Social and Intellectual Origins of Neo-Ottomanism:
Searching for a Post-National Vision

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Abstract

This article will unpack the intellectual and sociopolitical conditions under which the idea of neo-Ottomanism was formulated, by focusing on the following questions: What is neo-Ottomanism, who constructed the term, and for what purpose? What aspects of the Ottoman legacy have been incorporated in the ‘self’ definition of a new Turkey? Is this shift temporary or rooted in a more far-reaching transformation of Turkish society that will shape future sociopolitical choices? The article examines the intellectual origins of the term ‘neo-Ottomanism’ by examining the role of cultural entrepreneurs, such as Yahya Kemal and Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, along with the interactions among social factors, in the search for a new ‘old’ identity of Ottomanism by reimagining the Ottoman past. It seeks to provide a historical and sociological perspective of the process of reconfiguring the past, and especially its implications in domestic and foreign policy. Due to the oppressive nation-building project of the Kemalist regime, literature, art, music, and poetry became alternative sites for preserving, updating, and reconstructing the Ottoman memory. After explaining the formation of neo-Ottoman discourse in the 1990s, the article will address the debate about the politics of identity under the Justice and Development Party (JDP).

Keywords

Ottomanism – neo-Ottomanism – nostalgia – memory – Turgut Özal – Recep Tayyip Erdoğan – New Turkey – Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar

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Introduction

The past does not exist independently from the present. Indeed, the past is only past because there is a present, just as I can point to something over there only because I am here.1

This article answers several key interrelated questions: What is neo-Ottomanism? Who constructed the term, and for what purpose? What are the constitutive elements of neo-Ottomanism? What aspects of the Ottoman legacy have been incorporated in the ‘self’ definition of a new Turkey? What accounts for the change in Turkey’s ‘self’ identification and foreign policy in the Middle East, the Balkans, and the Caucasus? Is this shift temporary or rooted in a far-reaching transformation of Turkish society that will shape future sociopolitical choices? Do democratisation and the expansion of civil society in Turkey redefine Turkishness on the basis of the Ottoman legacy? Thus the article will track the intellectual origins of the term ‘neo-Ottomanism’ by examining the role of cultural entrepreneurs, along with interactions among social factors, in the search for a new ‘old’ identity of Ottomanism by reimagining the Ottoman past.2 It seeks to provide a historical and sociological perspective of the process of reconfiguring the past, and especially its implications in domestic and foreign policy. This necessitates focusing on the roles of democratisation, the expanding civil society and its public sphere, and, in particular, Turkey’s ‘new’ middle class.

Neo-Ottomanist discourse has evolved into the current critical juncture within which counter-memories of the Ottoman past and sensibilities have overlapped with essentially relevant social and economic formations. This article will unpack the intellectual and sociopolitical conditions under which the idea of neo-Ottomanism was formulated. By stressing different understandings of the idea of Ottomanism and its ‘otherisation’ by the founding ideology of the Republic of Turkey, the article will examine the sociocultural origins of the reimagining of the Ottoman legacy in modern Turkey. Due to the oppressive nation-building project of the Kemalist regime, literature, art, music, and poetry became alternative sites for preserving, updating, and reconstructing the Ottoman memory. After explaining the emergence of neo-

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1 Michel Rolph Trouillot, Silencing the Past (Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1995), 15.
Ottoman discourse in the 1990s, the article will address the debate about the politics of identity under the Justice and Development Party (JDP). I will argue that the JDP’s understanding of neo-Ottomanism is Islamist, anti-Western, adventurist, and ideological. This is one among the many reasons why many pundits and critics of Turkey’s foreign and domestic politics use this specific term as an epithet to indicate the gradual Islamisation of domestic politics and Islamic irredentism in foreign policy. A richer explanation requires a focus on the influence of international and domestic forces, and of political and intellectual entrepreneurs, and a need to develop a new framework of understanding by emphasising the cross-section of domestic and international, and ideal and material factors.

The debate about neo-Ottomanism highlights the tensions associated with the entangled histories of empire and nation-state in Turkey. To unpack neo-Ottomanism, one must examine how the ideal and memory of the Ottoman Empire persist as a guiding force in the ongoing nation-state project of the Republic of Turkey. Although Kemalist nation-building incorporated all means to suppress the Ottoman heritage, this imperial ‘ghost’ has haunted the state and society since the empire’s collapse. As Turkey became more secular, thus moving closer to the West, the search for its lost soul has intensified. The Ottoman past offers a reservoir of experiences, lessons, and opportunities to shape the present and come to terms with the roots of Turkish identity. Therefore, as Turkey becomes more self-confident and economically prosperous, Ottomanism echoes in incrementally louder tones in every corner of Turkish society’s cultural, political, and social spaces. Nostalgic expressions about the Ottoman past carry the capacity to offer nuanced explanations of the Turkish present. In fact, nostalgia traverses many territories: a rift between historical signifiers and their signified, its character as a social disease, and an abdication of memory. In trying to recapture history through a favourably coloured lens – the yearning for past glories, for example – the risk of forgetting “remains the disturbing threat that lurks in the background of the phenomenology of memory and the epistemology of history”.

The Republic’s founding philosophy is being reformulated today, and the fragments of the past provide the means for reconstruction. Jacobin secularism in the form of nation-building projects has already run its course. Today, a new Turkey has arisen. Yet amidst complex contradictions, the new Turkey searches with great efforts to reconcile the different pieces of its fragmented self-identity. Many writers, poets, architects, fashion designers, Sufi mystics, and composers engage with this ongoing exhumation of their buried past and tradition. They are deliberately and patiently piecing these fragments together to understand themselves and vernacularise their modernity. This process is expected to reposition their country as the indispensable centre of dynamic civilisations and cultures.

Definitions of Ottomanism, Neo-Ottomanism

Ottomanism, as a top-down project, sought to create one Ottoman nation through the rule of law and promising to regard all Ottoman citizens as equal in rights and privileges in exchange for their fidelity and loyalty to the nation and the state.8 Ottomanism’s main purpose was to stem and cut off the centrifugal forces of ethnic nationalism and secessionist movements in the Balkans by formally recognising the Ottoman Empire’s multi-ethnic and multireligious nature. However, it failed because the Ottoman state lacked the resources to keep the union together; because ethnic nationalist movements were far more cohesive, cogent, and powerful than the Ottoman identity; and because foreign powers, which competed over influence in the region, used their resources to ‘sponsor’ nationalist movements against the Ottoman state. The European powers, along with Russia, were formidable existential threats to Ottomanism and determined to carve their share from the Ottoman territories. In short, Ottomanism, the Islamism of Abdulhamid II, and the amorphous Turkism of the Young Turks shared a common goal: saving the state from these nationalist movements and European interventions, which threatened to shatter the empire. In keeping with this goal, the Turkism of the Young Turks evolved from failed Ottomanism after the catastrophic consequences of the Balkan Wars.

