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HISTORICAL REFLECTION ON NEO-OTTOMAN WELTANSCHAUUNG: BETWEEN IDENTITY-MAKING AND FOREIGN POLICY

ABSTRACT

The text is a diachronic presentation of the development of neo-Ottoman ideology in Turkey. After six decades of secular Kemalism that assimilated minorities under a single Turkish identity, Turgot Özal's government progressively reintroduced elements of Islam in Turkish public life and revived the 19th-century concept of Ottomanism involving a multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-religious state. Islamic spiritual movements contributed to the start of formation of a new Turkish identity with a strong Ottoman Islamic character This process has been continued under the rule of the AKP, a party rooted in Islamic tradition but active in foreign policy. According to the party theoretician Ahmed Davutoğlu, the Middle East turmoil results from the destruction of Ottoman cosmopolitanism by the European model of secularism and political nationalism and Turkey can be a pivotal state in the region. The AKP perceives Islam as a key for a new identity that will unify the various domestic ethnic groups and a way to calm regional instability while its current foreign policy carries strong pan-Ottoman undertones.

Key words

neo-Ottomanism, Turkish-Islamic synthesis, *pax Ottomanica*, pivotal state

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Introduction

Behind Turkey's development over the last three decades, a new identity can be traced that is focused on a worldview (German: *Weltanschauung)* defined as neo-Ottoman. This has been fostered by Turkish society gradually embracing elements from its imperial past and, more particularly, from the nineteenth century political ideology known as Ottomanism. Neo-Ottomanism is well-established and accepted as a general way of thinking and living in modern Turkey. Its reference is to Turkey's glorious and ambitious past and a revival of its Islamic roots. Nevertheless, the term neo-Ottomanism is still rarely accepted and used by Turkish political establishment, which rejects its use for fear that it might arouse unwanted references to a period of "neo-imperialism" or even worse, of "neo-caliphate".

The aim of this work is to present a worldview of the historical developments of neo-Ottomanism and to define in a broad sense its basic elements and roots. For this purpose, the work uses a diachronic analysis that facilitates rehabilitation of an Ottoman-Islamic identity.

1. The Ottomanism behind Özalism

The victorious election of Turgot Özal in 1983 represented the beginning of a break with the policies of the previous sixty years of the Turkish Republic which had been shaped along the values of Kemalism or Atatürkism. Özal's rise to power proved decisive for the beginning of changes that have pushed Turkey towards an ever more decisive transformation in which the progressive reinstatement of Islam in both private and public sectors plays a central role.

The *Anavatan Partisi* (Motherland Party, ANAP) led by Özal presented itself as a mix of the four major political ideologies of the Seventies (right, left, Islamic fundamentalism and radical right). Held together by Özal's charisma, these ideological forces won favour especially among the emerging middle classes, who would have enjoyed the economic policies implemented by the new government. This Muslim bourgeoisie was connected with the Anatolian provinces, and as such was further away from Ankara's secular establishment and more linked to religious and mystical tradition.

The liberal reforms promoted by Özal and the gradual rehabilitation of Islamic values in the public sphere helped stimulate the emergence of an alternative culture, autonomous from Kemalism. Concurrently, the secular-army establishment modified state ideology with the adoption of the *Türk-İslam Sentezi* (Turkish-Islamic synthesis). Turkish-Islamic synthesis was formulated by a group of intellectuals known as *Aydınlar Ocağı* (hearth of the intellectuals) and dealt with the idea that Islamic culture was a moral complement necessary to strengthen the order of values embodied in Turkish nationalism. The adoption of Turkish-Islamic synthesis as an integral part of state ideology helped to temper Islamist thinking. Thus the combination of several domestic factors brought about new room for public expression of religion and no longer confined to the private sphere, it assumed a collective identity-making value that does not deny modernity but experiences and professes a new way of life of which the central parts are Islamic ethics and the recovery of its long denied Ottoman past.

