# THE ANTI-GLOBALIST RESONANCES IN THE RECENT TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY

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The paper tackles how the Turkish foreign policymakers of the AKP era view anti-globalization and presents some current discussions regarding Turkish foreign policy. During its first terms, the ruling party of Turkey, the AKP (Justice and Development Party), sought to align with the EU and the Western world and naturally had a tendency to conform to the liberal democratic order. However, during its later terms, the AKP foreign policymakers adopted a more critical stance towards globalization. In this regard, the first section of this study tackles theories of capitalism, globalization, and the current inequalities. How the AKP approaches such issues are sought to be revealed through a discussion focusing on anti-globalization. The second section addresses Turkey's handling of regional and global issues by employing a new view to globalization in which an active and more engaging foreign policy is envisaged. The third section shortly reviews the situation that emerged after the Hagia Sophia decision of the Turkish government. The study also aims at perusing the shift of the axis and discourses in the Turkish foreign policy and how the AKP governments have made use of various rightist and leftist discourses to promote their own brand of Islamic internationalism.

**Keywords:** Turkish foreign policy, globalization, anti-globalization, neo-Ottomanism

### Introduction

For many years, Turkey was regarded as a role model for Muslim countries with its democratic experience. Globalization in that regard was perceived as a factor contributing to the westernization, secularization, and development of Turkey. During its first terms, the Islamic party of Turkey, the AKP, employed a pragmatic approach and avoided Islamist policies as well as anti-globalization discourses. In a country embracing democracy and secularization, the AKP was a moderate Islamist party that sought integration with the EU and the economic, social, and cultural model of the Western world.

However, Turkey's ruling party and most of its supporters no more embrace Western globalization, as they have a critical stance against Western cultural and political values and pursuit Islamist policies in its near abroad. With the failure of Western models of development and 'cultural imperialism,' globalization took a new route in Turkey like in many other developing countries. Western-European-Atlantic-centered order was

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shaken by many phenomena. Liberal capitalism is thought to be replaced by statesponsored and promoted capitalism, which favors party advocates.

This article tackles the anti-globalization discourses employed by the Islamist currents and movements in Turkey. How does Turkey define itself and shape its foreign policy through anti-globalization discourses? Why does it want to reassert its influence in the Middle East, Central Asia, or the Balkans? Why does regionalism with a strong emphasis on Turkey as a pivot country persist among Turkey's ruling elite? This study seeks answers to these questions and attempts to delve into the roots of anti-globalization rhetoric the Islamists in Turkey resort to. By examining how Turkey desires to challenge Western economic and political order, this article seeks to present how Turkish Islamist political elites make use of leftist and liberal discourses and concepts to attack the Eurocentric and Western origin world order.

Islamist and nationalist irredentism mark the AKP's foreign policy to a large extent. In that regard, the AKP era witnessed some conceptual and pragmatic changes in Turkish foreign policy. One of those changes pertains to a discussion on anti-globalization or alternatives to Western-oriented globalization. Turkish foreign policy is also moving away from the 'zero problems with neighbors' approach and becoming more and more proactive and aggressive. This transformation in the Turkish foreign policy is a subject of multi-layered research. Nevertheless, the present study focuses on globalization and anti-globalization discourses utilized by the ruling party of Turkey and their implications for a more assertive role recast for Turkey by the foreign policymakers of the country.

The first section of this study tackles the theories of capitalism, globalization, and the current inequalities. How the AKP approaches such issues are sought to be revealed through a discussion focusing on anti-globalization. The second section addresses Turkey's handling of regional and global issues by employing a new view to globalization in which an active and more engaging foreign policy is envisaged. The third section shortly reviews the situation that emerged after the Hagia Sophia decision of the Turkish government.

