fuller argues, there are certainly elements of truth in such clichés, but it is also a historical fact that Turks, Kurds, and Arabs lived harmoniously for centuries in a stable multiethnic empire until the last decades of the Ottoman Empire. Nationalism animated the Muslim ethnic groups of the empire much later than it did its Christian minorities.

More than the historical image of Ottomans, it was Kemalist secularism and the extreme pro-Western policies of Turkey during most of the Cold War that rubbed the Arab world the wrong way. But with the end of the Cold War, and particularly during the Özal and AKP years, Turkey began to emerge as a possible example of regional success in political and economic terms. After

September 11, the AKP appeared perfectly content to assume the role of a neo-Ottoman bridge builder between Islam and the West. Mixing piety with nationalist pride in neo-Ottoman fashion, the AKP declared Turkey uniquely qualified to demonstrate the compatibility of Islam, democracy, and secularism. Turkish secularists and Kemalists, on the other hand, remained highly suspicious of both the AKP and U.S. intentions to promote Turkey as a “model” for the Islamic world, on the grounds that all this would come at the expense of secularism and Turkey’s traditional Western orientation. An important “identity” debate began to polarize Turkish foreign policy and the formulation of the national interest. While the AKP appeared willing to follow what can be called a “neo-Ottoman strategy” of active engagement with the Middle East, the military and foreign service bureaucracies defended the more traditional tenets of caution and noninvolvement.

Neo-Ottomanism Versus Kemalist Foreign Policy

Since the AKP came to power in late 2002, its foreign policy has been based on what Erdogan’s top foreign policy advisor, Ahmet Davutoglu, calls “strategic depth.”² Davutoglu, formerly a professor of international relations at universities in Turkey and Malaysia, argues that Turkish foreign policy had been unbalanced, with an overemphasis on ties with Western Europe and the United States to the neglect of Turkey’s interests with other countries, particularly in the Middle East. He argues that, unlike other imperial powers, for the first 80 years after its founding in 1923, the Turkish Republic largely ignored relations with the states that had been formed out of the former Ottoman provinces in North Africa and the Middle East, and that today Turkey needs to play a greater role there.

Davutoglu’s “neo-Ottoman” vision, it should be noted, is very different from policies promulgated by Necmettin Erbakan. While Erbakan sought to create an Islamic alliance with Muslim countries like Libya, Iran, Malaysia, and Indonesia as an explicit alternative to alliance with the West, AKP leaders today want to reach out to the East to complement their ties to the West, not replace them. Their vision, which builds on the approach of former President Özal, is one in which Turkey rediscovers its imperial legacy and seeks a new national consensus where the multiple identities of Turkey can coexist. It reminds Turks that they once had a great multinational empire that ruled the Middle East, North Africa, the Balkans and parts of Central Europe. Such emphasis on the Ottoman legacy is not part of a plan to Islamize Turkey and Turkish foreign policy. Rather, it is an attempt to balance and broaden the horizons of Kemalism and its over-obsession with Turkey’s Western identity and trajectory.

Three factors help define the neo-Ottoman tendencies of the AKP. The first is the willingness to come to terms with Turkey’s Ottoman and Islamic heritage at home and abroad. Neo-Ottomanism does not call for Turkish imperialism in the Middle East and the Balkans. Similarly, it does not seek to institute an

Islamic legal system in modern Turkey. Instead, neo-Ottomanism favors a more moderate version of secularism at home, and a more activist policy in foreign affairs. In this neo-Ottoman paradigm, Ankara exerts more “soft power”—political, economic, diplomatic, and cultural influence—in formerly Ottoman territories as well as in other regions where Turkey has strategic and national interests. This broad vision for Turkish foreign policy requires an embrace of Ottoman “great power” legacy and a redefinition of Turkey’s strategic and national identity.

In practical terms, such a shift in the “mindset” has serious implications for policy making. For instance, because neo-Ottomanism is at peace with the imperial and multinational legacy of Turkey, it opens the door for a less “ethnic” and more multicultural conceptualization of “citizenship.” As a result, neo-Ottomanism sees no major threat behind Kurdish cultural rights and the expression of Kurdish national identity, as long as Kurds maintain a sense of loyalty to the Republic of Turkey. Similarly, when faced with Kurdish demands for cultural and political rights, the neo-Ottoman mindset prefers to accommodate such demands in the framework of multiculturalism and Muslim identity. In other words, unlike Kemalist hardliners who insist on assimilating the Kurds, neo-Ottomanism allows Islam to play a greater role in terms of building a sense of shared identity. Just like in Ottoman times, Islam thus becomes a crucial common denominator between Kurds and Turks.

This more flexible mindset, in turn, leads to the second characteristic of neo-Ottomanism: a sense of grandeur and self-confidence in foreign policy. Neo-Ottomanism sees Turkey as a regional superpower. Its strategic vision and culture reflect the geographic reach of the Ottoman and Byzantine Empires. Turkey, as a pivotal state, should thus play a very active diplomatic, political, and economic role in a wide region of which it is the “center.” Such grand ambitions, in turn, require a nation-state at peace with its multiple identities, including its Muslim and Ottoman past.

