

IDEOLOGY AND PRAGMATISM IN TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY: FROM ATATÜRK TO THE AKP

Observers who interpret Turkish foreign policy through the lens of an ideological debate between the country's Eastern and Western identities have often overlooked the pragmatic motives that shaped policy decisions. In formulating their approaches toward Europe and the Middle East, Turkish leaders have seldom been influenced by the ideologies that determine their domestic politics. Understood in context, Atatürk's disengagement from the Middle East and the AKP's re-engagement with the region were both practical responses to strategic realities.

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Perhaps every country between Greece and Japan has at some point been described as a meeting place of East and West. Turkey, however, with its unique inter-continental geography has an especially close relationship with this cliché. Furthermore, in Turkey's case, the rhetoric of East and West has been matched by the rhetoric of Islam and democracy. As a result, the geographic coincidence of being in both Europe and Asia has become fused with the historical circumstance of being both Muslim and democratic or, alternatively, both Muslim and secular. These joint identities have come to dominate discussions of Turkey's domestic and foreign politics, both within Turkey and among the international scholarly community. With the rise of the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) and the ongoing debate over the nature of its religious roots, these labels have become particularly confused in recent years.

This confusion is apparent in the widespread belief that Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's political disengagement from the Middle East was a product of his nationalist ideology and domestic commitment to Westernization, as well as the belief that the AKP's more active Middle Eastern policy has been driven by its Islamic orientation. The first part of this claim regularly appears as a preface to scholarly works on Turkish foreign policy, including those by Philip Robins, Graham Fuller, Stephen Larrabee and Yücel Bozdağlıoğlu.¹ Robins, for example, writes that "The strong ideological orientation given to Turkey by Atatürk contained an umbilical link between the Western value system of the Kemalist elite and the external orientation of the state," while Fuller goes so far as to claim:

"[T]he essence of Atatürkism oriented Turkey firmly toward the West to transform it into an advanced and westernized state. For well more than half a century under the rule of Atatürkists, Turkey behaved almost literally as if the Middle East did not exist. That region represented an unhappy association with Turkey's past...."²

At the same time, some scholars have argued that the AKP's engagement with the region represents an ideologically-motivated reversal of this supposed Kemalist tradition. This position has been put forward in its most extreme form by Soner Çağaptay, who, writing for the Washington Institute, claims:

"[T]he AKP has taken an avid interest in Middle Eastern Muslim causes. Because the AKP government has not supported Turkish foreign policy moves paralleling those of the country's Western

¹ Philip Robins, *Suits and Uniforms* (London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs and Pinter Publishers, 1991), p.136-160; Graham Fuller, "Turkey's Strategic Model: Myths and Realities", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 3, p. 151-164; Stephen Larrabee, "Turkey Rediscovered the Middle East," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 4, (July/August, 2007), p.103-4. Bozdağlıoğlu's *Turkish Foreign Policy and Turkish Identity: A Constructivist Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2003) makes this argument in some depth.

² Robins, *Suits*, p. 138-139; Fuller, *Strategic Model*, p. 59.

allies, instead putting a premium on Turkey's ties with Muslim countries and emphasizing solidarity with Muslim causes, the Turks are turning to the Muslim Middle East. This transition is feeding into new and powerful political sentiments in the form of Muslim nationalism, with many Turks concluding –in line with the AKP's arguments– that their interests lie with other Muslim-majority countries.”³

This paper will argue that scholars have overemphasized the role of domestic identity and ideology in determining Turkish foreign policy, both now and in the past. A review of the pragmatic concerns that shaped Turkey's international relations during key periods in its history –under Atatürk, during the Cold War and under Turgut Özal– will provide the background for the claim that pragmatic concerns have influenced the AKP much more than any Islamist ideology.

Europe and the Middle East in Atatürk's Foreign Policy

Atatürk's lack of interest in Middle Eastern affairs, besides being the product of a broader policy of moderate isolationism, reflected the fact that in the wake of World War I, the Middle East was largely under European political control, and there were few independent states with which Turkey could have had relations. Turkey could not have had a Middle Eastern policy that was separate from its relations with European states. In this context, the only important decision facing Turkey's leaders was whether or not to challenge the mandate powers in the hope of reasserting influence in the region. Once this option was rejected, Turkey had little to gain through involvement in the Arab world, and risked little through non-involvement.⁴ Thus, whatever ideological prejudices the Kemalists may have had against Islam or Arabs, the strategic imperative to focus directly on European affairs was compelling.