## 1. Theories of Capitalism, Globalization and the Worsening Inequalities

Inequalities and political issues related to inequality from a global perspective dominate the discussions of political economy. In a way, the gaps between countries have been narrowing but income differences between rich and poor remain. Global inequality has been increasing consistently throughout this century. Actually, in the nineteenth century, 'the Industrial Revolution was similar to a big bang that launched a part of mankind onto the path of higher incomes and sustained growth, while the majority stayed where they were, and some even went down. This divergence of paths widened global inequality' (Milanovic 2018: 119). Globalization brought to our attention the problem of large differences in income between people living in different countries. One of the AKP's strongmen, Numan Kurtulmuş, reveals his anti-globalization sentiments through a leftist conceptualization: 'The world is divided into two: debtors and creditors. What we are having is a creditocracy. To overcome this debt crisis, we are in solidarity with our friends, brothers, and allies from wide geography extending from the Balkans to eastern Asia, from the Caucasus to the south of Africa.' In this case, the Islamist party adopts a leftist conceptualization and engages in the criticism of globalization.

There exists a deep inequality within nations as well as inequality among nations. In this regard, management of complicated systems needs to be left in the hands of the best and the brightest, with help from the state. Yet, endless growth driven by technology is not sustainable anymore. Further, the Western liberal order crumbles. The growing irrelevance of Europe is coupled with the decreasing population of the continent and its inability to absorb migrants and refugees. This is an issue that has not escaped Islamist politicians' notice in Turkey. The EU is less and less relevant for Turkey as emphasized by Turkey's president in one of his statements regarding the inefficiency of the EU.<sup>2</sup>

Now, Turkish foreign policymakers are asking if another world is possible. For most of the Islamists of Turkey, it is. It will not be easy but it is possible to construct a new society by challenging Western globalization and its institutions. However, the Islamists also adopt a pragmatist approach. The market forces are not denied. These forces should be recast with a new Islamist-regionalist view. This is why Islamist internationalism that is in tune with state capitalism can be an outlet to make globalization take a new turn.

So, is this vision an egalitarian one? 'A more efficient economy and fairer society will also come from making markets work like markets – more competitive, less exploitive – and tempering their excesses. The rules of the game matter not just for the efficiency of the economic system but also for distribution. The wrong rules lead to a less efficient economy and a more divided society' (Stiglitz 2013: 334). A fairer society could be established. Most of the world has benefited from the post-WWII economic order and globalization. Global economic growth and people moving out of poverty indicated this improvement. And developing countries like Turkey in the Atlanticist block envied the Western liberal miracle for a long time. However, the case remains that befitting some at the expense of others. Globalization may be good for the overall country but it is not good for everyone in the country. There are winners and losers. Probably, the most controversial aspect of globalization is immigration. The recognition that there may be losers in globalization is something new.

Economic theory did explain that globalization would hurt unskilled workers in advanced countries. The dishonesty arose not from the academics, but from the politicians and those in the corporate and financial world who benefited from globalization but didn't want to face up to its darker sides and didn't want to do anything about its adverse effects (Stiglitz 2018: 51).

The United States and Western Europe initiated globalism but some segments of their societies did not benefit from globalization, which paved the way for the rise of populist and aggressive stances. Moreover, global power has become dispersed: the United States, Western Europe, and Japan are not the sole economic superpowers. Turkey also aspires to be a new pole or center in its region. Who writes the rules of the game? Turkey wants to be a part of this writing process. At this stage, deglobalization and protectionism are at work. We live in a system that is more and more interdependent but still, populist nationalism is on the rise.

In a way, globalization has not corroded national interests on the international stage, on the contrary, 'China and India, two examples not of countries becoming less driven by national policies as a result of globalization, but of countries using international markets to strengthen their internal focus and status as nation-states' (Saul 2018:

50). The AKP also discovered the idea of the nation-state and began to reassert national interests following the coup attempt.

There was supposed to be a decline in the power of nation-states, along with a growth in the number of democracies. But democracy is in a way a manifestation of the nation-state. It is a manifestation of the power of individual citizens inside those states – a manifestation of their competence to take part in national choices, to determine the direction of the nation-state toward domestic and international matters, and to define the nature of the public good. Their power applies directly to the structures and choices of their state. The international trend was toward more religious nationalism as parties identifying themselves that way became dominant in Israel, India, and Turkey and began to grow almost everywhere.