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The debates and practices of Ottomanism deeply shaped the Young Turks’ understanding of politics, homeland, loyalty, and political community. The Young Turks also debated reorganising the state (some favoured centralisation, others defended a federal structure), the content and context of the political community, and how to adopt the reforms from the West and reconcile them with Islam’s role in the modernisation project and in relations with the European states. A century later, these issues still dominate contemporary Turkish politics.

After the Republic’s establishment, the task of sustaining Ottoman sensibilities, social practices, and cultural expressions of art and music was largely outsourced to novelists and poets, who told the reading public and arts audiences that because the Ottoman past constitutes the Turkish identity, the people cannot alienate themselves from the past. Therefore, the term ‘Ottoman’ was neither confined to the descendants of Osman (the founder of the empire) nor to a single group of people or the state’s elites. Rather, it signified a way of accomplishing objectives, a set of sensibilities, a collective paradigm in statecraft, a type of social cohesion and coexistence of cultures, a distinct expression of artistic and musical sensibilities, and a particular tradition of cuisine, religious coexistence, and political strategising. In this comprehensive sense, the term ‘Ottomanism’ went far beyond the geopolitical history of the Ottoman state and its political institutions. It was a ‘way of living and thinking’ in the last great cosmopolitan empire that came after the Roman Empire, but with far greater implications for the emergence of the Balkans and the Middle East. It was not only a history of military conquests and conflicts, but also a vast confluence of culture, education, art, trade, urbanism, and diplomacy. Recovering this tradition and understanding its achievements and failures can help us better appreciate the dynamics of Turkish history and to identify the roots of Turkey’s aspirations to become again a regional power.

Neo-Ottomanism invokes a broad, deep complex of stylistic connotations conducive to the project of memory and nostalgia. It is a term that is constructed to capture a set of ideas and norms about the self of Turkey and its world view. Thus neo-Ottomanism does not simply regulate Turkey’s foreign and domestic politics as a set of ideals, values, ethics, and norms; more importantly,
the holistic set constitutes the essential definition of how Turkey defines itself. There is a mutually constitutive relationship between how the ‘self’ is defined and how it reflects national interest. Neo-Ottomanism is about constructing a new ‘national’ (milli, not milliyetçi) identity and translating it into foreign policy by using historical, cultural, and religious ties to former Ottoman territories. Ordinary Turks do not necessarily think of themselves as members of a nation-state but rather as participants in a multicultural project. This mentality is directly linked to the rejuvenated memories of Ottoman grandeur and the sense of responsibility for being stewards of the past. Because it is increasingly informed by its imperial Ottoman past, Turkey’s new identity is not confined to the boundaries of Anatolia, but rather goes beyond it. The idea of neo-Ottomanism as a constructed memory about the past was first worked out in Turkish literature and many other forms of cultural expression and then eventually primed and made suitable for the political domain and the public discourse.11 In the process, culture was marked by an unattainable desire for the past and a preoccupation with historicism and a false sense of history that results from a society seemingly unable to progress in the secular, democratic process upon which it was predicated.

David Barchard, who coined the term ‘neo-Ottomanism’ as one of several options for Turkey’s possible future orientation, offers the most apt definition of the term as “consciousness of the imperial Ottoman past”, which is a “more potent force in Turkey than Islam” because “as Turkey regains economic strength, it will be increasingly tempted to assert itself”.12 Indeed, it is a ‘consciousness of the past’ and the externalisation of this understanding that shapes Turkey’s present social and political configurations. Neo-Ottomanism means the formation of historical consciousness (i.e., how people think and

11 Halide Edib Adıvar, Türkiye’de Şark-Garp ve Amerikan Tesiri (İstanbul: Kardeş Yayınları, 1956); Peyami Safa, Millet ve İnsan (İstanbul: Akbaba Yayınları, 1943); Safa, Türk İnkılabına Bakışlar (İstanbul: Kanaat Kitapevi, 1938); Safa, Doğu-Batı Sentez (İstanbul: Yağmur Yayınları, 1962); Beşir Ayvazoğlu, Peyami, Hayatı, Sanatı, Felsefesi, Dramı (İstanbul: Kapı Yayınları, 1997).

12 David Barchard, Turkey and the West (London: Routledge Chatham House Papers 27, 1985), 91. Although Kemal H. Karpat claims that the term was first used by the Greeks during the 1974 Cyprus War, he does not substantiate his claim with evidence. Moreover, as a result of my exchange with Barchard and a group of historians in Greece, it is conclusive that the term, as it is understood today, was coined by Barchard in 1985. Kemal H. Karpat, Studies on Ottoman Social and Political History: Selected Articles and Essays (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 524.
remember their past to understand the current situation). This consciousness is formed by numerous cultural, literary, and cognitive factors.

The externalisation of this new consciousness is primarily an outcome of domestic transformation and the changing international environment. The key factor was the ‘opening’ of Turkey and its integration into the neo-liberal economic order under the structural adjustment program of Turgut Özal, which began in January 1980. Yet it would be a mistake to treat traditional Kemalism and neo-Ottomanist discourses as mutually exclusive. Neo-Ottomanism, as understood by Özal, sought not to replace the Kemalist project of secular nation-building but rather to modify and update it by branding the variety of Ottoman identities as a feature of pluralism. This understanding differs from the hard-core Kemalist-Jacobin understanding of the nation-building project, but it also does not reject Turkey’s western orientation in foreign and domestic politics, and its pragmatic approach to governance. By the Kemalist-Jacobin understanding, I mean both a project and a revolutionary ideology that is anti-tradition and anti-religion, and seeks to create a new secular nation-state through the top-down process of implanting European practices and institutions. Neo-Ottomanism is a new mindset that seeks to resituate Turkish nation-building in its Ottoman roots by recognising the Ottoman legacy and its communities as the constitutive elements of the nation that live on in the Republic of Turkey. Neo-Ottomanism is not anti- secular but it is anti-Jacobinist. Moreover, it seeks to bring constitutional citizenship on the basis of sharing the Ottoman legacy and memories, along with the achievements of the Republic. It treats the Ottoman legacy as cosmopolitan and is open to diverse communities under the same sovereign authority.

The Sociocultural Origins of Neo-Ottomanism

A key factor shaping Turkey’s search for a cosmopolitan identity has been its demographic makeup. Turkey is a nation of many identity groups, comprising a large number of diverse ethnic (at least 13 in major terms), linguistic (at least 16 in primary languages), and religious groups (perhaps more appropriately characterised as religious and non-religious, devout and non-believer). Put simply, Turkey is akin to a lake fed continuously by significant streams from the...