According to Kemalists, this ambitious vision of neo-Ottoman foreign policy is unrealistic and prone to adventurism. The idea of allowing the Kurds cultural rights, and Islam more political space, amounts to dangerous departures from secular, national, and republican norms. In that sense, the Kemalists consider the neo-Ottoman mindset harmful to Turkey’s national interests. Moreover, Kemalist foreign policy refutes pan-Turkic or Islamic openings toward the Middle East and central Asia, mainly on the grounds that they are against Atatürk’s precepts of a strictly “national” foreign policy. As such, Kemalist foreign policy puts a high premium on maintaining the status quo and confronting the threat of Kurdish separatism.

The third aspect of neo-Ottomanism is its goal of embracing the West as much as the Islamic world. Like the imperial city of Istanbul, which straddles Europe and Asia, neo-Ottomanism is Janus-faced. Even at its deathbed, the Ottoman Empire was known as the sick man of “Europe” and not of Asia

or Arabia. In that sense, the European legacy matters a great deal to neo-Ottomans. They are as open to the West and Western political influences as they are close to the Muslim legacy. Such pragmatism and flexibility is largely absent in the “orientalist” mindset of Kemalist hardliners, who consider Islam, multiculturalism, and liberalism as potential enemies of the Kemalist revolution. Not surprisingly, the AKP’s ability to embrace the West and the European Union has not impressed the Kemalists, who suspect a hidden Islamic agenda. In fact, the Kemalist establishment is now increasingly suspicious of the EU and the United States, whom they see as naïve toward Islamists and dangerously tolerant of Kurdish nationalism.

In short, there are clear differences between Kemalism and neo-Ottomanism in these three main aspects of strategic culture. Where neo-Ottomanism favors an ambitious regional policy in the Middle East and beyond, Kemalism opts for modesty and caution. Where one favors multiculturalism and a more moderate version of secularism, the other prefers strict measures against headscarves and Kurdish ethnic identity. Where one is increasingly resentful of the EU and the United States, the other is trying hard to pursue EU membership and good relations with Washington.

A major problem with Kemalism is its illiberal tendency and attachment to an anachronistic concept of “modernity and progress.” There is no agreement among Kemalists themselves about what Kemalism stands for in the context of the twenty-first century. Kemalism, as it was conceived by Atatürk, represented a progressive political agenda to establish a strong and secular Turkish nation state. In many ways, Kemalism has already achieved this historic mission. Modern Turkey is a secular nation state and a democratic republic. There is certainly room for improvement in Turkey in terms of establishing a truly “liberal” democracy. However, it would be unfair to blame Atatürk or Kemalism for this. After all, liberalism was a rare commodity in the 1920s and 1930s. Kemalism, as a secularist–nationalist political project, aimed at building a modern, Western-style nation state has therefore achieved its goal.

Today, it is this very success that transforms Kemalism into a conservative ideology. Kemalism, in other words, seeks to conserve what has been achieved. Especially for Turkey’s politically powerful military, Kemalism represents a defensive instinct against the perceived enemies of the secular Turkish republic: Kurdish nationalism and political Islam. Concerned about the ascendance of these forces, Kemalism has become a secularist and nationalist reflex, rather than a coherent ideology. Any deviation from the Turkish character of the nation state and the secular framework of the republic presents a challenge to Kemalist identity.

It is primarily within Turkey’s military circles that this Kemalist identity and reaction are most discernible. As far as the Kurdish question and political Islam are concerned, there is no room for ambiguity in the Kemalist position of the military. On the Kurdish front, any public assertion of Kurdish ethnic identity,

no matter how minor, is perceived as a major security threat to Turkey's territorial and national integrity. A similarly alarmist attitude characterizes the military's approach to Islam. Islamic sociopolitical and cultural symbols in the public domain, such as headscarves, are seen as harbingers of a fundamentalist revolution. Such a mindset naturally fuels authoritarianism and military tutelage over democracy.

Despite such differences between Kemalism and neo-Ottomanism, it is also important to point out their commonalities. Both share a strong sense of patriotism and attachment to the Turkish nation-state. Neo-Ottomanism represents a more pragmatic and liberal mindset than Kemalism, but it has successfully internalized the Kemalist paradigm of Turkish nationalism. The concept of the nation-state and the achievements of the modern Turkish republic are not called into question or refuted by neo-Ottomans. At the end of the day, both Kemalism and neo-Ottomanism share a state-centric view of the world and Turkish national interests.

Beyond this discussion of Kemalist and neo-Ottoman views, one must examine actual policies in order to make sense of Turkey's decision in the Middle East. How did these two worldviews translate into policy? Which policies did the Turkish state pursue and why? An understanding of Turkey's recent Middle East policy requires a focus on events and policies without putting Kemalism and neo-Ottomanism a priori at the forefront of the analysis, because the differences between the two can be more subtle than the sharp dichotomy described above.

The Iraq Debacle

Turkey had no particular attachment to the regime of Saddam Hussein, but Baghdad traditionally provided stability on Turkey's southern border. In the eyes of Turkish national security establishment, the Baathist regime was an effective bulwark against Kurdish separatism in Iraq. Ankara had always been opposed to political or military destabilization in the region, fearing such developments could fan ethnic separatism or sectarian conflict. Moreover, since the arrest of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1998, Turkey enjoyed a much cherished sense of peace and stability in its Kurdish regions. As the PKK was subdued, political and economic relations with Syria and Iran significantly improved. By the close of the century, Turkish policy makers began to speak of normalization and the emergence of a "zone of peace" as the main objective of Turkey's new Middle East policy. Under such circumstances, the last thing the AKP, the Turkish military, and the Turkish public at large wanted was another war in Iraq.

