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The Myth of the Empire in Turkish Conservatism and Islamism

Abstract

Since the early 2000s, Turkish conservative and Islamist intellectuals have advocated a new foreign policy discourse relying heavily on a new interpretation of the country's history and identity prioritizing its imperial heritage and its centrality in the Muslim world. Ahmet Davutoğlu and İbrahim Kalın — both as academics and as policy-makers — have contributed to the reshaping of Turkish foreign policy and its legitimacy discourse during the AK Parti era. This paper intends to examine firstly the evolution of the idea of Empire in Turkish Islamism and conservatism and secondly Davutoğlu and Kalın's reading of Turkey's imperial magnificence in the general framework of Turkish Islamism and conservatism. Moreover, it also aims at understanding how and when Turkish conservatism and Islamism have reformulated the country's identity and relation with Ottoman heritage. This paper attempts to demonstrate also that global events and social transformation have certainly influenced intellectuals' perception of themselves. However, the shift from Turkish-Islamic synthesis to an Ottoman-Islamic synthesis has been promoted by a new generation of academics — to which both Davutoğlu and Kalın belong — who since the early 1980s worked to uncover the Ottoman past that, allegedly, had been dismissed by Kemalist dominant ideology. Thus, new research accompanied by the desire for taking revenge has promoted this new image of the self among Turkish conservative and Islamist intellectuals. Despite these two authors' influence, this paper will argue that their role in shaping Turkish foreign policy is limited.

Keywords

Turkish foreign policy, Conservatism, Islamism, Ottoman heritage, Identity

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Introduction

The month of May 2022 has been particularly interesting for understanding the myth of the Ottoman Empire among conservative and Islamist political actors and intellectuals. On 15 May, President Erdoğan addressed the party youth branches in Adana and remembered how the nation-loving Sultan Abdülhamid successfully fought "that time's imperialists and their local agents [*maşa*]" without losing even an inch of territory, and he, implicitly, compared himself to the Sultan.[1] In his statement, Erdoğan was criticising the opposition centre-right leader Meral Akşener who had drawn a parallel between the President's and the Sultan's despotic rule. This was just one of the daily harsh political debates that also occupied columnists and commentators for days. However, it is indicative of the instrumental use of history to legitimise (or delegitimise) charismatic leaders. Yet this instrumental use is sometimes based also on the manipulation of historical figures and the selective use of events. President Erdoğan used an old conservative mantra on Sultan Abdülhamid, however, he forgot that Abdülhamid was in power during the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–78, at the end of which the Empire lost more than half of its rich European territories, Cyprus and, later, also the strategic island of Crete.

Few days later, it was the Greater Istanbul Municipality that held the celebrations for the Conquest of Istanbul. Since the 1990s, the celebrations of the 29 May have become a regular event even if it is not a national holiday. However, it was the municipality (held by the opposition Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi - CHP[2]) that organised and attended the celebrations. President Erdoğan did not attend the celebrations but carried out a counter-ceremony not to commemorate Mehmed the Conqueror as he did in the past, but to start the groundbreaking for converting an abandoned airport into a public park in Istanbul city centre. Paradoxically, the abandoned airport was named after the founder of modern Turkey, Atatürk, a figure that President Erdoğan does not like to refer to very often. In this example, again, historical events have been used or downplayed to gain political legitimacy.

The use of history for gaining legitimacy has been frequently used in domestic political quarrels and in foreign policy. Since the early 2000s, Turkish conservative and Islamist intellectuals have started to promote a new foreign policy relying heavily on a new interpretation of the country's history and identity, prioritising its imperial heritage and centrality in the Muslim world. Ahmet Davutoğlu and İbrahim Kalın — both as academics and as policy-makers — have contributed to the reshaping of Turkish foreign policy and its legitimacy

discourse during the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - AK Parti[3] era, particularly before 2013. However, it is also exceedingly difficult to sustain that AK Parti's foreign policy was determined by the new image of tradition that these two key intellectuals were trying to enact and to think that they have substituted the previous pragmatic and security-centred approaches to foreign policy. As Hakan Yavuz (2022: 666) argues, AK Parti's foreign policy was not moved by a clear formulation of the national interest but by an instrumentalization of foreign policy to gain legitimacy, undermine its domestic opponents, mobilise its grassroots bases, and differentiate itself from the previous governments.