The state has been baptized and sacralized again. Actually 'like capitalism itself, the state is something that is easy to take for granted. However, the way in which we conceive of the state is important for the way in which we assess its potential to facilitate change. One way to do this is to consider the democratic state as an arbiter between different interests in society' (Rogers 2014: 116). There is an international competition not just for states but also for individuals who want to hold on within the system. The 'collapse of communism' in the late 1980s and 1990s seemed to confirm what many people had long believed: that capitalism is the natural condition of humanity, that it conforms to the laws of nature and basic human inclinations, and that any deviation from those natural laws and inclinations can only result in grief (Wood 2017: 78).

Capitalist and globalist triumphalism might be questioned, also the evils of globalization and neoliberalism. From the growing gap between rich and poor to increasing ecological destruction following can be said:

Capitalism is not a natural and inevitable consequence of human nature, nor simply an extension of age-old practices of trade and commerce. Rather, it is a late and localized product of very specific historical conditions, which required great transformations in social relations and in the relationship between humans and nature. International trade is the economic activity that above all created the great commercial centers, which are, according to all versions of the commercialization model, supposed to have been the precursor of capitalism. This was essentially carrying trade, with merchants buying goods in one location to be sold for a profit in another, or 'commercial arbitrage between separate markets' (Wood 2017: 78).

These processes have extended their reach from the relations between exploiting and exploited classes to the relations between imperialist and subordinate countries. Capitalism and globalization are not capable of promoting sustainable development, not because they encourage technological advances that are capable of straining the earth's resources but because the purpose of capitalist production is to exchange value, not use it. Another issue that arises out of globalization is related to immigration and identity: 'Modernity strings identity between one pillar of individualism and another of globalism: many young people see themselves both as fiercely individual outsiders in their surrounding society, and as citizens of the world' (Collier 2014: 231). The political and economic superstructure of globalism fails to address the immigration problem. Refugees and immigrants have become a determining factor in shaping regional problems. The AKP struggles to legitimize Syrian refugees by underlining the Muslim ummah

brotherhood, however, a significant part of society is at odds with the AKP's immigration policies. The AKP's Islamic internationalism notion and the socio-psychological structure of its Islamist policies do not appeal to many people.

The political elite of Turkey have undergone a dramatic transformation in terms of character and formation (Başkan 2019). Turkey's priorities have changed in foreign policy but those changes have not evolved into constants of foreign policy; they are still variables that can be altered following a government changeover. Actually most Islamists actively penetrate into business, education, even in the lower municipal bodies, organize medical assistance, mediate in the delivery of money to families of migrants, *etc.* (also in Turkey) and many Islamists come from the lower segments of society. They have sympathizers among the poor and lower middle class (Grinin 2019). Their power partly originates in those classes but they are still struggling to create a strong political culture to hold on power.

The increasing conspicuousness of religion and expanding interest toward religion mark a change in global political landscape (Robertson 2011). Religion is more apparent in nation-states and the current Turkish government predominantly struggles to make its Islamist discourse more visible by creating an intellectual tradition which makes benefits of various concepts and notions that conventionally do not belong to Islamism.

# 2. Turkey's Changing Path to Regional and Global Issues

Turkey's decision-makers and the ruling party have a negative view of Europe and Western institutions. The domestic political institutions instigate distrust against Europe and the USA. Globalization from above has imposed rules formed by international and regional organizations on the nation-states like Turkey, which have their own regional and global ambitions. The interdependency and global crises like pandemics compel nation-states to cooperate on the one hand. However, on the other hand, states engage in harsh competitions to assert their economic, political, and cultural hegemony, as a result of which opposition to globalization emerges.