Özal realized that a new definition of Turkish identity was necessary to replace Kemalism, which was no longer considered suitable to effect social and global changes. Mustafa Kemal defined Turkish identity by a common linguistic and territorial nationality and rejected multi-culturalism that had represented one of the main pillars of the Ottoman Empire. Such a strict assimilationist view led to greater ethnic discrimination than under the Ottoman Empire, during which time cultural, religious and ethnic cohabitation was accepted as a national trait for centuries.

To the contrary, Özal considered the different ethnic, cultural, religious, linguistic and political traits as organic parts of a new national identity which was able to assume a more Ottoman perspective than one solely of Turkish nature. Özal's Turkism was a cultural concept that did not tend to clash with Turkey's ethnic minorities but was rather aimed at understanding them under the broader concept of Turks, or more precisely, under the wider concept of Ottomans. If Mustafa Kemal dreamt of a secularized and Westernized society, Özal wanted a democratic, Muslim, liberal and capitalist society, enclosed within a state system that was multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-religious.

In this meaning there are several aspects of imperial Ottomanism (*Osmanlilik*), a concept developed during the period of the Tanzimat reforms (1839–1876) by the bureaucratic elite. Ottomanism is derived from the idea that all Ottoman citizens should enjoy the same status within the empire, regardless of their ethnicity, religion or language. However, his was a purely formal concept, which only found full application in 1869 with the advent of the Ottoman citizenship law and represented the empire's first identity-making process. Paradoxically,

the failed attempt to spread a modern concept of citizenship, turned out to be one of the main factors that accelerated the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Indeed, Ottomanism undermined the legitimate basis of the millet administrative system, which for four centuries had represented the best expression of Ottoman religious tolerance. The millet system was a result of the "pragmatic" belief that the acceptance of differences was necessary for the survival of a multi-confessional and multi-national reality. The peaceful co-existence of a multiplicity of identities with flexible boundaries, which for centuries had been the backbone of the Ottoman society, crumbled.

An analysis of Ottomanism shows its evolution in three different stages and declinations between 1856 and 1882, which were each influenced by specific historical circumstances and driven by the common desire to stop the empire. The first phase (1856), defined as liberal Ottomanism, was characterized by the ideas of several members of the Porte, Grand Vizier Ali Pasha and Fuad Pasha who called for a new understanding of citizenship as a base of union of the various imperial ethnic groups (*Ittihad-i Ansar*). The second phase (1870–1878) was instead focused on an alternative vision promoted by a group of intellectual reformers known as the Young Ottomans, who tried to carry out mediation between the European thought (liberalism, constitutionalism) and the Islamic nature of the Ottoman state. The Young Ottomans coined the idea of union of elements, referring to the Muslim community (*Ittihad-i Islam*), considered in its original form as an embryonic democracy. Finally, the third phase (1880–1908) was outlined by Sultan Abdülhamit II who, following the Treaty of Berlin of 1878, emphasized the Islamic character of his authority. In order to legitimize his role, the Sultan gave rise to a form of defensive pan-Islamism to compact the Ottoman-Muslim community around the symbols of Islamic tradition as Caliph and Caliphate. Despite its evolutions, Ottomanism failed the challenge of many centrifugal forces that eventually weakened the Ottoman centre and structure, making it easy prey for European imperialist ambitions.

Besides the identity-making aspect, Özal's reference to Ottomanism was also connected with another element that could no longer be underestimated by the Turkish government: the presence of a large number of migrants coming from neighbouring regions. Since the Republic's birth in 1923, many ethnic groups have been forced to assimilate Turkish identity, abandoning any form of political and community representation. This did not prevent the ethnic group's progressive growth, which during the Eighties resulted in pressure from groups whose influence could no longer be ignored. Özal became aware of this further important change and came to the belief that the needs of the many ethnic groups had

to find their answers in Turkey's policies. A consideration that became crucial for Özal's foreign policy was aimed at recovering better relations with neighbouring countries and the former Ottoman provinces. Turkey was in the position that it could no longer ignore what was happening beyond its borders as a more active policy was expressly required by many ethnic pressure groups.