Balkans, Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Caucasus. Memories of empire, especially of the persecution in the Balkans and the Caucasus, and Islam are the main common denominators of these groups, denoting what is known today as the Turkish nation. Neo-Ottomanism offers a loosely (or broadly) defined amalgam of identity that would allow all these ethnic and linguistic identities to coexist. It provides a pluralistic view of Turkish identity. The ethnic groups from the Balkans were constantly forced out and they all reluctantly moved and joined the ‘Turkish’ nation, along with diverse groups from the Caucasus. With the war and humanitarian crisis in Syria, a major population movement is occurring and seems unlikely to ebb as it approaches its sixth year. The misinterpretation and misappropriation of Ottoman history have become key tools in Turkey’s current reconfiguration of national community, legitimacy, and a sense of political loyalty. This reimagining of national identity has gradually been informed by the legacy of empire, by symbols of Islam, by painful narratives of the destruction of the Ottoman Muslim communities in the Balkans, and by the forced deportation of and genocidal campaigns against the Muslims in the Caucasus.¹⁴

The second factor in the search for memory is the reaction to the heavy-handed reforms that accompanied the nation-building and westernising processes of the state and society.¹⁵ To understand neo-Ottomanism and its attendant discourse, one must examine its sociopolitical environment. Ottoman heritage is a critical component of contemporary Turkish identity, along with its perceptions of politics and society. These aspects have been highlighted during recent events: the domestic crisis of identity and the failure of the Kemalist project of homogeneous nation-building; the assertive Kurdish identity; the subsequent rejection by the European powers; and, finally, Turkey’s desire to expand its influence into the Balkans, the Middle East, and the Caucasus.

The third factor has been the democratisation and expansion of the public sphere in Turkey. Mustafa Kemal’s reforms aimed for a complete rupture from the Ottoman-cum-Islamic tradition and normative order that girded the imperial system and placed the nation on a path to evolve and mature as a secular state. After the war for Turkish sovereignty, the Republic’s founding fathers

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¹⁵ More on the Republican construction of the Ottoman past, see Arisan, “Eternal”, 1218f.
introduced a new ‘war’ – cultural in nature – to transform society and infuse a new social glue to bind and reinforce national identity. The significant ‘other’ of the Kemalist project was the Ottoman past’s normative order, along with religiously rooted institutions. The Ottoman-Islamic traditions were treated as the archaic past and as obstacles to progress. In fact, the Republic’s founding fathers aligned themselves with the broader spirit of the time in their homogenisation, nation-building, and secularisation of the society and the state. It was an imitative project modeled after the nation-building projects of Europe, especially the Balkan nation-building projects, which all employed ethnic cleansing, forced population exchanges, and the suppression of religious institutions. Despite the policy of westernisation, Ottomanism – as a cultural memory and as a form of historicism – has survived to this day in popular entertainment, fashion, architecture, visual arts, oral stories and, especially, literature. Thus the opposition to the reforms framed the counter discourse in Ottoman-Islamic language.

With the multiparty system, these counter narratives and historiographies seeped into the public debates and cross-fertilised the old and new, nation-state and empire, secularism and Islam – all of which produced a more complex understanding of the past and the present. Democratisation helped the masses to enter the public sphere with their counter narratives and bring their localised memories, along with Islamic and Ottoman normativity. A highly important development of the 1950s and 1960s was the Turkification of Ottoman history.16 This process also brought Islam and Islamic norms within the framework of the Ottoman legacy.17 While the Islamists stressed the Ottoman Empire’s Islamic nature and traditions, the Turkish nationalists, under the National Movement Party, emphasised the Ottoman state’s Turkish character. In short, the Ottoman legacy and its memory populated the dynamic ground for Islamists and nationalists to move back and forth between the two movements. An example of this is presented by Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, a leading ideologue of the JDP today, who regularly moved between the pro-Islamic National Salvation Party (1971–1980) and the Nationalist Movement Party of Al-

The fourth factor in the reconstruction of the past for the needs of the present has been the shift from history to memory. History and memory are related but cannot be compacted into one entity. Memory is more personal in nature and, as it suggests a communal understanding of the past, it becomes codified and consolidated in a distinct narrative that is constructed within the present context. Memory, more than history, relates to the quest for identity in a way that individuals and communities seek to understand the past to shape their present and future. The memory of the Ottoman past, more than its history, is being reconstructed within new opportunity spaces through the film industry, media, new architecture, art, music, and literature. The desire to express these memories, which constitute the content of neo-Ottomanism, sometimes arises in “fashion-plate, historicist” cultural productions and literary expressions that reveal “the desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past”. In the most critical sense, this may be viewed as inauthentic, imaginary fabrications of the past that manipulate, distort, or downright ignore historical evidence. The goal of neo-Ottoman discourse is not only setting up a new target but also leveraging the sociocultural rhythm of longing and seeking to be ‘someone’ again, as powerfully communicated in the film, literature, art, and music being produced in the country. These cultural expressions can reinforce these enduring memories almost to the extent that the people think they have actually witnessed the Ottoman past in its ‘real’ form. These cultural accounts of history become events as well, channeling the “empathy and identification to create memories that are not based on first-hand experiences, but which nevertheless have a powerful emotional affect”. They become the new cultural archive of social memories, which can be viewed repeatedly, reinterpreted, and distilled from various perspectives. Turkey’s current political culture is informed by its Ottoman past and by the ‘living ghost’ of the Empire or, perhaps more precisely, by a ‘reflective nostalgia’ that thinks the past is gone but can be used eventually to understand where we are today and what we can do in the future.


Neo-Ottomanism’s purpose is not to restore the past but rather to critique the current position for the purpose of articulating a new collective goal.

Plainly, the debate over neo-Ottomanism is not about the past but about Turkey’s current position and its future possibilities.²¹ The neo-Ottomanist debate engages several major discourse activities: constructing certain aspects of the past; aiming to deconstruct the Kemalist Republican’s conception of identity and society; offering a discursive instrument to reach out to ex-Ottoman societies to promote the market for Turkish goods and, more broadly, socio-political influence; and bringing Islam back into the public sphere under the guise of Ottomanism.

Until recently, Ottomanism or Ottoman memory had remained dormant and had been constituted in the conservative-nationalist discourse. The publishing of literature was the most important tool in preserving and transmitting the heritage of the Ottoman Empire. Due to the Kemalist regime’s silencing of its opponents and preventing alternative channels of intellectual development, the nation’s body of literature became the surrogate womb for preserving, updating, and transmitting the Ottoman heritage. Yahya Kemal Beyatlı (1884–1958) was a poet who offered an alternative version of Turkism, rooted in and inspired by the Ottoman legacy.²² He was not anti-nationalist but instead disagreed with the Kemalist project of constructing a nation void of its historic (Ottoman) and symbolic (Islamic) dimensions. Yahya Kemal stressed the role of a particular aesthetic in the construction of nation. In contrast to Kemalist positivism, which treated culture as an instrument of nation-building, he insisted that the ideal of nation is foremost an aesthetic reality that stems from tradition and history.

