

Civilizational Discourse in Turkish Foreign Policy: The Cases of Syria and Palestine

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As competing currents of thought, Ottomanism, Islamism, Westernism and Turkism appeared in the early 20th century, addressing the identity question of the Ottoman Empire and offering different civilizational identities. Islamists considered Turkey as a part and leader of Islamic civilization, sharply opposing Westernization and considering the West as the anti-thesis of Islamic civilization. Turkists proposed a different identity project based on ethnic and cultural ties, advocating for the unification of all Turkic peoples. Turkism aspired to establish a Turkic union in a vast motherland referred to Turan. Westernists supported Turkey's Westernization, liberal values and full integration with Western system and civilization. As a founding ideology, Kemalism had been a dominant ideology in Turkey throughout the Cold War. Following the end of the Cold War, as the competing interpretations of Turkish identity, Turkism, Islamism and Ottomanism resurfaced relevant to geopolitical changes in the world. The emerging new geopolitical landscape in Eurasia and the former Ottoman territories led Turkey to reassess its international position and identity.

With the rise to power of Islamic rooted leader Erdoğan in 2002, Turkish foreign policy underwent an ideological shift. This shift was characterized by assertive foreign policy, a reorientation towards the Ottoman historical space and Islamic world, a reinterpretation of Turkish identity centred around the Ottoman-Islamic heritage, and a reimagining of the glorious past of the Ottoman Empire. Based on the tenets of Neo-Ottomanism and Islamism, Turkish politics under Erdoğan rule has departed from Turkey's Western oriented policies and Kemalist-secular Turkish identity.

The presentation will include three main parts:

1. It will be demonstrated how Neo-Ottomanism, Islamism, Turkism and Westernism as mainstream ideologies offer different civilizational identity projects and foreign policy visions for Turkey.
2. It will be disclosed how Neo-Ottomanism and Islamism shaped Turkish foreign policy since Erdoğan came to power.
3. The civilizational discourse in Turkish foreign policy towards Syria and Palestine will be examined.

The presentation will be based on constructivist theory underlining relationship of identity-foreign policy and considering civilizations as ‘imagined communities.’ The presentation offers a discourse analysis of Erdoğan’s official speeches given since October 7, 2023 which marks the start of the Israel–Hamas War. All analysed speeches directly relate to issues concerning the Ottoman, Islam, West, Syria, Palestine and Israel. The texts were borrowed from the website of the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey (tccb.gov.tr).

The findings of the research demonstrate that Neo-Ottomanist and Islamist civilizational discourses are very salient in Turkey’s stance on both the Israeli-Palestinian and the Syria issues. It is rooted in the religious values and historical references of Turkey which stems from the Ottoman past. The current territories of Syria, Israel and Palestine were ruled by the Ottoman Empire for centuries. Erdoğan considers Turkey to have a historical mission and responsibility for Palestine, claiming that there was a peace in this region under the rule of the Ottoman. Erdoğan has strongly raised the Palestine problem and expressed Turkey’s full support for Palestinians.¹ According to Erdoğan, one of the reasons of existing the Israeli-Palestinian problem is that the Ottomans were forced to leave this region.² He supposes that there could be a peace in Palestine if it was still ruled by the Ottoman Empire.

Islamist discourse is also evident in Turkey’s foreign policy approach to the Israeli-Palestinian problem, considering Turkey as a part of Islamic world. Erdoğan regarded Turkey as the voice of Palestinians and Muslims in the world, calling upon all Muslims to support Palestinians and unite against Israel aggressiveness.³ Moreover, the Israeli-Palestinian problem sparks Anti-Western discourse in Turkish foreign policy. Erdoğan sharply accused the West of supporting Israel, arguing that this support shows the West’s eternal shame and injustice.⁴

¹ R. T. Erdoğan, "İslam İşbirliği Teşkilatı Sosyal İşler Bakanları Zirvesi’nde Yaptıkları Konuşma" [Speech at the Summit of the Ministry of Social Affairs of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation], December 9, 2019, accessed February 10, 2021, www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/113857/islam-isbirligi-teskilati-sosyal-isler-bakanlari-zirvesi-nde-yaptiklari-konusma; R. T. Erdoğan, "Pakistan Milli Meclisi ve Senatosu’nun Oturumunda Yaptıkları Konuşma" [Speech at the Session of the National Parliament and Senate of Pakistan], February 14, 2020, accessed February 10, 2021, www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/116685/pakistan-milli-meclisi-ve-senatosu-nun-oturumunda-yaptiklari-konusma.