Decisively rejecting the Ottoman-era claims to the Middle East was certainly one of the more revolutionary decisions Atatürk made, and also one of the most pragmatic. Even after their defeat in World War I, many Ottoman leaders did not see the loss of the region as a foregone conclusion. In Sultan Mehmet VI's October 1918 proposal for armistice terms, Article 1 requested “Autonomy of the Hejaz, Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia under the suzerainty of the Sultan after the model of Egypt before the war.”⁵ When the Istanbul Assembly voted to adopt the National Pact in 1920, it included language declaring that all former

³ Soner Çağaptay, “Secularism and Foreign Policy in Turkey: New Elections, Troubling Trends, vii,” *Washington Institute Policy Focus*, No. 67 (April, 2007).

⁴ When, in the case of Hatay [the Sanjak of Alexandretta], Turkey did have a clear interest in the Middle East, it could only be achieved by going through Paris. Furthermore, France's decision to resolve the issue in Turkey's favor had nothing to do with the political situation in the Middle East but rather with its desire to win Turkish cooperation in the looming confrontation with Italy and Germany.

⁵ Gwynne Dyer, “The Turkish Armistice of 1918,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.8, (1972), p.153-155.

Ottoman territories with an Arab majority should be allowed to decide their future by plebiscite.⁶

Atatürk's rejection of these imperial ambitions fits very neatly with the nationalist ideology he used to organize the Turkish state. It also reflected the fact that after the Ottomans' defeat, the Hejaz rebellion, and the rise of Arab nationalism, these imperial ambitions were clearly unrealistic. Was Atatürk truly driven by a deep belief that Turkish nationalism should define the borders of his new state, or was he simply making a virtue of necessity? The best evidence that it was the latter lies in the way he handled a number of similar territorial disputes that arose during the Lausanne Conference. Hatay, Mosul and Western Thrace were all regions to which Turkey laid claim, but whereas Hatay and Mosul were of clear economic importance –containing an important port and significant oil reserves respectively– Western Thrace was not. In terms of population, however, Western Thrace was predominantly Turkish speaking, while Hatay was split between Turkish and Arabic speakers, and in Mosul, only the minority Turkmen population spoke Turkish. Both at the Lausanne Conference and in the years that followed, Atatürk showed his determination to regain Hatay and Mosul, in stark contrast to the indifference he showed toward Western Thrace, where the population had the best claim to Turkish identity as it was then being defined. While these priorities reveal the definite triumph of pragmatism over nationalism, they should not be taken as evidence that Atatürk's nationalism was in any way insincere. The borders he sought may not have included all the people who could have been considered Turks, but they certainly worked to the advantage of the great majority of them.

Had Atatürk decided to pursue an unrealistically expansionist policy in the Middle East –as Mussolini and Hitler were to do elsewhere with disastrous results– there were justifications he could have used that would not have contradicted his political ideology or the organizational logic of his efforts to found the modern Turkish nation state. Most ambitiously, he could have used the rhetoric that the League of Nations had used in creating territorial mandates, and claimed that as a civilized, Western, European country, Turkey had the same right to rule over the region as France or Britain.⁷

Another option, briefly considered during the War for Independence, would have been to pursue a federated relationship with one or many potential Arab states, although this would have been harder to justify on nationalist grounds.⁸ More realistically, Turkey could have supported nationalist independence movements

⁶ H. W. V. Temperley, *The History of the Peace Conference of Paris*, Vol. 4 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 605-606.

⁷ No one suggested that France or Britain were any less European because they took over the Ottoman's possessions in the Middle East. Quite the contrary, in the imperialist ideology of the day, a nation earned the right to rule over another not by sharing its culture or civilization but by having a superior one.