The ideals of Ottoman continuity were also emphasised by Ahmet Hamdi Tanpinar (1902–1962), a student of Yahya Kemal. Tanpinar problematised the forced modernisation process and the dehistoricised identity of the Turks by examining the catastrophic consequences of the new nation-building project,
which had sought to cleanse all Ottoman sensibilities, art, and language. One of the key reform projects of the modernising elite was to sanitise the Turkish language from Arabic and Persian versions of any Ottoman words. Tanpınar resisted by employing Ottoman words in his work, which made him unpopular among the modernist-secularist writers. He was labeled as a conservative and reactionary, as he focused on fragments of the past that articulated Ottoman culture. Rather than rejecting the westernisation reforms, Tanpınar stressed the continuity of tradition by filtering the essence of modernity through the shared vernacular practices of Ottoman culture. His work frequently invoked the Turkish people as ‘in-between’ modernity and tradition, as in-between the West and the East. Simply, they did not entirely belong to one place but rather inhabited both places simultaneously. The Kemalist elite, committed to westernisation, sharply criticised his work. “To admire Debussy and Wagner yet to live the ‘Song in Mahur’” – an a la turca song – “was the fate of being a Turk”.

In his books, he invoked the cosmopolitanism of the Ottoman Empire, seeking to preserve it by updating traditional practices, sensibilities and a spirit of community. He brought the Ottoman world to Republican readers, demonstrating how tradition was important if you wanted to have a ‘home’ and a sense of ‘community’. Tanpınar’s A Mind at Peace (1939), which became popular when it was revived in the mid-1990s, deals with how Ottoman poets and composers endured alienation in Turkish society. Tanpınar rejected becoming a tool of ‘social engineering’ by displaying positive Western characters against pious Ottoman society or the past. He used his pen to remind society what it was asked to forget: the Ottoman language, social sensibilities, and memory essential for one’s self-identity. This work by Tanpınar gives voice to the deepest angst associated with rejecting the Ottoman and Islamic traditions in order to create a new Turk who would be transformed into a Western secular persona in the city of Istanbul. This story highlights in detail psychological aspects of the impact of torn identities and cultures and the existential crisis inflicted upon the society and individuals as well. Individuals do not belong to any one place, but rather struggle to belong to both East and West. For example, Mumtaz, the main character in A Mind at Peace, listens to the traditional Ottoman


composers, Itri and Dede Efendi, while also enjoying the music of Bach and Beethoven.

Tanpinar’s efforts to invoke the cosmopolitanism of the Ottoman Empire and preserve it by highlighting traditional practices, sensibilities, and a spirit of community were carried further by other cultural observers. For Nihat Sami Banarlı (1907–1974), the Ottoman state represented Turkey’s most significant historical achievement. 25 Another prolific writer, who played an important role in the Ottomanisation of Turkish nationalism, was Süheyl Ünver (1898–1986). 26 In his corpus, Ünver treats the Ottoman Empire as the product of the collective Turkish genius, praising Ottoman civilisation as Turkish civilisation. To him, the conquest of Istanbul marked the beginning of Pax Ottomana. Nurettin Topçu (1909–1975) also regularly argued for the importance of Ottoman history in societal integration. As a result of these intellectual works the Turkish nationalist movement gradually internalised the Ottoman state and tradition as the constitutive aspect of being a Turk.

The 1970s brought major developments in the Turkish nationalist movement. Its key leaders tried to recentre Turkish nationalism in the Ottoman past. Dündar Taşer (1925–1972) was the intellectual leader of Turkish nationalist movement credited with bringing the Ottoman state back into the Turkish nationalist discourse. 27 Erol Güngör (1938–1983), who was deeply influenced by Taşer, was a professor and a public intellectual with political connections to the National Movement Party, and espoused Ottomanised and Islamicised Turkish nationalism. Insisting that a national ethos is only possible with history and religion, he called the nationalists to return “home” to the Ottoman-Islamic civilisation. For Güngör, Turkism, Ottomanism, and Islamism are inseparable. According to this, in order to understand Turkish nationalism and the meaning of being a Turk, one is expected to know the history of the Ottoman state and regard it as the integral part of being a perennial nation. An impactful protagonist in the complete Ottomanisation of Turkish nationalism was Seyyid Ahmet Arvasi (1932–1988), who popularised Ottomanism and argued that the telos of Turkish-Islamic tradition is the Ottoman Empire. He called the nationalists to restore the grandeur of the Ottoman Empire and its normative order in the future. Moreover, every idealist (ülkücü, or nationalists)

26 Ahmet Güner Sayar, A. Süheyl Ünver (Istanbul: Eren, 1994).
27 More on a detailed bibliography on the Ottomanisation of Turkish nationalism, see Umut Uzer, An Intellectual History of Turkish Nationalism: Between Ethnicity and Islamic Identity (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016).
was called to be the defender of the Ottoman tradition and its legacy. In addition to these books, popular epic action films such as *Malkoçoğlu* (1972), *Battal Gazi* (1955), and *Fatih'in Fedaisi Kara Murat* (1972)\(^{28}\), along with folkloric songs such as *Estergon Kalesi*, *Vardar Ovası*, and *Plevne Marşı*, and classical (read, Ottoman) music also helped to perpetuate Ottoman memories in mainstream and popular entertainment.

Leaders of prominent religious orders also sought to revise the Ottoman legacy. In the writings of Said Nursi, the founder of the most powerful Islamic movement in Turkey, one finds an identity informed by both Ottoman and Islamic themes.\(^{29}\) The movement that evolved from his writings has responded most effectively to the search for identity, which has been a salient characteristic of Turkish politics since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. There is no clearly articulated political design in Nursi’s writings; the purpose is rather to maintain Ottoman-Islamic memory and build a Muslim personality. Nursi’s books became a literary refuge for his followers, a sanctuary of reflection and fulfillment for soul-searching Turks/Kurds. Nursi’s books inspire many Anatolian Muslims who find that their self-identity as Muslims is coupled with a sense of Ottoman history.

### Sociopolitical Transformation and Özalian Neo-Ottomanism

Neo-Ottomanism was cultivated during Turgut Özal’s presidency.\(^{30}\) For Özal, a conservative Naqshbandi, Ottomanism was a key part of his political and social vision for the identity of Turkey and its orientation.\(^{31}\) Moreover, Özal’s understanding of Islam was deeply shaped by the Ottoman legacy.\(^{32}\) As a conservative, pious Muslim with a neo-liberal economic outlook, Özal was deeply

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\(^{28}\) The Kara Murat (Black Murat) series, the title was derived from “Fatih'in Fedaisi Kara Murat” (Kara Murat: Bodyguard of the Conqueror) in 1972. Malkoçoğlu was another Ottoman soldier with superhuman abilities and protected Ottoman-Turks against all odds.


\(^{32}\) Hikmet Özdemir, *Turgut Özal, Biyografi* (İstanbul: Doğan, 2014).
shaken by the Serbian forces’ genocidal campaign against the Bosnian Muslims. The war, and the indifference of European powers, forced many Turks to ‘remember’ what had taken place in the Balkans. The systematic destruction of the Bosnian Muslims mobilised the masses in Turkey, and major rallies were organised during the war. Under these conditions, Öal did not shy away from reminding the people about their Ottoman roots, and the education system increased the number of pages devoted to a positive view of Ottoman history.