U.S.–Turkish differences over the war came to a head in early 2003, when Ankara was pressed to respond to a U.S. request to pre-position the 4th Armored Division in Turkey for a potential invasion of Iraq from the north. The AKP government was against the war, but it also wanted to maintain good relations

with Washington. The Turkish military was at the heart of the negotiations with Washington but appeared reluctant to commit itself. Turkish generals were particularly disturbed by the American–Kurdish military cooperation and the joint buildup in Iraqi Kurdistan. They feared that the Kurds would emerge as the main beneficiaries in a post-Saddam Iraq, because the dynamics on the ground would lead incrementally to the emergence of an independent Kurdish state.

On top of these problems, the chemistry between the Turkish military and the AKP was far from ideal. The military still considered the AKP an Islamist party and was not convinced by its EU reform agenda. The AKP had already irritated the military and the Kemalist national security establishment by promoting a compromise on Cyprus.³ Given this state of affairs in Turkey's civil–military relations, the generals seemed happy to see Washington's relations with the “Islamist” AKP deteriorate.

For its part, the AKP government postponed several times the parliamentary vote on allowing the U.S. military to use Turkish soil for the invasion of Iraq, and it bargained hard with the United States over how Turkey would be compensated for its cooperation. The negotiations were difficult and often acrimonious—the Americans believed Ankara should have been more ready to help its strategic partner, while the Turkish government resented the notion that they could be “bought off” to support a war they considered ill advised. The AKP and especially then Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul also believed Turkey could avert the war by mobilizing Iraq's neighbors behind a regional peace initiative.

Weeks before the war, the AKP brought together six key regional powers—Turkey, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Syria (Kuwait did not participate) in a series of regional conferences. This Turkish initiative led to the “Istanbul Declaration,” which was explicitly aimed at heading off a U.S. military attack. Although some analysts in the United States and Turkey saw the motivation behind the initiatives as “Islamist,” the initiative was based not so much on Muslim solidarity as on a Turkish self-perception as a regional leader. The AKP policy was dictated by a strong sense of self-confidence and national interest—both part of the neo-Ottoman framework described above.

Yet in the end, Turkey's ambitious initiative failed to produce concrete results. Negotiations between Ankara and Washington eventually resulted in a U.S. offer to provide Turkey with \$15 billion in grants and loans, along with an agreement that some 20,000 Turkish troops could enter northern Iraq to protect Turkish interests there. Despite this deal, the Turkish parliament shocked the United States, and perhaps itself, on March 1, 2003, when it narrowly voted against allowing the United States to open a northern front to invade Iraq from Turkish territory.

Washington's frustration with Turkey's decision was enormous. Three years after the vote, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was still partly blaming the Iraqi insurgency on Turkey's refusal to provide access to American

troops: “Had we been successful in getting the 4th Infantry Division to come in through Turkey in the north when our forces were coming up from the south out of Kuwait,” Rumsfeld said, “I believe that a considerably smaller number of the Ba’athists and the regime elements would have escaped. More would have been captured or killed, and as a result, the insurgency would have been at a lesser intensity than it is today.”⁴

Relations between Turkey and the United States over Iraq got even worse after the war started, when on July 4, 2003, U.S. forces in northern Iraq detained 11 Turkish special force members suspected of planning to participate in the assassination of a local Kurdish politician. The Turks were released after 48 hours, but not before they were hooded and treated as prisoners by the Americans, causing great humiliation and resentment in Turkey. The Turkish general staff spoke of “the worst crisis of confidence” between Ankara and Washington in more than 50 years, and Foreign Minister Gul warned that “this harm cannot be forgotten.”⁵ Although the two sides eventually issued a joint statement of regret about the incident, for many Turks “July 4” came to symbolize America’s hostility to Turkey in the same way that for the Bush administration “March 1” came to symbolize Turkey’s lack of support for the United States. The strategic partnership that was supposed to bind the two countries together was crumbling in the sands of Iraq.

The post-invasion chaos in Iraq has driven Turkey more deeply into the Middle East. Since the invasion, Ankara’s worst fears have been realized. Iraq has become a breeding ground for international terrorism and continues to face significant sectarian and ethnic violence. Tehran’s influence has greatly increased in Iraq and in the region more broadly. The Iraqi Kurds’ drive for autonomy—and eventually formal independence—has gained momentum. Once believed to have dissolved, the PKK has taken up arms again. Since January 2005, it has launched repeated attacks on Turkish territory, killing several hundred Turkish security forces. Although the PKK maintains some guerilla and urban presence in Turkey, most Turkish observers believe its main attacks are organized from sanctuaries in the Kandil Mountains, in northern Iraq. Iraqi Kurdish political figures, particularly Massoud Barzani, are demonized by the nationalist media in Turkey.