Yet, the discourse created by Davutoğlu's ideas was also very important in shaping a discourse to legitimise its policies and gain (mainly conservative and nationalist) voters' support for Erdoğan's foreign policy and (quite frequent) readjustments of its policy according to the global and regional context. However, their role should not be overestimated. The main reason is that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, as Prime Minister and even more as President, has downplayed the importance of Turkish soft power but prioritised nationalism, security, and military strength (Benhaim and Öktem 2015). For instance, emphasis on democracy or the celebrated "zero problem with neighbours" policy have been shamingly forgotten after 2013. Other notable examples are Turkey's position on the Uighurs (Chen 2020) or the new rapprochement with Israel[4] and Saudi Arabia,[5] all of which cannot be framed in any of the imperial images that Davutoğlu and Kalın presented.

However, Turkish conservatism and Islamism, with all their numerous wings, have looked at Turkey's imperial past in diverse ways. For instance, early conservatism and Islamism of the first quarter of the 20th century even rejected Turkey's "corrupted" imperial past, and many looked to the Turks' affinity with another myth, "Turan", which remains influential. Then, for many decades, conservatism and Islamism have been inward-looking, focusing on Turkishness and the Anatolian plateau.

This paper intends to study Davutoğlu and Kalın's reading of Turkey's imperial heritage in the general framework of Turkish Islamism and conservatism. Moreover, it also aims to understand how and when Turkish conservatism and Islamism reformulated the country's identity and relation to its Ottoman heritage. This paper will demonstrate that global events and social transformation have certainly influenced intellectuals' perception of themselves. However, the shift from Turkish-Islamic synthesis to an Ottoman-Islamic synthesis has been promoted by a new generation of academics who, since the early 1980s,

have worked to uncover the Ottoman past that, allegedly, had been dismissed by Kemalist dominant ideology. Thus, new research accompanied by the desire for taking revenge has promoted this new image of the self among Turkish conservative and Islamist intellectuals.

Before examining these two intellectuals' ideas, though, it will be useful to briefly examine the evolution of the idea of empire in Turkish Islamism and conservatism.

The Hideous Ottoman Past

Turkish conservatism emerged in the last two decades of the 19th century, and Islamism departed from the former after the proclamation of the Second Constitutional Era in 1908 (Guida 2021). Both ideologies attempted to save the empire and to provide a unifying identity by imagining a tradition based on the glories of the Ottoman Muslim Empire. The Young Ottoman intellectual Namık Kemal, the first conservative author, wrote extensively on history and on political figures as models of strength and glory without differentiating between Muslim and Ottoman history, which appeared to him in a natural continuation.

First generation Islamists, instead, looked more at the early Muslim history than the Ottoman classical era. They were all strongly critical of the last sultans' rule and, in particular, of the reign of Abdülhamid II. The despotic palace was seen among the causes of decadence, and it had become the centre of censorship and the hub of an extensive network of spies and informers, which spread fear among intellectuals and bureaucrats. Fear then produced a profound hatred against the Sultan, and this is exactly the image that the centre-right politician Akşener was recalling in her 2022 statements. Akşener was not alone. In a poem entitled İstibdâd (Despotism) published in 1909, Mehmet Âkif (Ersoy), a Young Turk and a celebrated Islamist poet, decried Abdülhamid in the following way: "Thou hast dishonoured our flag, which was flying in the sky. Thou made the descendants of our father ashamed, whereas they were expecting pride. What a great people we were; Alas, you came, and you made everything miserable. Now, you have made impossible all our best hopes for the future. We're now disgraced… Thou, cruel nightmare, you brought disgrace!" (Ersoy n.d.: 242).

Ersoy's words are just one example of the large (Ottoman) literature against Abdülhamid II that emerged after 1908. Ersoy was a member of the Committee of Union and Progress, as many of the Kemalists and all shared an aversion for

the despotic Sultan, but also to many distinct aspects of the decaying Ottoman Empire. However, Ersoy is also the most beloved poet among contemporary Islamists, including President Erdoğan.