Because Öal represented a break with the Kemalist past, he was Turkey’s first leader to bring provincial (religio-conservative) sensibilities to the centre of the establishment and to convey his religious convictions. Öal’s economic policies ended the statist economy and supported export-oriented policies by adapting the Washington Consensus. His export-oriented policies and liberalisation of economy helped the emergence of a new middle class in the religious-conservative Anatolian periphery. Öal revised Turkey’s western orientation by applying for European Union membership in order to strengthen democracy, improve human rights, and provide a competitive market for Turkish goods. The EU application set in motion a series of human rights reforms in Turkey, including the abolition of the death penalty and the granting of significant rights to the Kurdish minority. Additionally, Öal closely engaged with the Balkan states and the newly independent Turkic republics in Central Asia.

In the 1990s, the main catalysts behind neo-Ottomanism’s emerging discourse were domestic societal transformations that created alternative discursive spaces for critical thinking within the emergence of a new liberal political and economic milieu, and a number of major international developments, such as the gradual collapse of the bipolar system, the Cyprus crisis, the EU’s refusal to accept Turkey as a full member, European indifference to the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, and Kurdish ethnonationalism in southeastern Turkey.

In this context, Öal’s neo-liberal policies redrew the boundaries between state and society. His economic policies created opportunity spaces for new economic actors, commonly known as the Anatolian Tigers, who were religiously motivated, socially conservative, and carried a more positive perspective of the suppressed Ottoman history. These new economic actors gradually gained considerable economic power and, in turn, gained leadership and strategic influence in the media, education, arts, and politics – to promote and promulgate the imagined Ottoman-cum-Islamic past in the contemporary

34 Anatolian-based small and medium scale pro-Islamist merchants and industrialists.
public sphere. These new economic actors established schools at all levels, university examination training centres, higher education institutions, publishing houses, and think tanks, which were mainly funded by the newly emergent Anatolian bourgeoisie. Özal’s reform project empowered civil society, deepened human rights discourse, and allowed societal forces to shape the state’s identity and foreign policy. At this juncture, these new actors regularly recalled the Ottoman past in order to deconstruct the rigid nation-state and build a vernacular framework for a multicultural and liberal society to address the identity claims of the Islamists, Kurds, Alevi, and other groups.

Since the 1990s, the crisis of the Kemalist project and the emergence of a new economic and political elite from the provincial towns of Anatolia have facilitated an alternative framework for coexisting yet diverse identities. These structural transformations have expanded the incentive for projects to reimagine the Ottoman past, which has engendered a broad revival of Ottoman culture, architecture, furniture, fashion, and even cuisine. While the Kemalist state-builders stressed nation-building and modernity within the contexts of westernisation and secularism, the provincial elite and Islamically oriented masses emphasised the glory of the Ottoman past as peaceful, imperial, and notably Islamic. However, the crisis of identity, which reflected itself in a series of identity-based political movements, has forced the state to reluctantly re-think the ‘Ottoman’ experience as a way of coping with the political and cultural challenges, along with capitalising on new opportunities arising with the end of the Cold War.

The conservative Anatolian bourgeoisie played the most critical role in the commercialisation and evolution of neo-Ottomanism by supporting a series of cultural, social, and educational activities to ‘bring the Ottoman past back’. This new bourgeoisie evolved out of the state’s neo-liberal economic policies, which created conducive economic conditions and the emerging transnational financial networks as a result of deregulation and the opening of the Turkish economy. The conservative bourgeoisie have also benefited from the local governments (belediyeler) of the Welfare Party, especially after 1994. This new actor is both a cause and an outcome of the neo-liberal economic policies of Özal, the former reformist, Turkish prime minister and president who died in 1993. The symbiotic relationship between the state and the large Istanbul-based capitalists had been based on agreeing over secularism and the Kemalist ideology. The emergence of an Anatolian-based Islamic bourgeoisie ran counter to the existing economic and cultural alliance between the state and the Istanbul-based capitalists.35

These conservative Anatolian (pro-Islamic) entrepreneurs consisted mostly of a first generation of college graduates who are the children of an Anatolian-based lower middle class. They benefited from Özal’s neo-liberal economic policies, which increased their social mobility and which, in turn, allowed them to establish their own medium and small-size firms. Most of them, born and raised in provincial towns and villages, only settled in Turkey’s larger metropolitan centers after completing their college education. Those foundations provided the basis for a new cultural condition. The emergence of private schools and publications spurred new economic opportunities for the conservative cultural elite, who gradually became the agents tasked with reconstructing memory and inducing new signs of nostalgia.

International developments also provided unexpected opportunities for these agents to reconstruct the past to address the present challenges. Outside Turkey, especially in the Balkans, neo-Ottomanism was understood as a proactive Turkish foreign policy and an attempt to expand the regional market for Turkish goods. While domestically neo-Ottomanism offers a way of managing diversity and institutionalising tolerance, its foreign policy seeks to eliminate economic borders among the Balkan, Caucasian, and Middle Eastern countries, and allow for the free flow of goods, ideas, and people.

Islamically inclined groups regard the Ottoman legacy as the constitutive core of their political and cultural identity. Islamist elites argue the current ethnic conflict between the Turks and Kurds is an outcome of the Kemalist project of nation-building regarding ethnicity and that the solution to this problem is to ‘bring Islam back’ as the essential social glue to bind society and share common Ottoman memories. Neo-Ottomanism is more about casting a new melting pot to address the Kurdish challenge and to dismantle the Kurdish demands of autonomy, even independence, through the shared religion of Islam.

The politics of identity in the 1990s sat at the centre of the neo-Ottoman debate, as the conservative elite constructed the idea of Ottoman pluralism, tolerance, and the peaceful coexistence of diverse ethnic and religious communities. It sought to exemplify cultural pluralism and codify the vernacular expressions of modern liberal multiculturalism through reimagining the Ottoman past. The goal was to create a shared identity around the Ottoman past while simultaneously overcoming the ethnic divisions in the country. Those

who promulgated the idea of neo-Ottomanism were mostly Islamic-inclined intellectuals, those with deep roots in Anatolia, and politicians who stressed the role of religion in a consolidated society and who had reached out to the Balkan Muslims. The domestic transformation and search for new orientation was timely, as the Cold War ended and a number of new Muslim-populated states became independent. Yugoslavia's break-up and the Soviet Union's dissolution turned Turkey into a regional cultural centre for these newly independent states. This historical juncture is key to understanding neo-Ottomanism's emergence.

