The Empire Strikes Back

The Ottoman Empire in Contemporary Turkish Political Discourse

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In the century since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, ambivalence and contradiction have defined Turkey's political rhetoric regarding its imperial legacy. As the leader of the nascent Republic of Turkey in 1923, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk embarked on a mission to quickly build a modern nation-state, rejecting Turkey's Ottoman and Islamic past and establishing a Western orientation that pervaded Turkish politics throughout the 20th century. "Neo-Ottomanism" emerged as an alternative perspective in the late 1980s, promoting a renewed appreciation for the Ottomans and for Turkey's Islamic character. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's political leader since 2003, has been a critical advocate of this approach, and as his agenda becomes increasingly confrontational and conservative, the Ottomans have taken on yet a new role in official Turkish rhetoric. The changing treatment of the Ottoman Empire by Turkish

Recep Tayyip Erdogan, president of Turkey. Wikimedia Commons, 2017.

politicians—and particularly in their use of the term "neo-Ottoman"—reflects their ideologies about Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East and the roles of religion and ethnicity in defining what it means to be a Turkish citizen.

The Republic of Turkey emerged from a deeply problematic empire, and Mustafa Kemal aimed to sever his new nation from its Ottoman past.[1] He developed "Kemalism," a nationalist ideology which sought to "modernize" Turkey by embracing systems such as democracy and secularism, and which treated the Ottoman Empire as "another country," as opposed to Turkey's predecessor state.[2, 3] The Kemalist reforms abolished the Caliphate, secularized the legal and education systems, outlawed Sufi orders, replaced the Arabic alphabet with the Latin alphabet, and adopted the European clock and calendar.[4] Kemalism was completely oriented toward the West, devoted to "the elimination of the influences of Islamic/Arab culture by adopting Europe as a model."[5]

The Kemalists' separation of religion from government best exemplifies their rejection of the Ottomans. While Islam shaped Ottoman politics, law and social systems, the Kemalists based their political philosophy on French laicism: they were "assertive secularists," meaning religious expression was tightly controlled in public spheres.[6] Additionally, though they did not define Turkish citizenship in terms of race or religion in the Constitution, they conceived of the nation as "ethnic Turks," which could only include ethnic and religious minorities if they could be "Turkified." When the Kurds rejected Turkification, Kemalists saw them as a threat to modernization and national security. [7] Although Kemalism faced challenges from both conservatives and liberals throughout the 20th century, its central tenets remained dominant in Turkish politics.[8] Only relatively recently has Turkey begun to rethink its pro-Western, anti-Ottoman perspective, which has had major implications for the place of Islam and minorities in Turkey.

Neo-Ottomanism is a reaction against this aggressive secularism and nationalism. Developed by secular, liberal intellectuals and by the socially conservative (but politically liberal and nationalist) President Turgut Ozal, neo-Ottomanism "challenged the unitary plank of national identity and strict secularism of the early nation builders," touting Turkey's "multi ethnic composition [and] tolerance of Ottoman Islam."[9] Neo-Ottomanism aimed for a synthesis of the Turkish and Islamic identities, embracing the historical legacy of the Ottoman Empire for its pluralism, as well as its Islamism as a source of soft power in the Middle East.

Ozal's neo-Ottomanism also challenged Turkey's Western trade and foreign policy focus. Though Ozal maintained a close relationship with George H.W. Bush and "showed no hesitation" in allying with the United States against Iraq in the Persian Gulf War, he actively pursued better relationships with Arab

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nations, as well as with states in Central Asia and the Caucasus.[10] Ozal also established relationships with Kurdish leaders and was a proponent of moderate Kurdish rights throughout his political career, in contrast to the Kemalists who saw Kurdish nationalism as "an existential threat to Turkey's territorial integrity."[11] Continuing in this direction, Erdogan's early administration was centrist and moderate in its approach toward Islam, minorities, and the West.