The term "neo-Ottomanism" was introduced in the mid-Eighties to define Turkey's growing geo-political engagement and remains present today as a notion that is eminently used by academics and journalists. At this stage neo-Ottomanism, better defined as Özalism, emerged in relation to a new foreign policy agenda driven by the idea that Turkey could, and should, play an important role as a regional power. Özalism, as a reaction to the traditional security-oriented approach, became functional to the protection of Turkey's economic interests worldwide. The Özal government tried to re-establish a pro-Western attitude by strengthening ties with both the United States and Europe while at the same time Turkey expanded relations with other regions such as the Balkans and Middle East. Afterwards, in the early Nineties, Turkey successfully created room to operate in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia.

Özalism introduced several new elements in Turkish foreign policy as the cultural dimension that has always played a key role in the neo-Ottoman vision. The ANAP government increased the use of soft power towards the former Ottoman provinces, anticipating what would have been the prerogative of AKP governments. However, unlike the AKP's foreign policy agenda, Özal could not enjoy a large operating space because Turkey did not yet have a strong and reliable economy. Özal is therefore merited with emancipating concepts such as Islamism and Ottomanism, which for years the Turkish secular elite had believed to be dangerous for Turkey, and it was he who created values for them on which to establish new regional ties.

2. The rise of conservative democracy and pro-Islamic civil society

The rise to power of the *Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party, AKP) in the 2002 election was a turning point of Turkish politics. The specificity of this case lies in the Necmettin Erbakanh's Milli Gorus movement and its ability to produce a ruling party that, although rooted in the Islamic tradition, has succeeded in combining Islam with democracy and found remarkable free market opportunities and openings in the West, particularly in

the European Union. Under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the AKP left behind not only fifty years of secular Kemalism but also political Islamic tradition, through a gradual process of institutionalization.

The AKP presented itself as a conservative democratic party, a platform able to fully meet the needs and ambitions of the new entrepreneurial class developed in the provinces, the so-called Anatolian Tigers. This new Muslim middle class looked upon the EU and globalization not as poisoned fruits of Western imperialism, but rather as an opportunity for greater freedom in various areas, including those of a religious nature. This group soon became a counter elite in which Islam is not a political horizon but rather an integrated way of life, in which traditional religious values are combined with the ethics of hard work, innovation and sober economic management. It was the approach that resumed the process undertaken by the Calvinist European bourgeoisie which began in the sixteenth century. For this reason, this middle class is labelled as "Islamic Calvinism", which combines the traits commonly attributed to Protestant ethics with strict Islamic observance.

The Midnight Statement of 2007 became the last attempt by the army to interfere in the political and institutional affairs of the state and also marked a decisive shift in the AKP political paradigm which assumed a more pronounced Islamic trait. The main effects of this change occurred in foreign policy, with the gradual detachment from long-term partners such as Israel and with the adoption of more Islamic arguments. In domestic policy, the AKP was able to bring forward the transformation of the whole Turkish public thanks to the introduction of its own élite in the various state administrative apparatus and cadres (education, economics, information, religious affairs). This was the outcome of a process following the *coup d'état* of 1980, when the military junta promoted de-politicization of the society and resizing of the pluralist democracy, restricting any form of political participation and expression or any correlated actions, including activities performed by many civil society organizations. There was a widening of the gap between the state and society, in which the void left by the total absence of parties and other socio-political organizations was gradually filled by new forms of associations linked to the networks of popular Islam, which became an element of social cohesiveness and integration.

These forms of social Islam, taking advantage of their strong variable and elusive spiritual character, which over the years had allowed the survival and underground spread of popular Islam,. in a short time succeeded in both expanding the intervention in the public sphere and promoting the development of a new civil society.

During its early years in power, the AKP was able to use the drive of the economic élite and, more generally, of this young pro-Islamic civil society in order to accelerate institution of a de-securitization process. The electoral vote in favour of the AKP, therefore, should be looked upon as the desire of civil society to legitimize a new actor with the implicit mandate to restructure the boundaries between State and society.