These problems are compounded by the potentially explosive situation in Kirkuk, which sits atop one of the world’s largest oil deposits. Its status is supposed to be determined by a referendum, which has been postponed repeatedly. Over the past several years, hundreds of thousands of Kurds who were evicted during Saddam’s campaign to “Arabize” Kirkuk in the 1970s and 1980s have returned to reclaim their homes and property. Now, the Kurds of Iraq are seeking to make Kirkuk the capital of the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq. Ankara wants power to be shared by all ethnic groups in the city, which include the Turkmen minority, and the referendum to be put aside in the

hope that the city's status can be determined by other means. Turkish officials are protective of the Turkmen and greatly concerned about the demographic change in the city toward "Kurdification."

Clearly, Turkey's Kemalist instincts and neo-Ottoman tendencies share the main objective as far as the Kurdish question is concerned: to stop the emergence of an independent Kurdish state in the region. Yet the way the two camps want to achieve this goal often differs. The nationalist-Kemalist position is not even open to dialogue with the Iraqi Kurdish authorities, mainly because of the PKK presence in Kandil. When he was president of Turkey, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, a staunch Kemalist, objected to any dialogue, with Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, mainly because the latter was Kurdish. The AKP position is more flexible and pragmatic. In 2007, Foreign Minister Gul had to cancel the scheduled visit to Turkey of Kurdish Regional Government Prime Minister Nurchivan Barzani, when the chief of the Turkish general staff publicly announced his opposition to such contacts. Only when Abdullah Gul became president did Turkey invite Jalal Talabani to make an official visit to Ankara in early 2008. Overall, the neo-Ottoman AKP is more willing to co-opt the Kurds and play "big brother" to them, whereas the Kemalist position is categorically opposed even to dialogue. Economic reality, namely the several billions of dollars of Turkish investment in Kurdish Iraq, would seem to favor neo-Ottoman flexibility, since Turkey is now northern Iraq's main trading partner.

Another potential Kemalist and neo-Ottoman difference concerns the Sunni question in Iraq. AKP's very active diplomacy with Iraq's Sunni minority, particularly in terms of encouraging them to participate to elections and to the government, does not find much support among Kemalists, who are generally averse to sectarian approaches to Iraq. The Kemalists believe that Turkey should consider Iraq a secular nation-state and stay away from ethnic, Islamic, or sectarian approaches. In that sense, the AKP's attempt to influence fellow Sunna was not something that Kemalists endorsed. Similarly, the Sunni sensitivities of the AKP are not shared by secularist Kemalists. To the contrary, the Kemalists fear that any sectarian Turkish approach toward Iraq would backfire and pave the way for Iraqi attempts to play the Kurdish card against Ankara.

In short, despite convergence on some issues, the differences between the Kemalist and neo-Ottoman mindsets tend to result in different sensitivities and priorities. This is most obvious on issues related to the Middle East, where the AKP is much more willing to establish "Sunni" solidarity against the perceived emergence of a "Shi'i crescent" in the region. The Kemalist preference, however, is to stay away from the emerging Sunni-Shi'i divide in the Middle East and emphasize the secularist, nonsectarian dimension of Turkish foreign policy. However, as the January 2008 Turkish cross-border operations against the PKK in northern Iraq clearly illustrated, when it comes to fighting the PKK, the Turkish military and the AKP are increasingly of one mind.

The difference between the AKP and the military is not about the need to confront the PKK but rather how best to deal with political issues involving the Kurds. For instance, the AKP is opposed to the outlawing of the Kurdish Nationalist Party. Having won a significant majority in Kurdish provinces in the July 2007 elections, the AKP appears politically more sensitive than the Kemalist establishment to Kurdish democratic demands. Yet, the AKP is also a nationalist party, and because it already has problems with the secularist military on issues such as Islamic headscarves, the last thing the AKP wants is to appear soft on the PKK.

Ankara's Relations With Iran and Syria

Beyond efforts to encourage the Iraqi Sunni's participation in elections, Turkey's greater activism in the Middle East has been reflected in its effort to strengthen its anti-Kurdish coalition with Iran and Syria. Ankara's relations with Tehran and Damascus have significantly improved since the invasion of Iraq, thanks to the three governments' shared interest in containing Kurdish nationalism and preventing the emergence of an independent Kurdish state on their borders.

Turkey and Iran come from rival imperial and religious traditions. The Ottomans were historically the defenders of Sunni Islam against the Shi'i Persians. Particularly after their conquest of Mecca and Medina in the sixteenth century, Ottoman Sultans who assumed the title of caliph came to see the Shi'i Safavids as heretic contenders on their eastern borders. Ottomans and Safavids fought major wars during the sixteenth century. On the other hand, as Turkish officials are quick to remind their Western partners concerned about Iran's ascendancy, the last major war fought between Turks and Persians was almost 400 years ago. In addition to a long and peaceful relationship since then, Atatürk's Turkey became a secular and Western model for Iran's Pahlavi dynasty during the first half of the twentieth century. In fact, Iran's White Revolution in the 1960s was greatly inspired by Turkey's Kemalist cultural revolution. In contrast to Ankara's negative image in the Arab world (as a former colonial master that turned its back on Islam), the image of secular Turkey in Pahlavi Iran was largely positive during most of the 1960s and 1970s.