As a social conservative, Erdogan lauds Ottoman Islamism. However, he was not dogmatic in his early Prime Ministership; his views mirrored American "passive" secularism, which allows religious expression in public spaces and by individual civil servants.[12] His Justice and Development Party (AKP) asserts that Kemalist secularism has created hostility toward religion, and that "the state could be secular, while individuals are not necessarily so."[13] For example, Erdogan campaigned in 2007 on lifting the hijab ban in civil service jobs, arguing that it discriminated against conservative women.[14] The Turkish Constitutional Court annulled the Parliament's decision to lift the ban, but ultimately the ban was lifted in 2013.[15, 16]

Erdogan and the AKP were also more moderate in their treatment of minorities, referencing the Ottoman millet system "in which each minority community was left in peace."[17] The stringent nationalism of Kemalism meant that ethnic and religious minorities were excluded from positions of power, and neo-Ottomanism opened the door for a more pluralist conception of Turkish citizenship.[18] Citing Turkey's "imperial and multinational legacy," the AKP passed laws enabling broadcasting in languages other than Turkish in 2004, and drafted a new civil constitution in 2007 which replaced the reference to "ethnic Turks" with "citizens of Turkey."[19, 20, 21] Kemalists' ethnic idea of what it meant to be a Turk had room for inclusion only through assimilation, whereas neo-Ottomanists, because of their celebration of the Ottoman legacy, had a "'less 'ethnic' and more multicultural conceptualization of citizenship."[22]

The final shift inspired by neo-Ottomanism was Erdogan's foreign policy. Erdogan's Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoglu developed a policy of "zero problems" with Turkey's neighbors, which emphasized strengthening relationships and staying uninvolved in regional conflicts. Turkey pursued better relationships with Iran, Iraq and Syria, Turkish conglomerates' investments in the region greatly increased, and trade with its eight nearest neighbors doubled between 2005 and 2008.[23] Additionally, though Erdogan more actively pursued partnerships and alliances with nations that were previously under the Ottoman yoke, he retained his good standing with the West. His government was repeatedly hailed as a "progressive and prosperous democratic model" for other nations during the Arab Spring, and some saw him as even more Western-aligned than the Kemalists, due to the Kemalist resentment toward the West's support of the Kurds and "moderate Islam."[24, 25]

These trends have not endured. Since the election in 2007 solidified his grip on power, and especially since being named President in 2014, Erdogan's treatment of the Kurds and his foreign policies have shifted remarkably. Formerly a more moderate political ideology, the term "neo-Ottomanism"

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is now used almost exclusively by Erdogan's critics to accuse him of imperialist ambitions. Erdogan's recent rhetoric regarding the Ottomans reflects his changing conception of Turkish citizenship. Integral to this Muslim identity is the Ottoman Empire, and Erdogan often refers to the glory of the Ottoman caliphate.[26] By stressing an Islamic identity, he insists that the different ethnicities are unified, dismissing Kurdish demands for democratic rights.[27] In a reversal of his 2007 campaign messages, Erdogan began using "increasingly militaristic and nationalist language toward the Kurds" once elected.[28] More recently, his government has targeted Kurds since the failed coup in July 2016, closing 15 pro-Kurdish news outlets and detaining Kurdish members of Parliament with unsubstantiated links to the separatist PKK.[29, 30]

As Erdogan cracks down on political dissent within his borders, he is also moving away from a foreign policy of "zero problems" and conspicuously working to establish Turkey as a regional power. His initial innovation in looking past the Kemalist Western orientation has been overshadowed by recent statements regarding the "former Ottoman territories," signaling desires to increase Turkey's influence and dominate its neighbors.[31] Erdogan has attempted to play a role in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and has "barged" into the fight against ISIS in Mosul, undermining the fragile alliances that exist between the Iraqi army, Kurdish forces and Sunni tribal forces.[32,] He justified this move by saying that Turks "did not voluntarily accept the borders of our country" at the end of World War I—openly implying a wish to redraw them.[33] Erdogan's current brand of neo-Ottomanism harbors a sense of grandeur about Turkey's foreign policy, believing that Turkey's "strategic vision and culture reflect the geographic reach of the Ottoman and Byzantine empires...thus it should play a highly active diplomatic, political and economic role across the region."[34]

With a faltering economy and increasing unpopularity, Erdogan has fallen back on his conservative coalition, introducing a new Ottoman discourse which focuses on the role of Islam and legitimizes an interventionist foreign policy. Accordingly, the meaning of "neo-Ottoman" has evolved from an alternative political ideology to a term used by critics of Erdogan's policies and governing style. As Erdogan consolidates power by replacing the parliamentary system with an executive presidential system, supporters and critics alike call him "Sultan Erdogan," the former praising his strength and the latter deriding him as authoritarian.[35] Because of this lack of consensus, because perceptions of the Ottomans differ greatly depending on one's conception of the Turkish nation, rhetoric regarding the Ottoman Empire continues to be a useful tool in analyzing Turkish political ideologies. ✦

Endnotes

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