Domestic and international factors provided the appropriate nexus for the practice and ideal of neo-Ottomanism, and Türkiye Günlüğü offered its pages for the debate. Mustafa Çalık, Ahmet Turan Alkan, Nur Vergin, and Erol Göka contributed articles and essays to Türkiye Günlüğü to explain the content and significance of neo-Ottomanism. Almost all of these intellectuals were closely involved in and supported the politics of Özal. One key aspect was that they all treated Ottomanism and Ottoman legacy as the constitutive elements of societal identity. This represented an alternative model of imagining society and offering space for diverse identities. Yet there was also a hidden agenda: the creation of a new melting pot, one that would deny the ethnic and religious differences within Turkish communities. The authors presented neo-Ottomanism as an alternative framework with an ‘imperial vision’, without necessarily being imperialist, to offer a new direction to Turkish foreign policy and a model of multi-ethnic coexistence in response to the prevailing Kemalist conception of a monocultural nation-state model. Yet the main core of neo-Ottomanism was (and remains to this day) Ottoman-centric Islamic solidarity, Islamic normativity, and the positive civilisational aspect of Islamism, all of which Turkey is expected to ‘lead’.

Thus these practices and policies unleashed cultural identities and their interactions, which formed the foundational impulses of neo-Ottomanism. Contending with Kurdish secessionism inside the country, Özal realised that the Kemalist project of creating ‘one nation (Turkish), one state (Turkish)’ and removing Islamic norms and practices from the public sphere in the name of secularism could not address effectively the challenges or properly orient the country’s future. He knew his model for the mobilisation of the population could echo Ottoman grandeur and be fortified by Ottoman memories. He employed the education system to reactivate and reconstruct the Ottoman past as tolerant, liberal, self-confident, and grand in scope. Neo-Ottomanism emerged as an intellectual outcome of these cultural, political, and economic practices.
During the era of Özal’s rule, his foreign policy reflected his domestic politics: both traditional and modern, western and Islamic, adeptly keeping one foot in the ex-Ottoman territories and the other in Europe. This was what Özal understood as neo-Ottomanism (i.e., being at home both in Europe and Asia), having an imperial vision without being imperialist. Özal’s Ottomanism was pluralist, in that it recognised the role and power of each community, while Erdoğan’s Ottomanism is about state power and the concentration of power in the hands of a single individual. Erdoğan relishes the authoritarian aspect of the Ottoman system, along with its communitarian aspect, in which individualism is subjugated. Ottoman Islam, for Özal, was flexible and accommodated competing visions of religious communities. Özal argued that this conceptualisation of Islam as practiced in Turkey is deeply shaped by the Ottoman vision and “has given Turkish society a different outlook from that of other Muslim societies. As a result of its cosmopolitan foundations, moreover, the Ottoman State was open to other cultural influences”.

During the same period of enhanced neo-Ottoman sentiment, Iraq’s Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, an unexpected event that once again turned Turkey into a ‘frontline’ state for American security interests. Turkey allowed its airbases to be used by the United States in the war against Iraq. Without any hesitation, Özal (first as prime minister, 1983–1989, and then as president, 1989–1993) allied himself with the Americans, expecting to reap economic benefits from this reinvigorated alliance. However, some key ministers and military leaders disagreed with Özal’s calculations of the alliance with the United States and some of them resigned in protest at what they characterised as Özal’s slavish policy toward the United States. The war ravaged the Turkish economy (significantly, Turkey lost income from the Iraq–Turkey pipeline and from the interruption of bilateral economic relations between itself and Iraq). The worst development from the state’s perspective was the formation of a Kurdish regional government in Iraq, which encouraged secessionist tendencies among the Kurds in Turkey. This event was the turning point for Turkish–American relations and the beginning of widespread anti-Americanism in Turkey. Moreover, the experience of the 1991 Gulf War shaped the attitude of Turkish policymakers to the United States’ removal of Saddam Hussein from power in 2003.

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The Process of Islamisation of Politics and History in Turkey

The Kemalist Republic celebrated the practice of ‘forgiven and forgotten’ regarding what had happened to the Muslims in the Balkans and the Caucasus. Furthermore, it did not want its population to remember the persecution and genocidal campaigns against the Ottoman Muslims in the Balkans. However, the major event that ended this Kemalist practice came in the Bosnian War and the killings of Muslims that happened during it. The Serbian leadership, who had labelled the indigenous Slavic Muslims as ‘Turks’, were determined to either kill or force them to Anatolia. This genocide, seen live on Turkish television, formed and mobilised the transnational Muslim political consciousness. The Kemalist establishment turned its back on the Muslim communities in the Balkans while stressing the principle of non-interference and territorial integrity. Özal fully engaged in diplomatic campaigns to protect the Balkan Muslims and encouraged the transnational Islamic networks to provide military and economic support as requested. With Özal’s death, the foreign policy aspect of neo-Ottomanism continued in the Balkans, but Süleyman Demirel was a staunch supporter of the nation-state and secularism. However, neo-Ottomanism survived in the programs and practices of the Islamic Welfare Party (WP), which became the dominating political force in the 1995 elections.

The Welfare Party and the Emergence of New Turkey

The 1995 municipal elections represented a turning point in the Islamisation of society and the state. The pro-Islamic WP’s successes (Erdoğan was then elected as the mayor of Istanbul), and the eventual forming of a coalition government, redirected the country from the path of the Kemalist system to the work-in-progress project of the New Turkey. The secular Kemalists desperately attempted to defend the system through a soft military coup (known as the coup of the February 28 process) to delegitimise and criminalise the rising economic and cultural actors. The military–civilian alliance, which defined itself as the rightful secular and Kemalist guardian of the Republic, employed the judiciary system along with other undemocratic means to cleanse the Islamic presence in the public sphere and close the opportunity spaces for these Islamic-oriented conservative actors. As discussed earlier, there are several constructions of neo-Ottomanism. Turkey’s Islamists have tended to present the Ottoman state as an Islamic empire and deny its cosmopolitan aspect. Emphasising the Islamic identity, they seek to Islamise society by highlighting the past glories of the Ottoman state as the achievements of Islam.

The WP municipalities in major urban centres, which have played the most crucial role in popularising the Ottoman legacy, used the municipalities’ resources to revive Ottoman arts, calligraphy, and architecture while setting out to create a civilisational alternative to the ideals of Kemalist westernisation. They also funded major cultural programs by subsidising theatres and publications, and organised major conferences to observe and integrate an alternative memory and history as a base for crafting a new Islamic identity. The Islamisation of Turkish daily life was invigorated in the name of a strategy to “bring the Ottomans back”. For instance, the WP mayors organised alternative commemorations to offer a different expression of the Islamo-Ottoman national identity as opposed to the existing secular-ethnic Turkish national identity. As mayor of Istanbul, Erdoğan launched a number of cultural programs to bring the Ottoman tradition (and Islam) back into the public sphere. He effectively organised the commemoration of the conquest of Istanbul by Fatih Sultan Mehmet, who is popular among Turkey’s Islamists. The Islamists of Turkey are especially fond of two Ottoman Sultans – Fatih Sultan Mehmet, who conquered Istanbul and ended the Byzantine Empire, and Sultan Abdulhamid II, who resisted Zionism. For example, a film that registered as one of Turkey’s best box office revenue successes ever, Conquest 1453, lavishly produced with a budget of $17 million – with major support from JDP municipalities and state institutions – offered its own narrative spin on Mehmet the Conqueror’s conquest of Istanbul in 1453: Byzantines were portrayed as decadent, morally disadvantaged individuals, in contrast to the thoroughly magnanimous portrayal of Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror. The success of film projects such as this one echoes a critical function for the cinema, which becomes a ‘machine for virtual time’. Indeed, a film such as Conquest 1453 accomplishes this in three essential ways: 

first, as a theatrical ‘set piece’, set in a period in the past or in the future; second, in its capacity, through montage, to elicit an elliptical temporality; and third, in its ability to be repeated, over time, imparting to each spectator a unique montage consciousness.39