As two important allies of the United States, Turkey and Iran put their imperial competition and religious rivalry aside during most of the Cold War. However, this harmony came to an abrupt end with the Islamic revolution in 1979. When Ayatollah Khomeini emphasized "exporting" the Islamic revolution, Turkey with its secular and pro-Western political regime came to see itself as a natural target of such efforts. As a result, by the 1980s, the historic rivalry between Turkey and Iran re-emerged, this time in the context of a secular Turkey versus an Islamic Iran. Yet despite such difficult and antagonistic dynamics, Ankara maintained a traditional Kemalist policy of non engagement

and noninvolvement in the Middle East. Thanks largely to this policy, Ankara managed to remain neutral during the Iran–Iraq war of the 1980s. Throughout that long and bloody conflict, Ankara's neutrality served the Turkish economy well. Turkish exports to both countries increased sevenfold.

By the mid-1990s, as Iran's Islamic revolution lost steam, political relations between Ankara and Tehran also slowly began to improve. This rapprochement was also helped by political Islam gaining some social and cultural ground in Turkey with the arrival of the Welfare Party to power. In fact, it was under the Islamist-led coalition government of Erbakan that Ankara signed a \$23 billion deal for the delivery of natural gas from Iran to Turkey. After coming to power in 1996, Erbakan quickly launched new openings to the Islamic world. Since the Turkish military was vigilant about any departure from secularism at home, Erbakan's overtures to the Islamic world were partly designed to compensate for the absence of a domestic Islamic agenda. Yet, it did not take very long for Erbakan's high-profile state visits to Iran and Libya to upset both Washington and Turkey's secular military establishment. Given its official policy of isolating Iran, a multibillion-dollar energy deal between Tehran and Ankara was not welcomed by Washington. In time, the Turkish military and secularist public opinion also began to worry about Erbakan's outreach to the Islamic world. Erbakan's short tenure in power—he was forced from office by the soft coup of 1997—included visits to Egypt, Malaysia, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Nigeria.

Erbakan's interest in improving Turkey's economic and political ties with the Islamic world reached an unprecedented level in 1997, when his government took a leadership role in the establishment of the Developing-8 (D-8) organization, a Muslim countries' version of the G8. The establishment of D-8 was announced officially in Istanbul at an economic summit with the heads of states of Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria, and Pakistan.⁶

Given the AKP's willingness to improve relations with the Islamic world and the "strategic depth" argument of Ahmet Davutoglu, it may be tempting to argue that Prime Minister Erdogan is following a foreign policy similar to Erbakan. However, unlike the overtly pro-Islamic Welfare Party, the AKP is firmly committed to Turkey's drive for membership in the European Union.

Progress in Turkish-Iranian relations during the late 1990s was not confined to economic relations or the Islamic solidarity of Erbakan. As trade relations between Ankara and Tehran improved, the two countries also increasingly began to focus on the Kurdish issue. Iran, home to 5 million Kurds, has historically been concerned about Kurdish separatism. Although Tehran has traditionally been more tolerant of Kurdish cultural rights than Turkey, the Islamic regime still shares Ankara's concerns about an increasingly independent Kurdish region in Iraq.

Turkey and Iran had begun cooperating on the security front in the framework of the Turkey–Iran High Security Commission established in 1988.

However, this body became more active after the fall of Saddam regime and after the formation of PJAK (The Party for Freedom in Kurdistan), a sister terrorist organization of the PKK active in Iran. Although the PKK and PJAK are organizationally distinct, both have their main training camps in the Kandil mountains of northern Iraq, where they logistically cooperate, and profess allegiance to PKK founder Abdullah Ocalan. During most of the 1990s, the Turkish military was concerned that Tehran tolerated PKK activities inside Iran and offered a safe haven for militants being pursued by Turkish security forces. Since the emergence of the PJAK in 2004, the Turkish–Iranian Security Commission has met several times, most recently in April 2008 in Ankara, where the agenda was dominated by discussions about intelligence cooperation against the PKK and PJAK.

In 2004, Ankara and Tehran signed a security cooperation agreement that branded the PKK a terrorist organization. Iran clearly seeks to lure Turkey away from its traditional security moorings in the West. For Tehran, Turkey's Kurdish obsession is a useful issue to press Turkey to stay out of an economic embargo or a "coalition of the willing" with the West in case of a U.S.–Iranian military confrontation. During visits to Ankara, Iranian officials often stress the troubles created for both nations by the PKK. According to Turkish and Iranian news reports, Iran's former top nuclear policy negotiator, Ali Larijani, suggested that Turkey join with Iran and Syria to establish a tripartite platform of security cooperation against the Kurdish separatists. Although Iran and Turkey have not staged any joint military operations against the PKK and PJAK, each country has arrested militants from the two organizations targeting the other country.

Even Turkey's secularist establishment appears willing to engage in more direct relations with Iran. For instance, it is quite remarkable that in June 2002, shortly after President Bush declared Iran part of the "axis of evil," the Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer, who had excellent relations with the Turkish military, visited Iran. Iran's welcome extended to letting Sezer become the first Turkish president to visit the Turkish–Azeri regions of the country and to give a lecture in Tehran (on Kemalism and Atatürk). Of course, Iran was then under President Mohammad Khatami, who declared to Sezer that Tehran strongly supported Turkey's European Union membership as a symbol refuting the supposed "Clash of Civilizations."