⁸ Salahi Sonyel, *Turkish Diplomacy 1913-1923: Mustafa Kemal and the National Movement* (London: Sage, 1975), p. 23.

in the Arab territories in the hope of creating independent states, which would then be susceptible or receptive to Turkish influence. Such a policy, though, would have done little more than arouse the fury of the mandate powers without bringing any benefits to Turkey.⁹ Still, a less prudent leader could have pursued such a confrontational course without contradicting the tenets of Turkish nationalism. The best evidence that Atatürk's decision to renounce a more prominent Turkish role in the Middle East was not related to his belief in Westernization comes from the example of the İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti's [Committee of Union and Progress] wartime activities. While the ITC's leadership had generally shared Atatürk's view of Turkish nationalism and his skepticism towards religion, they remained fiercely committed to maintaining their control of the Middle East throughout World War One. Arnold Toynbee, writing in 1917, recounts a conversation with an ITC officer who boasted that the government would soon do to the Arabs what they were currently doing to the Armenians. Another officer suggested that the Arabs could simply be Turkified, providing yet another, albeit unrealistic, way to reconcile political hegemony in the region with nationalist ideology.¹⁰

To ascribe Atatürk's Middle East policy to any aspect of his ideology –be it his nationalism or his desire to renounce Turkey's Islamic, Arab or "Oriental" past– is to ignore the historical constraints he was operating under as well as the potential justifications he had available.

Turkey's Cold War Alignment

Turkey's membership in NATO has served as the defining feature of its relationship with the West for over half a century, and has been routinely cited by politicians both within Turkey and abroad as evidence of Turkey's European identity. At a practical level, Turkey's NATO membership provided the framework for the close relationship it developed with the United States. Conceptually, it helped give Turkey a new geographic position inside Europe. After centuries of being seen as "barbarians at the gates", the Turkish army took on the role of "gatekeeper", defending Europe's southeastern flank. Furthermore, when it came to defining the relationship between identity and foreign policy during the Cold War, the only significant division was between the communist and anti-communist camps. In a world where the "East" was communist and the "West" was not, Turkey could use NATO membership as evidence of its Western identity with little fear of contradiction.

⁹ That Atatürk was unwilling to risk Turkey's relations with its neighbors over the "Outer Turks" in Greece, Bulgaria or Northern Iraq suggests that even if he had felt equal sympathy towards the Arabs, he would have been unlikely to take any substantial risks on their behalf.

¹⁰ Arnold Toynbee, *Turkey: A Past and a Future* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1917), p. 28.

In fact, this division belies a more complicated ideological landscape. Despite his firm opposition to Communism as a political movement, Atatürk himself always worked to stay on good terms with the Soviet government as part of his policy of neutrality. He sought their support during the independence war, created an officially sanctioned communist party to win their sympathy and signed a ten-year friendship treaty with the Soviet Union as early as 1935. Atatürk argued that Communist ideology had no relevance for Turkey, as Turkey had no class divisions, yet in embracing Etatism (*Devletçilik*, one of the six arrows of Kemalism), hiring Soviet economic advisors and implementing his own five-year plans in 1934 and 1938, Kemal demonstrated that some socialist economic principles were not inconsistent with his view of modernization.¹¹

For Atatürk, Westernization meant both modernization and acceptance into the community of European states. Seeing Turkey's NATO membership as the fulfillment of Turkey's quest for a Western identity can mask the potential divergence of these goals and obscure the similarities between Kemalist and Soviet views on modernization in the cultural sphere. In fact, many of the very same reforms that were seen as Westernization in the Turkish context were carried out by the Soviet government in Central Asia under the banner of Sovietization. Not only did the Soviets bring nationalism to Central Asia through the creation of nominally sovereign republics, but they also brought semi-mandatory education for women, forcible unveiling (the *Hujum* campaign), new Latin alphabets (later replaced by Cyrillic ones), and a swift end to any independent religious organization.¹² Without delving too deep into counter-factual history, it is easy to imagine that had a different set of circumstances led Turkey into a close alliance with Moscow, this too could have been presented as the natural fulfillment of Kemal's positivist ideology.

Foreign Policy under Özal

Turgut Özal was sworn in as President of Turkey on 9 November 1989, the very day the Berlin Wall fell. That Özal's presidency so neatly coincided with the end of the Cold War has greatly complicated the task of understanding whether the changes that occurred in Turkish foreign policy in the early 1990s were the result of his personal commitment to a more active, less traditionally Kemalist policy or were a result of the radically altered global circumstances. Additionally, the image Özal gained from confronting the power of the military and challenging secularist and nationalist views on some social issues often cast an ideological shadow over the interpretation of his foreign policy decisions.