The progressive reinstatement of Islam to the Turkish public has gradually neutralized the threat of radical Islamism and at the same time promoted a possible solution to sensitive domestic issues, such as the Kurdish one, represented by the re-emergence of a multi-ethnic identity that, unlike the Kemalist approach, merges the ethnic diversities rather than assimilating them.

The rapid re-emergence of the Islamic movements was due to the failure of the Kemalist populism to produce its own code of ethics and its inability to provide an alternative and credible framework comparable to the Islamic virtues (*fazilet*). Virtues present in several Islamic social movements have facilitated the development of a new Turkish identity with a strong Ottoman Islamic character. These popular movements have spread a different idea of Islam, not coming from the mosques and sermons of the ulama but from newspapers, TVs, private schools as well as from many urban intellectuals who, in the '80s and '90s became involved in shaping their own modern version of Islam to be transmitted to the masses.

3. A neo-Ottoman *Weltanschauung* in the AKP era

The AKP's victory has merely revealed a process that has been embedded in Turkish society, highlighting the idea of neo-Ottomanism, a term that is often improperly used to indicate Turkish foreign policy *tout court*. The socio-political dynamics of the previous years triggered a process powered by the Muslim middle class in which reference to its own history and traditions, in particular to the Ottoman cosmopolitism took centre place. A new discourse emerged which stressed that ancient ties between people of different ethnicities and religions could reintroduce Turkey into the global stage and proposed a hybrid model of *Pax Ottomanica* (meeting of civilizations alternative to the Huntington's "clash") that was able to mediate the complex relation between Islam, modernity and democracy. Under the AKP government, Turkey is and must remain a national State; however, it acquired a more imperial vision of its own identity – in this sense, neo-Ottoman. This is an all-embracing way of thinking and living in present and future modern Turkey, referring to its glorious and ambitious past,

which for decades has been viewed as troublesome; it promotes the recovery of a common Ottoman-Islamic tolerant and inclusive identity.

In the notion of neo-Ottomanism there is a synthesis of identity-making elements that have characterized different historical phases of Turkish Ottoman reality in the last two centuries. The evolution of this concept has led to different outcomes: domestic policy has seen the promotion of a new idea of citizenship aimed at gradually recognizing Turkey's Muslim minorities (above all facing the delicate Kurdish and Alevi issues) and foreign policy has experienced a new dynamic, multidirectional and multidimensional attitude. Another effect of this process is the promotion of a neo-Ottoman *Weltanschauung*, necessary both to fill the void innate to Turkish identity, which for too many decades was built on the idea of loss rather than conquest, and to give greater self-confidence to Turkish society. This vision, combined with a strong feeling of revenge and pride, feeds that idea of *grandeur* that neo-Ottomanism tries to meet through a pro-active foreign policy.

With the rise of the AKP, Turkey's geopolitical centrality has begun to develop and has defined a new direction in foreign policy that follows the guidelines elaborated by International Relations Professor Ahmet Davutoğlu in his academic works. Davutoğlu's theories focus on the rhetoric of "the meeting of civilizations", which is part of the broader and more complex framework of neo-Ottomanism and is aimed at transforming Turkey from its status as a peripheral state during the Cold War era to a global actor or central state. The key asset of Davutoğlu's geopolitical doctrine, known as "Strategic Depth" is the gradual recovery of Ottoman Islamic heritage. The core idea of this approach is that the AKP no longer considers its imperial past as a destabilizing factor, as believed by Kemalists, but as a common denominator (*ortak payda*) among peoples of the neighbouring regions. In addition to the return to Ottoman Islamic inheritance, the Turkish government adopted a foreign policy that reflects activism in the former territories of the empire in the political, economic and cultural spheres. This push was not aimed at pursuing a phase of neo-imperialism but rather at increasing widespread use of soft power in the former Ottoman provinces to create and manage a new regional order.