Energy has been another major force behind the warming of Iranian–Turkish relations. Iran is the second-largest supplier of natural gas to Turkey (after Russia). In February 2007, under Prime Minister Erdogan, Turkey and Iran agreed to seal two new energy deals: one allowing the Turkish Petroleum Corporation to explore for oil and natural gas in Iran, and another for the transfer of gas from Turkmenistan to Turkey and on to Europe via a pipeline that passes through Iran. Since the AKP came to power in November 2002, Turkey's economic relationship with Iran has expanded even beyond the ma-

major gas and pipeline deals. In 2006, bilateral trade between the two countries reached \$6.7 billion, an increase of 52.5 percent over 2005 and more than five times the level of \$1.2 billion in 2002.

The growth in bilateral trade between Turkey and Iran appears to be part of the AKP's strategy of trying to strengthen economic ties with other Muslim countries. In summer 2007, Foreign Trade Minister Kursad Tuzmen announced that Turkey would sign preferential trade agreements with eighteen Islamic countries, including Iran and Pakistan. He said that tariff barriers between the countries would be reduced in stages as part of an attempt to boost trade among the ten members of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), which includes Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the six Central Asian republics.

In addition to further antagonizing Washington, any attempt to grant preferential trade status to Iran could create problems for Turkey in its relations with the EU, which is Turkey's main export market. Under the terms of Turkey's 1995 Customs Union Agreement with the EU all of Turkey's tariff barriers with third parties must be harmonized with those of the EU. Turkey's pipeline deal with Iran is also at odds with Washington's preference for isolating Iran.

Iran's nuclear ambitions, however, are a source of serious concern for Turkey. Turkey does not see Iran as a threat, but is conscious that a nuclear-armed Iran could have a destabilizing impact on the Persian Gulf region and force Turkey to take countermeasures for its own security. A serious effort by Iran to develop a military nuclear capability could thus undercut its rapprochement with Turkey. To be sure, a Sunni Turkey would have some problems with its historic Shi'i rival acquiring nuclear weapons. Yet that still-hypothetical threat is considered modest next to the reality of Kurdish separatism.

Turkey's relations with Syria have also considerably improved in the last decade. Hafiz Assad's decision to expel Abdullah Ocalan opened the way for a gradual improvement in economic and diplomatic relations. This rapprochement was underscored by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's visit to Ankara in January 2005—the first trip by a Syrian president to Turkey since Syria gained independence in 1946. As with Iran, the main driver of the Turkish–Syrian rapprochement is the common interest in dealing with Kurdish separatists. Both Ankara and Damascus worry that the Iraq war has unleashed a serious threat of Kurdish nationalism that both must work together to contain.

Like Iran, too, Syria seeks to use the rapprochement with Turkey to break free of the isolation the West has imposed on it since the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri in February 2005. It has done so in part by developing its economic relationship with Turkey. Between 2005 and 2007, Syrian authorities approved more than 30 Turkish investment projects in the country with a total value of over \$150 million. Bilateral trade was around \$1.5 billion in 2007, more than triple the figure when the AKP came to power in November 2002. Ankara and Damascus agreed in 2006 to establish a free-trade zone; and with Damascus encouraging Turkish investment in Syria, the two

countries established a joint company for oil exploration. Also, the number of Turkish tourists to Syria increased nineteenfold between 2000 and 2005.

It is clear that Turkey wants to play a more active role as a bridge in the region. Ankara started brokering indirect Syrian–Israeli contacts in 2007. In May 2008 these talks were made public and they have intensified. Similarly, AKP officials often express their willingness to mediate between Washington and Tehran. As for Ankara’s position vis-à-vis Iran and Syria, the Kemalist-nationalist stance again differs from the AKP position in subtle ways. The Kemalists are generally in favor of strong relations with Syria and Iran, but they see this partnership mainly in terms of security cooperation against Kurdish separatism. When it comes to playing a more active role for regional peace, the Kemalist instinct is reluctant to see Ankara as a major player in the Middle East state system.

Relations With the Broader Arab World

Over the last few years, Ankara has also begun to adopt a more active policy on the Palestinian question. Since coming to power in 2002, President Erdogan has been highly critical of Israeli policy in the West Bank and Gaza, calling the assassinations of Hamas officials acts of “state terror.” A few weeks after the parliamentary elections in the Palestinian territories in January 2006, the AKP hosted in Ankara a high-ranking Hamas delegation led by Khaled Mashaal. The government was hoping that the visit would highlight Turkey’s ability to play a larger diplomatic role in the Middle East. But it was arranged without consulting Washington and Jerusalem and irritated both governments, who wanted to isolate Hamas until it met a series of specific conditions, including acceptance of Israel’s right to exist. The AKP defended itself by arguing that these were exactly the messages that Turkey gave to Hamas. In an interview with the author, a high-ranking AKP official pointed out that the objective was to reduce the influence of Iran over Hamas and to convey pro-peace messages to the most influential leader of Hamas.

Although Turkey was strongly critical of Israeli policy during the July 2006 war in Lebanon, Ankara managed to follow a balanced policy by sending an engineering unit to participate in the UN peacekeeping force in Lebanon after the war. In 2007, the AKP also followed its pattern of active engagement by bringing together Mahmoud Abbas and Shimon Peres in Ankara in an effort to foster economic cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian authority. Both leaders addressed the Turkish Parliament and praised Turkey’s contributions for peace and economic development in the Middle East.