¹¹ The 1934 five year plan was launched in January while the 1938 plan was launched in September, thus making them less than five years apart in calendar years.

¹² A detailed discussion of Soviet policies towards women and family life can be found in Shoshana Keller's "Trapped Between State and Society: Women's Liberation and Islam in Soviet Uzbekistan, 1926-1941." *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Spring, 1998), p. 20-37.

Two motives are apparent in the way Turkey engaged the world under Özal. First, Özal sought and exploited opportunities to advance Turkish interests directly by enhancing Turkey's regional influence and economic position. Second, Özal sought to demonstrate Turkey's continued value to the U.S. and NATO, which he believed were still essential partners for Turkey even with a lesser or diminishing Soviet threat. Thus, Özal's activism was aimed at taking advantage of the new possibilities that the Soviet collapse had brought while simultaneously minimizing the negative consequences that it might also bring.

The Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) stands out as a prime example of Özal's desire to seize new political and economic opportunities. Founded in 1992 at Özal's initiative, it was an attempt to institutionalize a new and profitable relationship with countries that had almost all previously been trapped behind the iron curtain. Similarly, in reaching out to the Turkic republics of Central Asia, Özal was making contact with an area that had previously been off-limits to Turkish diplomacy. In both cases, there was a powerful economic incentive driving Özal's policy. Özal's term as president saw the fruition of the economic reforms he had instituted while prime minister. As a result, by the late 1980s, the Turkish economy was not only increasingly dynamic, but also increasingly export-oriented and more deeply integrated into the world economy. Özal was quick to see that many of Turkey's neighbors could serve as much needed markets for Turkish goods, and that enhancing political ties would be the natural first step toward consolidating a profitable economic relationship. By bringing a sizable delegation of businessmen along with him whenever he traveled abroad, Özal showed his commitment to putting Turkey's regional relations in the service of its economic interests.

At the same time, Özal was eager to show that Turkey could contribute militarily to the defense of what was then still being optimistically called the "new world order." Seeing the United Nations' 1992-1993 involvement in Somalia as a chance to do this, Özal successfully pushed for Turkey to take a prominent role in the U.S.-led "Unified Task Force". In other cases, most notably his outreach to the new Turkic states of Central Asia, Özal saw Turkey's direct and indirect interests as working in tandem. In the early 1990s, there was much talk of Turkey serving as an emissary of the west in Turkic Eurasia. The Turks' cultural connections, it was suggested, would lay the foundation for the economic and political connections that the U.S. in particular wanted to establish in the region. In this way, Turkey would receive economic benefits for itself while simultaneously making itself invaluable to the West.

The term "Ottomanism" or "neo-Ottomanism" has become closely associated with Özal's active pursuit of foreign policy. Alas, it has not become closely

associated with any clear and consistent definition, however, leading to some confusion when it is used today. When used in his own time, Ottomanism generally referred to Özal's vision for a more inclusive and multicultural state. Özal saw the Ottomans as offering a historical example for incorporating Islamic and Kurdish identity into Turkish political culture. He even drew parallels between the political structures of the Ottoman Empire and the United States, emphasizing that both "allowed different cultures and gave people freedom to exercise their religion, nationality and economic preferences."¹³ As a term to describe Turkey's new approach to relations with its neighbors, Neo-Ottomanism was used both by Turkish writers like Cengiz Çandar, for whom it had positive connotations, and by writers from the Balkans and Middle East, for whom the Ottomans were associated with imperial rule, not multicultural harmony.¹⁴ While writers of both persuasions contrasted neo-Ottomanism with the Kemalist tradition of neutrality and non-alignment, the term was not used at first to imply a particular focus on relations with Islamic or the Middle Eastern countries.¹⁵

In defending his activist approach, Özal contrasted it with what he saw as the overly cautious, not to say timid, approach of past Turkish leaders. Unfairly, perhaps, he cited İsmet İnönü's policy of neutrality in World War II as one of the prime examples of this tendency. Not content to conclude that his approach was the realistic one for the strong, secure country that he led, while İnönü's had been proper for its time, Özal instead implied that their different approaches were the product of different ideologies, not different circumstances. Moreover, in claiming that his approach would not only serve contemporary Turkey better but also would have served Turkey better in the past, he tried to wrap his ideology in a mantle of timeless pragmatism.