During the Turkish War of Liberation, Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) understood that in the new world order that emerged after World War I, the "Turks" had to reinvent their image: ridiculed for decades as the "sick man of Europe" and seen as racially inferior by the imperialist discourse (Renan 2000; see also Guida 2011), now they were even reviled as responsible for the eradication of the (Armenian and Greek) Christian populations of Anatolia. Therefore, to transform the republic into a modern nation accepted in the international arena, Turkey severed ties that connected it to its Ottoman Muslim geography (under colonial occupation). As France did for its *ancien regime* in the late 18th century or more recently as Italy did for its Fascist era, Atatürk's nationalist ideology broke with its most recent past. The new collective memory was reshaped on the exaggerated scheme of the "Turkish history thesis" (İnan et al. 1931), in which the ancient Turkic nation was cast as the original source of all human civilisations. Turkic migrants from Central Asia had been responsible for the spread of civilisation to all corners of the planet and modern Western civilisation was itself Turkic in origin. World history, therefore, became an account of the many instances in which the Turkic nation had played the pivotal role. It was a narrative in which the Ottoman Empire was accorded only a minor role. However, it was also a negative role because, since the 16th century, it represented the era of decadence and decline of the great Turkic nation.

The Charming Ottoman Past

However, lived memories of the once glorious empire did not simply evaporate. The Republic made capital Ankara, a minor town of the empire with only minor Ottoman vestiges, because of security concerns, but also to geographically mark the shift from the decadent Ottoman Empire to the modern Republic. In the country's major cities, though, Ottoman architecture and cultural practices still witnessed the past glories. Popular literature also continued to celebrate the Ottoman past.

The first powerful alternative to Kemalist history was presented by the nationalist Nihat Atsız who ridiculed Kemalist rule — particularly the period of President İsmet İnönü — and its attempt to rewrite history but maintained the idea that the Turkish nation emerged from pagan Central Asia. Islamist authors adopted the same critique of the single-party era but were eager to reinterpret the

recent Ottoman past through rose-tinted spectacles. For instance, Sultan Abdülhamid II was now seen as a saviour by intellectuals like Kısakürek, who wrote the book *Ulu Hakan* İkinci *Abdülhamid Han* (The Great Ruler Abdülhamid II, 1965) where the former ruler is portrayed as the greatest of all Ottoman sultans who fought against Jews, freemasons, imperialist agents, and Young Turks. Those became all conspirators to create an artificial modern state system in the Middle East as European imperial forces imposed it. Kısakürek also argued that Islam represented the true, native vocabulary and the way of life of the true turks. The Kemalists, instead, were representing the "native aliens", promoting the imperialists' agenda and preventing Turkey from returning to its former splendour (Yavuz 2022: 660). A similar portrait has been drawn by a recent 154-episode TV series — *Payitaht: Abdülhamid* — produced by state television TRT, and it is the image to which Tayyip Erdoğan was referring in his Adana speech.

Well before the AK Parti era, Kısakürek symbolised a new attitude toward history after multi-party politics were introduced in the country. Already in 1953, the quincentenary of the Turkish conquest of Istanbul was celebrated. Authoritarian Kemalist nationalism had failed to substitute the popular conception of identity, and the new democratic tradition necessitated the generation of a national narrative shared by most Turks. Kemalism, though, retained its dominant status. The conservative government of the time did not give emphasis to the 1953 celebrations (neither President Bayar nor Prime Minister Menderes attended the official celebrations in Istanbul) but few years later participated solemnly to the relocation of Atatürk's tomb to the newly completed mausoleum *Anıtkabir* in Ankara, a structure influenced by the vestiges of ancient Anatolian civilizations. Moreover, in 1951, the same government approved the Law on Crimes against Atatürk (*Atatürk Aleyhine İşlenen Suçlar Hakkında Kanun*), making it illegal to slander the founder of modern Turkey. Still today, school curricula dedicate incomparable space to the figure of the great leader and his cult.