The concept of anti-globalization may also be labeled as an alternative globalization movement. The alternative globalization movement is mostly a concept expressed by groups with the belief that globalization will be reformed. Wallerstein called the anti-globalization movements anti-systemic movements. These movements gain global significance in terms of their multiple structures, intellectual accumulation, militant actions, and desire for long-term changes. The Islamist anti-globalization movements in Turkey face no serious opposition from their voters and supporters, which leads to the adoption of anti-globalization and anti-Western stances by the ruling party of Turkey. At this point, paradoxical situations emerge. On the one hand, the conservative and Islamist politicians desire to be close to the liberal markets and the system they construct; on the other hand, they desire to conserve cultural values. In this case, the opposition to globalism is related to the non-economic aspects of life; it is not related to the welfare society, distribution problems, or development problems. The most important feature of the opposition to the existing global system is that the anti-globalization is getting stronger all around the world.

When founding or leading players of globalization are seen as 'Western', a link can be established between anti-globalization and anti-Westernism. Especially, what is meant to be part of globalization is considered to be part of the 'West', therefore, the link between anti-globalization and anti-Westernism can be established more easily. The reasons for anti-globalization and the reasons for anti-Westernism are not based on cultural and religious facts, but on political and historical factors.

The demise of traditional Kemalism and secularism reshaped the Turkish political life dramatically. However, the alliance of nationalist MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) and Islamist AKP made strange fellows, and even some old-time Kemalists found a statist and anti-Western turn in this new alliance that shook the political structure of Turkey. The AKP turned toward hyper-nationalism in a sense: 'It should be noted that such hyper-nationalism was something the AKP had ostensibly opposed when it was founded in 2001. Increasingly, then, the party was prepared to sacrifice its founding principles in order to hold onto political power' (Solomon 2019: 130).

The Islamist nationalism of the AKP-MHP alliance resulted in Erdogan adopting more aggressive policies, a more aggressive foreign policy toward Syria and the broader region. And 'the AKP's move from accommodation to authoritarianism also has implications for the inclusion-moderation hypothesis, which contends that once included in formal democratic processes, radical Islamist parties will become more moderate over time' (Solomon 2019: 132). In retrospect, then, while the Muslim Brotherhood and the AKP engaged in behavioral moderation for tactical reasons, this did not translate into ideological moderation. In the words of Murat Somer, these Islamists make use of their participation in the system to 'conquer the state from within as opposed to democratizing it' (*Ibid.*).

After the foundation of the republic, Turkey implemented 'assertive secularism' which excluded religion from the public sphere (Çelik 2018: 194). 'The Westernization process had begun in the late Ottoman period, but the implementation of the Western style secular institutions and excluding religion from the public sphere began during the new era. Atatürk with his supreme political authority immediately began to apply his perception of the Western secular model onto the framework of the new Republic of Turkey' (*Ibid.*: 197). For a long time, from 1923 to the early 2000s, Laicism in Turkey was applied by the military elite in an authoritarian model, from the top down, and it was not part of a democratic or civil implementation process.

However, as the new conservative party of Turkey, the AKP, tightened its grip on power, and Erdoğan and his entourage came to be labeled another Middle Eastern strongman, he consolidated his power and became less tolerant to dissents. Erdoğan did not meet the expectations of many liberals in Turkey and elsewhere who had initially hailed his ascent as a sign of progress (Karaveli 2016: 121). 'He believed that he could harness Sunni Islam, a creed shared by the majority of Turkey's citizens, as a unifying force' (*Ibid.*: 122). Statism, nationalism, religious conservatism, and the protection of powerful business interests have marked Turkey's governance set since the AKP rule. For many, once pro-European and pro-American democratic conservatism of the ruling party has evolved into political Islamism. Globalism and closer integration to world markets were the driving force of the AKP but in the end, the AKP government had no choice but to revert to traditional authoritarian nationalism.