The WP leadership, unlike Özal, treated Islam as the core of a separate civilisation pitted against the West. This civilisational approach, or occidentalism, sees the Ottoman state and society as the model of an Islamic civilisation. The WP's leadership, by stressing the Ottoman Empire, sought to restore Greater Turkey as the 'centre of Islamic civilisation'. This form of neo-Ottomanism had changed from Özal's understanding of neo-Ottomanism. His approach had promoted a salient Islamic solidarity. The WP used the terms 'Ottomanism' and 'Islamism' interchangeably for 'restoring' Ottoman norms and Ottoman grandeur. Another aspect of this new form of neo-Ottomanism is that it aspired to homogenise society, whereas Özalian neo-Ottomanism entailed multiculturalism and aimed to vernacularise liberal discourses of human rights and did not seek to distance itself from the West. Özal's vision of the Ottoman Empire was a confederation of diverse ethnic and religious groups, underscored by the motto of “living together by living apart”.

**Turkey's Soft-Power: Islamo-Ottoman Memory and Practices in the 2000s**

With the JDP’s electoral victory, Turkey’s foreign policy has evolved through at least three stages: first, it was characterised by a market-led approach that complemented Turkey's heightened efforts to Europeanise (2002–2011); then, it took an Islamic shape in the context of the Arab Spring (2011–2014); and finally, it has started to resemble a policy of ‘splendid isolation’ in reaction to mounting regional problems (2014–present). Foreign observers and opponents of the JDP label this current version of the JDP's foreign policy as neo-Ottoman. The key questions are: Has Turkey changed its foreign policy orientation? The JDP's foreign policy is more pro-Islamic and pro-Arab, signaling a shift from its traditional western orientation. Is this shift an outcome of the democratisation of the country or the by-product of JDP’s Islamist policies? Does the current foreign policy reflect the public's mood as suggested by its response in political polling and elections? What is the impact of a decade-long societal Islamisation on neo-Ottomanism?

The JDP leadership comprise the ‘Ottoman nostalgics’, who share positive memories of the Ottoman period and use this imagined past to criticise the current secular nation-building project of the Republic. Without showcasing actual knowledge of Ottoman history, they are nevertheless united by an ethereal sense of lost dignity and respect, and a yearning for past grandeur. Their sentiment is backed by fictional constructions of culture rather than by the annals of professional, dispassionate historical research and inquiry. Through this sense of nostalgia, the JDP leadership seeks to connect with Anatolia’s masses in the hopes of mobilising them for the present project of rebuilding
and restoring Greater Turkey. Many JDP-controlled municipalities have become the agents of this nostalgic Ottoman memory-building task through a series of cultural projects and commemorations. They freely invoke the Ottoman memory as a space of security, grandeur, and prosperity; a period during which Turks were ministering over other groups.

Turkey has been aggressively using its cultural heritage and shared memories with the regional countries to achieve its strategic goals of expanding the market for Turkish goods while influencing the foreign policies of these countries. This exemplifies Turkey’s use of “soft power”, which according to Joseph Nye is the ability to co-opt and attract others by using culture as a state resource. The rise in neo-Ottoman sentiment has been reflected through Turkey’s use of its heritage, religious networks, and shared history to become an important player in several regions. Since 2003, Turkey has produced more than 60 films a year, and currently Turkish television series such as the fictional soap opera Muhteşem Yüzyıl (The Magnificent Century) and Ask-I Memnu (Forbidden Love) are viewed in the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Middle East, thereby promoting Turkish culture and creating affinities with Turkey.

**Davutoğlu’s ‘Improbable Ottomanism’**

Why is it that when the whole of Europe is casting off its borders and unifying they don’t become the Neo-Romans or the New Holy Roman Empire, but when we call for the peoples who lived together just a century ago to come together once again, we are accused of being Neo-Ottomans? – Ahmet Davutoğlu

For Ahmet Davutoğlu, “Turkey’s road to progress lies in its past.” As the Turkish foreign minister, he spoke openly about the reorientation of his country’s foreign policy in a November 2009 speech to JDP members:

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43 Ahmet Davutoğlu, minister of foreign affairs of Turkey, delivered a conference presentation entitled, “Great Restoration: Our New Political Approach from Ancient to Globalization” on 15 March 2013 at Dicle University in Diyarbakır.
The Ottoman Empire left a legacy. They call us ‘neo-Ottomans’. Yes, we are ‘new Ottomans’. We are forced to deal with neighboring countries. And we even go to Africa. The great powers are dismayed by that.44

Although Davutoğlu relentlessly declares that he is “not a neo-Ottoman”, his name has become synonymous with neo-Ottomanism.45 Despite the initial hopes that it would result in accomplishments, neo-Ottomanism in the most recent years has been seen as an ambiguous foreign policy strategy at best, and a failed one at worst. Davutoğlu contends that Turkey should become a powerful player in the international system due to its geographical location and its historical importance as the heir of the Ottoman Empire. He seeks to utilise cultural (religious) affinities and common Ottoman history with the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Middle East to promote Turkey’s influence – and this new vision of foreign policy has been labeled, and even ridiculed, as neo-Ottomanism.

A closer examination of Turkey’s foreign policy indicates that Turkey’s perceived shift is less a strategic response and more a tactical one to emerging geopolitical challenges and opportunities. Turkey’s rejection by the EU and the failures of the United States in Iraq have turned Turkish public opinion against the West, and JDP’s foreign policy has aligned with this new public mood in the country. However, it also would be a mistake to treat the JDP’s foreign policy as the manifestation of the public’s will because, as polling and elections have shown, a sizable number of people disagree with their nation’s foreign policy. The most important factor of the current foreign policy is the identity and ideological conviction of the JDP leadership. In formulating new foreign policy, one needs to take a closer look at Turkey’s security environment and the threats that arise as an outcome of its location in, and near, the most unstable regions of the world. The instability stemming from the Balkans and the Caucasus became the major driver for a new foreign policy.