Strategic Depth, the AKP and the Middle East

In his 2000 book *Strategic Depth (Stratejik Derinlik)*, Ahmet Davutoğlu, who later became Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's chief foreign policy advisor, articulated what he saw as the connection between the AKP's desire to harmonize Turkey's European and Islamic identities and its efforts to improve relations with all of Turkey's neighbors.¹⁶ Davutoğlu argued that Turkey is located at the center of several "geo-cultural basins" –the West (including the United States), the Middle East, the Balkans and Central Asia– and that Turkey should pursue an active policy to take advantage of the opportunities that exist in all of them. Davutoğlu

¹³ Sedat Laçiner, "Özalizm (Neo-Ottomanism): An Alternative in Turkish Foreign Policy?" in the *Journal of Administrative Sciences* Vol 1 (2003), p. 182-185. Özal also used the Ottomans as a historical precedent for specific reforms, like the introduction of state [eyalet] system, which would serve his broader vision, in this case by providing greater regional autonomy within which cultural rights could be exercised.

¹⁴ Laçiner, "Özalizm," pp. 10-11, 20. For a negative view of Ottomanism, see Stephanos Constantinides, "Turkey: The Emergence of a New Foreign Policy The Neo-Ottoman Imperial Model," *Journal of Political and Military Sociology*, Vol. 24 (Winter, 1996).

¹⁵ Interestingly, Özal's pursuit of closer ties with the Turkic republics of Central Asia was often described as Neo-Ottomanism, despite the fact that the area was never part of the Ottoman Empire and only became identified with modern Turkey through the rhetoric of Turkish nationalism.

¹⁶ Sometimes called the "Zero Problems with Neighbors" policy. This description of Davutoğlu's work is taken primarily from Alexander Murinson's "The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy" *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 6 (November, 2006).

also argued that Turkey's historic depth enhances its geographic depth (these being the two components of the eponymous strategic depth). According to Davutoğlu, a country acquires strategic depth from having been “at the epicenter of [historical] events,” as Turkey was during the Ottoman Empire.¹⁷ Calling on Turkey to “rediscover its historic and geographic identity” –which its traditional foreign policy neglected– Davutoğlu recommended a “balanced approach towards all global and regional actors” and “strong economic linkages with all regional states.”¹⁸

Davutoğlu fully embraced the idea that the Kemalist disengagement from the Islamic world was a product of its disengagement from Islamic and the Ottoman past. He criticized this disengagement not from an Islamic perspective, though, but from a pragmatic one, pointing to the opportunities that Turkey supposedly missed because of the Kemalists' ideological fixation on Europe. More than Özal ever did, Davutoğlu focused on the strategic importance of the Muslim world and the need for Turkey to re-engage on this particular front. That said, he also stressed the importance of Turkey's geographic and historical ties with Christian neighbors like Greece and Bulgaria. The other major difference between the AKP's implementation of Davutoğlu's strategic vision and Özal era neo-Ottomanism is that for Özal an activist regional policy was seen as a way to enhance ties with the United States, whereas for the AKP, efforts to engage Turkey's Middle Eastern neighbors have increasingly had to come at the expense of its ties with the U.S. Thus, while the AKP can now pursue EU membership and a more openly Islamic domestic identity, it cannot necessarily enhance its relations with Syria, Iran, America and Israel all at the same time.

When forced to choose, the AKP has increasingly refused to side with America, generating a great deal of concern in Washington over the past six years and prompting many to ask “who's losing Turkey?” In searching for an answer, self-criticism –focused on America's inaction toward the PKK and its badly damaged global image– has been mixed with an impulse to blame the AKP and its Islamist ideology. Writing in the Middle East Forum, for example, Michael Rubin criticizes the AKP's “neo-Ottomanist” policy (enacted, he says, “behind the rhetoric of bridging East and West”), which he defines largely in terms of the party's overtures toward Syria and Iran.¹⁹ This argument has been bolstered by others who claim that the AKP has actually been one of the driving forces behind anti-Americanism in Turkey, promoting it through the party's rhetoric and media outlets.²⁰

¹⁷ Murinson, “Strategic Depth,” p. 951.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 953.