² R. T. Erdoğan, "Türkiye, Merkezinde Bulunduğu Coğrafyayı En İyi Taniyan, Anlayan ve Analiz Edebilen Ülkedir," September 14, 2014, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/1367/turkiye-merkezinde-bulundugu-cografyayi-en-iyi-taniyan-anlayan-ve-analiz-edebilen-ulkedir.html>.

³ R. T. Erdoğan, "9. Avrasya İslam Şûrası Açılışında Yaptıkları Konuşma" [Speech at the 9th Eurasian Islamic Council Meeting], October 11, 2016, accessed February 10, 2021, www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/53559/9-avrasya-islam-srasi-acilisinda-yaptiklari-konusma; "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: İslam Ülkelerinin Gazze’deki İsrail Zulmüne Ortak Tepki Vermesi İçin Temaslarımızı Sürdürüyoruz," Anadolu Agency, accessed August 19, 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-islam-ulkelerinin-gazzedeki-israil-zulmune-ortak-tepki-vermesi-icin-temaslarimizi-surduruyoruz/3132258>.

⁴ "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: 'İsrail Attığı Yanlış Adımla Kendi Geleceğini Kararttı,'" Republic of Turkey Directorate of Communications, accessed August 19, 2024,

Through the Israeli-Palestinian problem, Erdoğan proposed moral blames on the international order and the West, arguing that Israel is cherished and protected by Western powers and the international system. He has often blamed the international institutions and argued that the international order's real collapse occurred in Gaza and the international system lacks solidarity, justice and reliability due to not fulfilling its responsibilities for Gaza.⁵

Neo-Ottomanist and Islamist discourses are also salient in Turkey's stance on Syria, which is the former territory of the Ottoman. Erdoğan said that Turkey's involvement in Syria is driven not only by economic and military reasons but also by historical ones.⁶ "Emevi Camii'nde namaz kılacağız" (We will pray in the Umayyad Mosque) has become a motto regarding Syria pronounced by Erdoğan after the domestic war in Syria began. Besides, Turkey has advocated some Islamist movements in Palestine and Syria, such as supporting Hamas and the Free Syrian Army.⁷

As conclusion, civilizational discourse based on Neo-Ottomanism, Islamism and Anti-Westernism are very salient in Turkey's approach towards the Syria and the Palestine-Israel issues. Turkey's role in Syria's post-conflict reconstruction has increased with the fall of the Assad regime. Hence, Neo-Ottomanist aspirations would more appear in Turkey's policy towards Syria and the Middle East. Therefore, this presentation would provide to have a better understanding on Turkey's future behavior in the Middle East and the role of civilizational identity construction in Turkish foreign policy.

<https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/turkce/haberler/detay/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-israil-attigi-yanlis-adimla-kendi-gelecegini-karartti>.

⁵ "International Community Can Pay Its Debt to the Palestinian People Only through the Establishment of a Palestinian State," Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, accessed August 19, 2024, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/151376/-international-community-can-pay-its-debt-to-the-palestinian-people-only-through-the-establishment-of-a-palestinian-state->.

⁶ "Türkiye'nin Bu Dönemde Attığı Adımlar Önümüzdeki Yarım Asrı Biçimlendirecek Öneme Sahiptir," Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, accessed August 19, 2024, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/115281/-turkiye-nin-bu-donemde-attigi-adimlar-onumuzdeki-yarim-asri-bicimlendirecek-oneme-sahiptir->.

⁷ "Erdogan and Hamas: 'He's Presenting Himself as Leader of Muslim World,'" Financial Times, accessed August 19, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/7447e141-3d3f-4d98-953d-179e15909a7e>.