The AKP government's ambitions to make Turkey a pivotal state of a comprehensive macro-regional system has been resized by the Syrian crisis and more sectarian oriented policies. However, the neo-Ottoman vision has even domestic implications, with a review of the concept of national identity, as already understood and started by Özal. Neo-Ottomanism admits openness to Turkey's numerous ethnic minorities through the development of a multi-cultural concept

of citizenship. This concept directly recalls the ideology of Ottomanism and its principle of "unity of elements" under an even more specific role. The AKP political discourse and agenda accentuates the presence of a strong reference to Islamic identity by recalling Ottomanism in its third phase, namely that of the Hamidian period. At that time, as previously highlighted, Sultan Abdülhamit II covered the idea of Ottomanism with Islamic symbolism as a vehicle for consensus and source of new and greater political legitimacy. The Sultan's political choice led to the recovery of the title of Caliph with the intention of strengthening internal imperial cohesion, without the assertive traits typical of modern pan-Islamism. Likewise, in the AKP vision, Islam can and should be the key for a new identity shared by the various domestic ethnic groups; at the same time, it could be a useful drug to calm regional instability.

According to Davutoğlu, the current Middle East turmoil is an aftermath of the import of the European model of secularism, political nationalism and ethnic identity – in other words, the breaking of Ottoman cosmopolitanism. For this reason, Davutoğlu has advocated an "alternative paradigm", the return to the historical political legitimacy of the Ottomans as well as Muslim world based on two Islamic concepts, *Tawhid* and *Tanzih*. In Davutoğlu's perspective Tawhid and Tanzih can lead to making a better society rather than Islamizing it. To this we must add how the AK Party establishment, as well as Özal and Sultan Abdülhamit II before them, shared a vision of a dynamic and flexible Islam, able to adapt and express itself with regard to modernity and democracy. This idea was the result of the strong influence exerted on all of them, including Erdogan, by important movements of popular Islam – as Sufi orders – which was aimed at promoting the Muslim world and intended as *ummah*, a new teaching in which faith and tolerance meet progress and business. This perspective finds legitimization in Ottoman history where a tolerant model of confessional pluralism allowed centuries of peaceful and fruitful coexistence and prosperity (Pax Ottomanica).

Among the current institutions that express a neo-Ottoman worldview are Turkish faith-based NGOs which have recently become an important instrument of Turkey's soft power toolkit. In line with Davutoğlu's vision, and more generally with AKP Weltanschauung, Turkish NGOs are working in different regions from Central Asia to Latin America and driven by Muslim humanitarianism and a nostalgic view of the hybrid Ottoman-Islamic liberalism based on two pillars: the institutionalized system of religious tolerance (*millet*) and the deep-rooted presence in society of charitable foundations (*vakiflar*). If the millet structure had guaranteed a confessional pluralism, the charitable foundations

were an embryonic version of civil society organizations, ensuring services aimed at meeting the basic needs of people. Today, the reference to the Ottoman past is a common ground of legitimacy among the different organizations of Turkey's civil society (business associations, NGOs, charities) and the establishment of the AKP government. For these reasons, Turkey's foreign policy agenda rather than being a declination of pan-Islamism has taken traits of an original version of pan-Ottomanism.

Conclusion

This paper analysed some key elements characterizing present-day Turkey, focusing on a neo-Ottoman worldview (Weltanschauung) and its implications. The aim was to highlight an innovative interpretation of Ottomanism that indissolubly relates identity-making policy and foreign policy with the emergence of a common Turkish-Ottoman identity as fundamental to promote Turkey's international ambitions. The starting point for these analyses were the innovative policies undertaken by the Özal government which have favoured the emergence of a new idea of Turkish identity and society characterized by liberalism in the economic field, dynamism in the public sphere and activism in foreign policy. Today, we should look at neo-Ottomanism as a process still underway, whose roots lie in the socio-political dynamics of the 70s and 80s in which cultural turmoil led to the emergence of a group of intellectuals and academics (*Aydınlar Ocağı*) who promoted an ideology (Turkish-Islamic Synthesis) in which elements of Turkish nationalism met Islam. All these factors under a different guise can be seen in AKP's paradigm and in Turkey's current international agenda which has assumed a strong pan-Ottoman character.

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