Ankara’s economic and diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia also entered a new dimension with King Abdullah’s trip to Turkey in August 2006, the first visit of its kind in 40 years. The Kemalist establishment has always been suspicious of Saudi Arabia’s Islamic policies. The flowering of Islamic banking in Turkey and Saudi investment capital are seen by Kemalists as a serious threats

to secularism. Despite such ideological tensions, economic relations between the two countries have been flourishing since the 1970s. Turkish workers have gone to the kingdom in considerable numbers, and Turkish businessmen have won sizable contracts. Saudi Arabia and Turkey also share some general interests in the region, particularly the Arab–Israeli conflict, Palestine, antiterrorism, and regional stability. Both also share concern about Iran’s nuclear ambition.

AKP’s Islamic, and more specifically Sunni, identity is another common factor that fosters cooperation between Ankara and Riyadh. For instance, in 2006 Turkey organized a conference “in support of the Iraqi people” in Istanbul, which in fact brought together only Sunni groups across the Islamic world. The conference highlighted the “systematic marginalization of the Iraqi Sunnis; the targeting of their ulema, imams, areas, mosques; and the liquidation of their men and women based upon their identity,” according to the final statement of the conference that appeared on the Muslim Scholars Association’s website.⁷ One of the participants at the conference was Sheikh Nasir Bin Sulayman al-Umar, an influential Saudi Islamist and the director of the muslim.net website, which hosted a statement signed by 38 prominent Saudi clerics that called on Sunni Arabs throughout the Middle East to mobilize against Iraq’s Shi’a and to support its Sunni Arabs.

Turkey’s ties to Egypt have also improved under the tenure of the AKP. During a visit to Ankara in March 2007, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and the Turkish leadership decided to establish a new strategic dialogue and partnership focusing on energy cooperation and regional security. Egypt and Turkey share common strategic positions. Both are allies of the United States, and both have established diplomatic relations with Israel. Both have had strained relations with Iran since the Iranian revolution, although Turkey’s relations with Iran have markedly improved, and both countries want to tamp down radical Islam. When, in the 1990s, Welfare Party leader and Prime Minister Erbakan launched the D-8 as a global bloc of key Muslim states, Egypt became the only proposed Arab member. In 1996, Turkey opened negotiations with Egypt over the possible provision of natural gas to Turkey, but the project has yet to materialize, and its economic feasibility remains an open question. Despite such common interests, Cairo has been reluctant to encourage Turkish involvement in Arab affairs in ways that might shift the geopolitical balance or overshadow Egypt’s already eroded regional influence. After all, Cairo’s “strategic rent” vis-à-vis the West partially depends on its role as one of the main players in the peace process.

Moving Forward

Despite recent domestic political tensions between the AKP and the Kemalist establishment, after five years of political stability and high economic growth (between 2002 and 2007), most Turks feel optimistic about their country’s status as a power in the region and the world. Turkey has recently become

the fifth largest economy in Europe and the seventeenth largest in the world. Income per capita reached the critical threshold of \$10,000—a threefold increase since 2000. Thanks to better governance and growing entrepreneurship in Anatolia, the country’s social, economic, and cultural life is vibrant. Combined with Turkey’s geostrategic significance and military power, these factors fuel a sense among Turks that they should not be junior partners in an alliance with the West. In other words, an increasingly self-confident Turkey feels it deserves to be treated with respect by both Europe and the United States.

Whether Turkey opts for a more neo-Ottoman or a more Kemalist path, one thing is certain: Ankara is becoming a more independent and self-confident player, willing to pursue its own national interest. In the past, Americans and Europeans would often ask whether Turkey had any realistic geopolitical alternatives to the West and complacently assure themselves that it did not. But today, such alternatives are starting to look more realistic to many Turks. Many conservative AKP supporters resent American policies in the Middle East and Europe’s unwillingness to embrace Turkey. At the same time, Turkey’s Kemalist establishment is suspicious of the West, mainly because it believes Washington and Brussels are lenient toward Islamists and dangerously tolerant of Kurdish nationalism. It is in this new context of growing Turkish frustration with both Europe and the United States that Ankara is following a more active policy in the Middle East.

Where does Turkey’s new regional activism lead? Two distinct scenarios seem possible. In one, the AKP continues on the neo-Ottoman course, developing its ties with other regional actors in the Middle East and beyond, while seeking to maintain a working alliance with the United States and a viable candidacy for membership in the European Union.

The second alternative is much more problematic, since it potentially entails a suspension of democratic politics. The likelihood of this scenario rests on growing polarization between Kemalism and the AKP. If such polarization results with the ousting of the AKP by a military or judiciary coup—such outcomes were only narrowly averted in April 2007 and in July 2008—Turkey could move in an isolationist, authoritarian, and ultra-nationalist direction. Had the military managed to overthrow the AKP during the constitutional crisis of April 2007 (leading to Abdullah Gül’s presidency), or had the Turkish Constitutional Court banned the AKP with a “judiciary coup” in July 2008, a radical and anachronistic form of Kemalism—reflecting the ideology of the coup-plotters—would now be dominating Turkey’s domestic and foreign policy.