¹⁹ Michael Rubin, “Shifting Sides: The Problems of neo-Ottomanism,” *National Review Online*, 10 August 2004.

²⁰ This argument has appeared not only in Soner Çağaptay's work but also in that of prominent neo-conservatives, including Douglas Feith (“National Defense in the Second Term,” Speech given at the Council on Foreign Relations, New York City, 17 February 2005) and most notably Robert Pollack in an article entitled “The Sick Man of Europe – Again?” *Wall Street Journal*, 16 February 2005.

There are, however, a number of regional and global changes that have occurred since Özal's period that would have given any Turkish government incentive to devote more attention to regional relations at the expense of American interests. Most broadly, America's hard and soft power has declined relative to its strength in early 1990s. The rise of Russia, China and the EU have helped to diminish America's relative strength, while the Iraq war and its aftermath dealt a severe blow to the moral authority America once enjoyed. That America's image has suffered most in the Muslim world makes it particularly difficult for any Turkish government trying to manage its relations with America and the Middle East. Additionally, Arab-Israeli rapprochement in the early 1990s, particularly after the 1991 Madrid Conference, helped create a climate in which Turkish-Israeli ties could develop without generating undue hostility in Turkey or abroad. When this rapprochement dissolved following the Al-Aqsa Intifada 2000 and the 2006 Israeli-Lebanese war, it became much more difficult for Turkey to balance its relations with Israel, America and the Arab world.

The Euro-American tensions that developed during the Bush administration, particularly in regard to Iraq, have meant that it is no longer possible to talk about "pro-Western" policies without distinguishing which "West" one is talking about. Turkey's position *vis-à-vis* Iran's nuclear program, for example, which has been a cause for disappointment in Washington, is much closer to that of France, Germany and Britain. Similarly, some of the statements that have most angered the AKP's American critics –claims that America committed genocide in Falluja, or repeated criticism of Israeli crimes against humanity– reflect views that are not uncommon in Europe.²¹

There have also been more concrete changes in regional politics that have made rapprochement with Syria and Iran more advantageous. The groundwork for improved Syrian-Turkish relations was laid when Syria expelled PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1998 and, under threat of Turkish attack, reduced its support for the PKK. In Iran's case, the change has been more gradual, as the Islamic Republic of Iran has steadily moved away from its commitment to "exporting the revolution" and from much of the revolutionary rhetoric that so alarmed neighboring states in the past. At the same time, the success America has achieved in isolating both states has made them more willing to cooperate with Ankara.

The situation in Iraq gives Turkey, Iran and Syria a new common interest in preventing the emergence of an independent Kurdish state. Iran, in particular, was quick to capitalize on Turkey's anger over American inaction toward the PKK. Iran's President Ahmadinejad offered public support for Turkey in its struggle against the PKK, while Iranian diplomats have presented Ankara with alleged

²¹ Dan Bilefsky, "Turkey and Europe: Why a Strained Relationship is Fraying," *New York Times*, 8 November 2006.

evidence of American support for the organization.²²

Finally, with regard to Iran and Syria, the level of fealty the Bush administration often expected from its allies made a multilateral balancing act even more difficult for Turkey to achieve. President Bush's "with us or against us" attitude has given events like Erdoğan's 2004 visit to Damascus, which under another president might have generated quiet criticism, the appearance of major public ruptures.

In this altered geopolitical climate, the AKP's policy of engaging its Middle Eastern neighbors has gained support from across the political spectrum. Even in criticizing Erdoğan's visit to Syria, Süleyman Demirel made it clear that he supported the basic principle behind it. Erdoğan was being criticized not for wanting to balance relations with America and Syria, but in performing the balancing act poorly.

"While we claimed we wanted to smooth Turkish-U.S. relations we created serious tension over Syria. This was very wrong. No one asked Turkey to become Syria's enemy on behalf of America. But Turkey could have avoided acts that blatantly disturbed the U.S. This would not have bothered Syria... Turkey's foreign policy should be conducted in balance, nothing should be overdone."²³

As president, Ahmet Necdet Sezer also visited Syria, and indeed created far more controversy for doing so in the immediate aftermath of the Hariri assassination.