However, the quincentenary of the conquest of Istanbul, Kısakürek's book, and the conservative historical narrative since 1950 all "contributed to the nationalist *milieu de mémoire*, thus enabling it to survive in the midst of future decades characterized by intense political turmoil" (Brockett 2014: 428). These early examples of celebrations of the Ottoman imperial past "demonstrate that commemorations since 1980 are not merely the result of the intersection of globalization, resurgent religious politics, and refashioned nationalism" (Brockett 2014: 427).

If, after 1908, for ideological and political reasons, the Ottoman imperial past has been portrayed as a hideous era and historiography has neglected this past, in the 1970s and in the 1980s, political and social changes have prompted a change. The new historiography has been deeply influenced by two factors (Özel 2009: 27): firstly, the fears and the anxiety for the state's endurance in the last phases of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Republic. Secondly, the early attempt to generate a "national" history in the early years of the Republic that would distinguish the Turks from the other populations of the region and answer to European claims of racial and cultural superiority. These two factors have produced an image of history that is perceived as unique, *sui generis*, which does not resemble any other society's history. Moreover, it has created a state-centred history that also aims to enable certain specific historical eras and figures to be compared against others. This also transforms history as a matter of faith.

Politically, the Kemalist discourse was strongly criticised both by the Left and the Right, and a new interest in the past based on scientific approaches multiplied in Turkish academia. The discourse of the military junta of 1980 also adopted a more conservative approach and sponsored Turkish-Islamic synthesis (even if they modified their position again in the 1990s). Socially, economic liberalisation favoured the emergence of the old capital Istanbul, which had its historical places and symbols as an attractive centre (Keyder 2000: 21–22). Moreover, access to universities widened, and successful conservative students were able to access prominent universities, bringing with them their cultural backgrounds, frequently built on authors like Atsız, Kadir Mısıroğlu or Sadık Albayrak, who have a strongly anti-Kemalist approach and a strong ideological image of history. There was also the attempt to focus on a "*millî*" (national/religious) and "*yerli*" (local) history that has created history departments all around the country, teaching and researching exclusively Ottoman history, even though the history of Anatolia is as old as the history of humanity.

Moreover, history became part of the polarised political discourse of the 1990s. Different performances of national histories served, on the one hand, the conservative and Islamists to incorporate the Ottoman era in a new national memory, unsettling the secularist constructions of national history centred around the Kemalist/Republican era. On the other hand, it served the Kemalists and state bureaucracy to maintain the Kemalist/Republican narrative that is focused on the revolution's ability to bring development, rationality, and

prosperity after decadence, bigotry, and poverty.

Thus, the instrumental use of history does not belong only to the conservative and Islamist intellectuals. For example, the "Menemen Incident" is not simply a violent revolt led by religious authorities against the secular Kemalist policies: it is a "commemorated event" for which annual ceremonies are held in Menemen every year on 23 December. Especially since the early 1990s, when the threat to secularism was more felt, this annual commemoration ceremony has been attended by thousands of Kemalist civil activists and transformed into a secularist demonstration. The narration of religious bigotry and violence has been repeated since the 1930s in schoolbooks, commemorative statements, and ceremonies. The beheaded lieutenant, Mustafa Fehmi Kubilay, the heroic victim of the incident, has become an icon of Kemalist secularism (Azak 2010: 22).

In this context, history is far from being a science but is more a tool to legitimise political actors. The celebration of the conquest of Istanbul has been seen frequently as one of the most important examples: "[t]he May 29 commemoration serves to perform this alternative national history in the public sphere, thereby employing it in the construction of present-day political identities. These constructions contest secular national history by challenging its claims to objectivity and singularity" (Çınar 2001: 389). For Islamists, modernisation and westernisation have betrayed Istanbul that has lost its purity and Muslim character (Bora 2000: 61). The AK Parti, which was established in 2001, adopted the same polarized history because it aimed also at representing the "neglected" (*mağdur*) population who represented the true spirit and values of the country. AK Parti was very successful in reshaping foreign policy and the discourse behind it mainly because, when its government took office for the first time in 2002, Turkey was a completely different country. Internally, it successfully recovered from a profound economic crisis and, after ten years of shaky coalition governments, and for the first time, was creating a stable government. Internationally, the world after 9/11 was witnessing a new order in the Middle East, the end of hostile regimes in Baghdad, Tripoli, and Damascus, and the Balkans were stabilising. The country needed to review all its foreign policy axioms in this new context.