Revitalization of past and glorification of the Ottoman past is highlighted through language as well, 'Today, with the Ottoman language long forgotten, Erdoğan wants to rid Turkish of "foreign words." Why? Because "Turkey faces a mortal threat from foreign affections" (Bekdil 2017: 2). Cultural imperialism of the West is rejected, but Is-

lamo-Arabic influence is hailed as a bridge that connects Muslim Turkey to its bright past. By all means, Turkey's new cultural and geopolitical ambitions are not limited to language. Turkey is also determined to revive its ties with countries it had historically interacted with.

Turkey has historical and cultural ties with countries in the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. It also struggles to diversify its global options by reinforcing its bonds with the Caribbean, Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia. As for closer neighbors, continuing rapprochement with Russia, as well as ending the civil wars and refugee crises in Iraq and Syria are meant to cement the geostrategic importance of Turkey (Kayaoğlu 2017: 10).

This approach toward regional and global issues echoes neo-Ottomanist resonances. In order to influence other countries in its near abroad, Turkey seeks to move up in the international system. Through an Islamist agenda, is this possible? For some, it is not that easy:

In truth, political Islam can prosper in the future only as part of some opposition; but it is doomed to fail as soon as it takes power, as the examples of Tunisia and Egypt demonstrate all too well. Put another way, the exercise of power marks the failure not only of the Islamist ideology but of the very idea that religion offers a program for governing (Roy and Schlegel 2020: 112).

Before coming to power and in the first terms of its rule, the AKP was promoting plurality in politics and seemed to adopt a pro-Western attitude. However, from 2011 onwards, Erdoğan began to use his influence more intensively and expanded his role in the party and state alike.

As he consolidated his position, he assumed a greater role over domestic and foreign affairs through Davutoğlu, who was his advisor and served as the foreign minister from 2009 until 2014 and later replaced Erdoğan as the prime minister when Erdoğan became the president. Davutoğlu coined the term 'zero problems with neighbors' and struggled to explain the AKP's regional and global vision through this term. He also dreamed of pan-Islamism and favored neo-Ottomanism to turn Turkey into a regional hegemon (Kayaoğlu 2017: 8).

Turkey is in search of status and has been recasting its foreign policy accordingly since the AKP tightened its grip on power. A more assertive and aggressive foreign policy is employed to reassert a more pervasive global and regional paradigm: since 2002, Turkey's foreign policy has been, and continues to be, *proactive*, and a return to bilateralism, caution, and passive foreign policy of the Cold War years is unlikely. Turkey has been, and will probably continue to be, active, engaging, and assertive both regionally and globally. Yet, while this proactivity in 2002–2010 was more multi-layered, multi-actor, and multi-dimensional, as well as more regionally and globally engaging, the present nature of proactivity seems to be more focused, selective, and globally-limited. Today, the nation's regional and global engagements focus on Syria and Iraq, as well as on Africa, and operate on the basis of the priority of security concerns and humanitarian norms (Keyman 2017: 62).

In the first terms of the AKP rule, soft power instruments were stressed and employed, however, in the latter terms, hard power instruments have been used, and imperial identities, regional power status, and great power illusions seem to have resurfaced.

Yet another strong conceptualization, the Erdoğan-period foreign policy is associated with neo-Ottomanism: 'AKP's understanding of neo-Ottomanism is Islamist, anti-Western, adventurist, and ideological. This is one among the many reasons why 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' (Yavuz 2016: 440).

Turkey's desire to expand its influence into the Middle East and Central Asia makes one think that Ottoman nostalgia permeates the AKP cadres and that conservative as well as nationalist discourse pervades. This form of neo-Ottomanism also seeks economic ends: the proactive Turkish foreign policy predominantly struggles to expand Turkey's reach into the Balkans, Africa, and especially the Middle East.

Initially, 'by means of soft-power mechanisms and initiatives, the AKP tried to lead by example and serve as an inspiration for democratizing countries in the Middle East' (Volfova 2016: 490). However, later, the AKP leadership and cadres recast a new role for themselves, and this role was related to Turkey's historical mission: 'first, the Ottoman Empire is imagined as a cradle of civilization. Second, it is imagined as an Islamic Empire. And third, it is imagined as a multicultural identity' (*Ibid.*: 498).