Even the religious, cultural and historical language found in Davutoğlu's writing has parallels in the rhetoric of politicians from secular backgrounds. Writing as then-foreign minister in 2000, İsmail Cem, a hero of the Turkish left, repeatedly criticized Turkish policymakers for ignoring Turkey's history, specifically the position of strength it once enjoyed *vis-à-vis* its regional neighbors and the West.²⁴ Interestingly, he concludes that Turkey, by rejecting its Ottoman past, has lost the sense of confidence that Atatürk bequeathed it. Thus for Cem, embracing the history that Atatürk rejected is the only way to fulfill his legacy.

Finally, the list of foreign governments the AKP has engaged would be difficult to explain from an ideological perspective. President Abdullah Gül's recent visit to Armenia demonstrates that the AKP has also pursued its "zero problems"

²² Sami Moubayed "Iran and Turkey fire salvo over Iraq," *Asia Times Online*, 13 May 2006.

²³ Nigar Göksel interview of Süleyman Demirel, "Turkey and Democratization in the Middle East," *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2005).

²⁴ İsmail Cem, *Turkey in the New Century* (Mersin: Rustem, 2000), p. 7-52. He later argues, more directly, that Turkish policy has been overly dismissive of the Arabs. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

policy with Christian neighbors, as does its support for a close relationship with Georgia and a resolution to the Cyprus conflict. While Syria is an Islamic country, it is not an Islamist one, and the Assad regime would be a poor partner for any government trying to prove its Islamist credentials. Necmettin Erbakan –whose genuinely ideological foreign policy²⁵ was undoubtedly responsible for the some of the suspicion the AKP has faced– held his first meeting as prime minister with the son of Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Bana. Erdoğan’s decision to meet with Bashar Assad, whose father was responsible for the massacre of Muslim Brotherhood members at Hama and whose government continues to suppress the organization, is hardly evidence the he is following Erbakan’s style of Islamist ideology.

The AKP has pursued strategic depth through improved relations with explicitly Islamist regimes like Iran, but also by reaching out to non-Islamic countries and Islamic countries with non-Islamist governments. Recognizing that its policy is not an Islamist one makes it clear that, in trying to balance Turkey’s strategic relationships rather than prioritize relations with the U.S. and NATO, the AKP has demonstrated continuity not only with Özal’s Neo-Ottomanism, but also with the non-alignment of Atatürk and İnönü.²⁶

Conclusion

Recognizing the degree of pragmatism in Turkish foreign policy throughout the Republic’s history leads to several tentative conclusions which should give European and American leaders cause for both optimism and concern.

Whatever its rhetoric, no Turkish government will pursue ties with any Middle Eastern state to the point of precipitating an irreconcilable breach with America or Israel. In the case of Iran, security concerns over the potential consequences of the country’s nuclear program will limit the extent of any potential rapprochement. More broadly, the limited economic and military potential of the region as a whole precludes it from ever becoming a serious strategic partner for Turkey.

European leaders would be naïve to expect that Turkey’s Kemalist, “pro-Western” imperative will keep it on track towards EU membership in the face of repeated rejection, but they should also realize that the economic and political benefits of EU membership will continue to influence Turkish leaders from all ideological backgrounds. American leaders would also be naïve to expect that the election of a less Islamic-oriented government will necessarily lead to improved U.S.-Turkish relations. Additionally, the focus on the AKP’s ideology and Middle Eastern

²⁵ Among other things, Erbakan called for the creation of a Muslim alternative to the EU.

²⁶ Interestingly, Hakan Yavuz writes that during the Bosnian crisis the Refah Party criticized Tansu Çiller’s inaction by saying that her policy “was a product not of Atatürkism... but of Western-oriented subservience.” Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) p. 237.

policy should not distract American leaders from potentially greater long-term challenges, such as the rise of anti-Americanism among those in the military and secular left. There is also the possibility that the increased democratization of Turkish foreign policy at a time of widespread anti-Americanism will challenge the pragmatic inclinations of Turkish leaders, as it did when it prevented them from allowing American troops to use Turkish territory for the invasion of Iraq.

From Turkey's perspective, the most serious risk is that foreign policy makers would actually allow their ideology to shape their decisions instead of just their rhetoric. Given the strength of the historical precedent, though, and the fact that the broad contours of Turkey's current policy enjoy support from across the political spectrum, there is ample reason to believe that the tradition of pragmatism will prevail.