This second scenario would lead to Turkey’s disengagement from the Middle East—except on the Kurdish issue, where Ankara would adopt a more confrontational position vis-à-vis northern Iraq. More disturbingly, this scenario would also seriously endanger Turkey’s relations with the West. With EU membership prospects all but over after such a coup (which could, in fact, be one of

the objectives of those undertaking the coup), and relations with Washington troubled because of the Kurdish question, Turkey's new authoritarian leaders might well break with the West and seek closer ties with authoritarian states like Russia, China, Syria, Iran, Azerbaijan, and the central Asian republics.

Such a Eurasian alternative, sometimes mentioned openly by retired generals, would also enable Ankara to take action against Kurds without worrying about the reaction from the liberal West. This scenario remains unlikely, but as domestic tensions rise in Turkey, it would be naive to exclude it. The hard-line elements in Turkey's Kemalist establishment, after all, believe the United States and Europe are helping to erode Turkey's secular identity by promoting "moderate Islam" and are convinced that the West supports an independent Kurdish state in Iraq. As one prominent retired general argued in a May 2007 speech, "Turkey should leave the NATO alliance and search for possibilities for close co-operation with Russia and other power centers in the region."⁸

Conclusion

The contrast between neo-Ottoman and the Kemalist influence on Turkish foreign policy is obvious. In dealing with the Middle East, the challenge for Ankara will be to carefully balance its neo-Ottoman and Kemalist instincts. In the short term, the Kurdish question is likely to remain the central factor in the formulation of Turkey's national security policy. The terrorist threat posed by the PKK will continue to play into the hands of hardliners within the military. Although Ankara has legitimate concerns about Kurdish terrorism, it is clear that military means alone will not solve the Kurdish question.

In an ideal world, Ankara would address Kurdish discontent with democratic reforms, take bold steps toward EU membership, and continue its constructive engagement with the Middle East. Much hinges on Turkey's success in becoming a more liberal democracy, where cultural and political rights for Kurds are not perceived as a national security threat. Neo-Ottomanism is largely compatible with such a vision. However, much of Turkey's secular elite fears that the notion of neo-Ottomanism is merely cover for an Islamist agenda.

The stakes for Turkey and the future of the Middle East are high. Home to more than 70 million Muslims, Turkey is the most advanced democracy in the Islamic world. It has borders with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. It is the corridor through which the vast energy reserves of the Caspian Sea and Central Asia pass to the West—the only alternative being Iran. A stable, Western-oriented, liberal Turkey on a clear path toward the EU would serve as a growing market for Western goods, a contributor to the labor force Europe will desperately need in the coming decades, a democratic example for the rest of the Muslim world, a stabilizing influence on Iraq, and a partner in Afghanistan. An authoritarian, resentful, and isolated Turkey, on the other hand, would be the opposite in every case. If its domestic politics were to go wrong, Turkey would not only cease being a democratic success story but also could become a destabilizing factor in the Middle East.

Notes

- 1 Graham Fuller, *The New Turkish Republic: Turkey as a Pivotal State in the Muslim World* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2007).
- 2 See Ahmet Davutoglu, *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu [Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position]* (Istanbul: Küre, 2003).
- 3 In 2003, the AKP government took enormous domestic political risks and overturned 40 years of Turkish policy by pressing the Turkish Cypriots to accept a political compromise on the island. Such a deal, it was believed, would enhance Turkey's chances of joining the EU. The independent magazine *Nokta* revealed in spring 2007 that a military coup over the issue of Cyprus was barely averted in 2004 due to divisions within the Turkish general staff's top brass.
- 4 March 20, 2006 interview with George Stephanopolous, "This Week with George Stephanopolous" ABC News transcript.
- 5 "Turkey Says U.S. Has Agreed to Free 11 Soldiers Suspected in Plot to Kill Kurdish Aide," *New York Times*, July 7, 2003, p. A6; Nicholas Birch, "Detention Strains Already Tense US-Turkey Relations," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 15, 2003; and James C. Helicke, "U.S. General Seeks to Ease Tensions with Turkey Following the Detention of 11 Turkish Soldiers," Associated Press, July 8, 2003.
- 6 For more on the D-8, see Berdal Aral, "An Inquiry into the D-8 Experiment: An Incipient Model of an Islamic Common Market?" *Alternatives*, Spring–Summer 2005 Vol. 4, Numbers 1&2.
- 7 For more information about the Istanbul Conference and its pro-Sunni message see <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/12/e9c8b518-22cb-4c03-8393-3762675d78b9.html> (accessed July 29, 2008).
- 8 Tuncer Kilinc, a retired general and former secretary general of the Turkish National Security Council, has also said that Turkey should "protect its secular state and territorial integrity against Western efforts to promote moderate Islam and Kurdish independence." See Tuncer Kilinc, "Turkey Should Leave NATO," lecture at the Atatürkist Thought Association's London office, May 2007. Another retired officer, General Dogan Gures, chief of staff to the general staff from 1990 to 1994, claimed that "The U.S. also wants [to divide Turkey]. They have prepared maps accordingly." Cited in Gareth Jenkins, "Former Turkish Commanders Discuss Costs and Benefits of Cross Border Operations against the PKK." *Eurasian Daily Monitor*, November 7, 2007.

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