## 3. Hagia Sophia and the End of Turkish-Islamic Understanding of 'Convivencia'

Hagia Sophia was converted into a mosque once again after the cancellation of the cabinet degree of 1934 which had turned it into a museum. This act is also, by all means, an anti-globalist act; it challenges multi-culturalism, tolerance, and inter-religious dialogue that the liberal global order promotes. Some conservative and political Islamist fractions have always insisted that Hagia Sophia should be converted into a mosque.

In one sense, this highly symbolic building was manipulated for political gains and kindled a discussion about the re-Ottomanization of Turkey's domestic and foreign policy. This deed by the Turkish government also seeks to create an Islamic 'Reconquista,' but this new conquest is not achieved against the crusaders; it is an act against the secular, 'oppressive', Kemalist governance mindset and its supporters that have shaped Turkey's domestic and foreign policies since the beginning of the 1920s.

Turkey's current policymakers blame those criticizing the Hagia Sophia decision as orientalists or Islamophobes. To Islamic movements in Turkey, this conversion marks the reassertion of Ottoman splendor, while to secularists and many others this act represents a form of reactionism. In any case, the conversion of Hagia Sophia is a political tool and maneuver at the hand of Islamist politicians of Turkey. Turkey's increasing global ambitions and the need for the ruling party to consolidate its voters might have sparked such a decision. However, this decision also harms the tolerance and coexistence discourse employed by the Islamist ruling party in the first terms of its rule. In a sense, it is a domestic and cultural 'Reconquista' through which conservative politics reasserts its power.

Revitalizing past symbols is a popular means of gaining conservative and nationalist voters. This symbolic act is also a challenge against the fiercely secular state perceptive and indicates the rejection of break with the Ottoman past. The transformation of the Chora Museum into a mosque soon afterward is another example of the AKP government's tendency to revive the conservative past.

### Conclusion

Turkey has been struggling for international prestige and trying to contribute to reconstruct the traditional hierarchy in the international order. The ideological impetus of Turkey's ruling party to re-Ottomanize Turkey is based on an understanding of Muslim brotherhood in which Turkey is the leading power. In that sense, Turkish foreign policymakers seek a form of exceptionalism and claim that only their Turkish-Islamist civilization could make Turkey a great and ineradicable country. To achieve this, they also resort to antiglobalization rhetoric and withstand the liberal-globalist order.

To have more regional and global influence, Turkey's ruling elite aligns with antiglobalist movements whether they are rightist, like the Putinists in Russia, or leftists, like pro-Maduro partisans in Venezuela. Turkey has never viewed itself as a great power but it sees itself now as a regional power that has global ambitions. Its power declines from time to time but this has not extinguished its desire to be recognized as a mighty state. Turkey has been viewed by most Western powers as a non-European, non-Western country with most of its landmass in Asia. This issue worried the old political elites of Turkey; however, due to the growing indifference towards Europe and the declining normative power of the EU, Turkey now seeks new partners and allies in the emerging international order.

In the post-Cold War world, at first, globalization and liberal order were welcomed and hailed as the end of history. But more and more people and countries have been involved in anti-globalist movements, and they respond to changing regional and global dynamics in unconventional ways.

Likewise, Turkey faces very challenging and compelling international problems like the question of the Eastern Mediterranean, which makes Turkey's global aspirations more complicated. Further, Turkey has its own vulnerabilities and runs the risk of being alone in its regional and global ventures. Its economy faces the risk of suffering a long term crisis, and its political landscape may change dramatically. The ruling elite of Turkey may need to understand that its ambitions may be out of reach and recognize the fact that the multipolar world does not necessarily mean the pushing of Turkey's interests. The Turkish foreign policy has experienced an important axis shift in recent years, but it is questionable whether this change will be permanent because the current ruling party has difficulties in creating a permanent Islamic political culture in foreign policy, as well as having problems in many other areas of policy making.

## **NOTES**

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