45 The scholars who label the vision of Ahmet Davutoğlu as neo-Ottomanism shows the following books and papers for his ideas; Ahmet Davutoğlu, “Medeniyetler Arası Etkilesim ve Osmanlı Sentezi”, in Coşkun Çakır ed., Osmanlı Medeniyeti: Siyaset, İktisat, Sanat, (İstanbul: Klasik, 2005), 3–13; Ahmet Davutoğlu, Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye’nin Uluslararası Konumuna, (İstanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2001); Ahmet Davutoğlu, “Turkey’s Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007”, Insight Turkey 10, no. 1 (2008): 77–96; Ahmet Davutoğlu, “Tarih idraki oluşumunda metodolojinin rolü: Medeniyetlerarası etkileşim açısından dünya tarihi ve Osmanlı”, Divan 2 (1999): 1–63. This essay shows his admiration for the Ottoman system and desire to restore the Ottoman model.
**Erdoğan’s Islamist Neo-Ottomanism**

The most dominant leader of contemporary Turkish politics is Erdoğan, whose ideology and identity have been deeply shaped by Islamic movements and the National Outlook Movement of Necmettin Erbakan. He established the JDP in 2001 and carried his party to government power. Those who disagree with Turkey’s new foreign policy and are critical of the government tend to label the current policies of the government as neo-Ottoman. The reorientation of Turkey’s foreign policy from 2002 to 2013 – establishing close ties with Syria and Iran, becoming the main supporter for the cause of Palestinian statehood, and developing closer ties with Russia and the Balkan states – has been interpreted as neo-Ottomanist. It has translated plainly into an assertive foreign policy in the Middle East. During this period, the JDP has focused on Islamic issues, becoming the champion of Islamic causes from Burma to Bosnia and the Philippines.

Through transnational Islamic solidarity, the JDP seeks to form new alliances around Turkey to lead the Muslim world and believes in articulating a separate Islamic civilisational outlook. The JDP uses Islamic networks and solidarity to expand Turkey’s economic share in regional markets. As the JDP leadership never labels its foreign policy as neo-Ottomanism, its policies are deemed as more Islamic, less Ottoman. Neither Erdoğan nor Davutoğlu use the term, and both reject it outright while simultaneously criticising those who seek to delegitimise Turkey’s image domestically and internationally.

Despite their rejection, there is, as evidenced in earlier mentions about cultural appropriations, a basis for nostalgia for the Ottoman past and its grandeur.

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46 For his counter arguments; Davutoğlu’s interview on neo-Ottomanism: Ahmet Davutoğlu, “Yeni Osmanlılar sözü iyi niyetli değil”, Sabah, 4 December 2009.
47 Alexander Murinson, “The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy”, *MES* 42, no. 6 (2006): 950f.
50 Courtney Michelle Doroll, “The Spatial Politics of Turkey’s Justice and Development Party (AK Party): On Erdoğanian New Ottomanism”, unpublished PhD. Thesis (University of...
The current understanding of the Ottoman ‘imperial past’ and its formulation as neo-Ottomanism resonates in society, in that it moves away from and goes beyond the Kemalist nation-building project and its Jacobin secularism. Hence, those who use the term neo-Ottomanism seek to offer an alternative way of rethinking society, its identity, and its relations with the outside world. During the author’s interview with Mustafa Çalık, Çalık’s response to the question “What is inside the term of neo-Ottomanism?” was succinct and comprehensive:

It was an attempt to address the present problems with the lessons from the past and shape the future. Neo-Ottomanism means allowing diverse religious or secular life styles to co-exist; it also seeks to bring Muslim solidarity to address the main problem of the country that is the Kurdish secessionism. Turkey needs to update its social and political norms and orientation. Neo-Ottomanism was the response to those challenges in the 1990s. Today, I do not know how to describe Turkey’s foreign policy since we do not have one!51

Certainly, there have been several attempts to use and abuse history in order to reposition new actors. The JDP has strenuously tried to pursue a proactive foreign policy without the requisite preparation. Most Turks supported the JDP government’s earlier foreign policy to solve the Cyprus issue and integrate Turkey into the EU by lifting visas and opening borders with regional countries to allow the free flow of goods, people, and ideas. The Arab Spring shattered this optimistic foreign policy. Turkey closely allied itself with the Muslim Brotherhood and clashed with the establishments in Arab Spring countries. Moreover, Ankara’s lack of understanding of the regional countries, relying too much on Islamic solidarity and ignoring each country’s geopolitical sensitivities, has resulted in Turkey isolating itself from them.

The new Anatolian middle class initially supported the WP, and engineered a transformation within the party, but eventually came out in support of the Gül-Erdoğan ticket. The convergence of economy, politics, and intellectual influences enabled Turkey’s political lexicon to be redefined; the meaning of nation, state, secularism, westernisation, and security have all been redefined

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51 Interview with Mustafa Çalık, 12 March 2016, Ankara.
in accordance with globalisation and, most importantly, the demands of the Copenhagen criteria (the overall political criteria that countries applying to join the EU have to meet).

The recent privatisation of state enterprises and economic policies advocated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) will greatly benefit those who are already ideally placed to take advantages of new opportunities in business and trade. The JDP seeks to complete the neo-liberal economic revolution launched by Özal. However, the party is facing similar problems to those that confounded Özal. Its neo-liberal agenda, justified and presented in the name of EU membership, assumes that the free market can take over the role of the state. This withdrawal of the state from the social, educational, and health care spheres will further marginalise the large poor sector of Turkish society.

The Islamist Ottoman nostalgics tend to hold the present achievements of the Republic in contempt, treating them as alien and destructive. The memories of the Ottoman Empire's most fertile period are primarily reflections of the present exclusion, inferiority, and marginalisation rather than accurate recollections of Ottoman history. Neo-Ottoman discourse tells us more about the present subjectivity than it does about the actual circumstances of Ottoman history. Indeed, the EU's rejection of Turkey membership application and the systematic genocide against the Ottoman Muslim Bosnian population have politicised and disseminated neo-Ottomanist discourse. More disturbing is the misunderstanding of the role of culture and of forgotten brands. One can keep intact the instinctive values of historical culture and identity without necessarily sacrificing the attendant economic, technological, scientific, industrial, and even military achievements that come with modernism. Neo-Ottomanism, in its current form, diverges from its most fruitful, productive, and even revolutionary potential.

Conclusion

Either form of neo-Ottomanism, as articulated by Özal or Erdoğan, has little in common with the Ottomanism of the 19th-century Ottoman Empire. The historical form of Ottomanism meant keeping Muslims and Christians together under Ottoman citizenship.52 It was construed as a civic and legal term for the purposes of keeping the empire intact. The neo-Ottomanism of Özal was a

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pragmatic response to the politics of identity and post-Cold War conditions.\textsuperscript{53} It was infused with a subtle balance of Islamism but had the purpose of offering a new model of coexistence, primarily between the Kurds and Turks, and of expanding Turkey's share in regional markets. It was a political strategy to cope with identity-based political challenges and expand Turkey's influence through shared memories of the Ottoman Empire. There are several differences between the neo-Ottomanism of Özal and that of Erdoğan. Özal’s use of history tried to ‘open up’ Turkey and facilitate its liberalisation. His version of neo-Ottomanism was aimed at expanding the market for Turkish goods and remained pro-Western. Erdoğan's formulation of neo-Ottomanism, however, is based on his authoritarian tendencies and desire to become a supreme leader of the Muslim world. Since 2013, his foreign policy is informed by the civilisational clash between the Islamic and Western worlds.