Ahmet Davutoğlu

In this new context, Ahmet Davutoğlu is the figure who has contributed the most to AK Parti's foreign policy's ideological and intellectual evolution.

Born in the conservative Anatolian province of Konya in 1959, Davutoğlu soon became one of the most acclaimed intellectuals of AK Parti. He was also nominated as the second leader (between 2014 and 2016) when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was elected to the presidency of the Republic and was forced to leave the party leadership (at the time, the two posts were not allowed to overlap). In fact, Erdoğan perceived the new party leadership as intentioned to marginalise him and, after the elections of November 2015, he orchestrated a denigrating campaign that eventually led to Davutoğlu's resignation. Davutoğlu left when the country's influence and lead were in decline and returned to active politics only in December 2019, when he established a new opposition party — *Gelecek Partisi* (Future Party, GP) — in opposition to the AK Parti.

What made Ahmet Davutoğlu so illustrious was the fact that he was educated in élite schools: firstly, at the İstanbul Erkek Lisesi, the high school that grants the *Abitur* (the German qualification of secondary education) and, secondly, at Bosphorus University, the old Robert College established by American missionaries and now a prestigious but secular institution, where he obtained his BA and Ph.D. Between 1993 and 2003, Davutoğlu also conducted an academic career. In 1986, with his schoolfriend Mustafa Özel, he established *Bilim ve Sanat Vakfı* (Foundation for Sciences and Arts, BİSAV) to provide courses on Islamic history (mainly Ottoman) and philosophy to students who otherwise would not have access to university curricula, which were based on the Kemalist model. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the foundation became the focal point for conservative university students in Istanbul. However, when Davutoğlu established his new party, the government ordered the closure of the university (*Istanbul Şehir University*) sponsored by the foundation and the foundation itself was forced to downgrade its activities.

In 2003, the *hoca* (the professor), as he has been usually called, left his academic role, and was appointed as Prime Minister Erdoğan's advisor and, six years later, Minister of Foreign Affairs, a position that he maintained until 2014. Between 2003 and 2014, Turkey's prestige in the area increased remarkably and Davutoğlu and his ideas of reform of foreign policy were celebrated for this. Davutoğlu had already expressed his ideas in his columns of the newspaper *Yeni Şafak* and in his famous book *Stratejik Derinlik* (Strategic Depth), first published in 2001 and reprinted several times. All these conferred Davutoğlu not only the title of skilful diplomat and politician but also of a great intellectual who emerged from secular schools, inside a political movement that is frequently blamed for being a party of illiterates and bumkins. When

he explicitly stated his intention to leave active politics and return to teaching, conservative public opinion even more exalted his qualities because "centre-right academics were celebrating the discovery of a local hero" (Kıvanç 2015: 16). The columnist Ali Saydam, for instance, wrote on the newspaper *Akşam*: "[r]ead it [*Stratejik Derinlik*], and your worldview will change! [...] because is so impressive and deep" and "If Tayyip Erdoğan is still willing to defeat what he calls the 'bureaucratic oligarchy' [the Kemalist one], he will always need a 'chevalier' like Ahmet Davutoğlu, who not only is able to use his brain but has also a solid conscience".[6]

Those were not only pro-government media ritual blessings. Indeed, "in the AKP era, the face of foreign policy was represented by Erdoğan, but the language of this same foreign policy was greatly defined by Ahmet Davutoğlu" (Balcı 2021: 303). In his book *Stratejik Derinlik*, for the first time he makes an Islamist reading of Turkish foreign policy and accordingly tries to build a vision for the future.

The book starts with the usual conservative criticism that assumes that previous administrations (and above all the single-party Kemalist regime) have always conducted a shy, unassertive, and incoherent foreign policy, which was unrelated to the historical and geographical depth of Turkey. The conservative criticism also assumes that the same model of foreign policy remained unmodified and unrepresentative of national interests. The reason for this was that the main policy makers are indeed "alienated', namely they have refused their own land's cultural and moral values (Davutoğlu 2001b: 258). The future foreign policy envisaged by Davutoğlu will be based, instead, on a rational strategy that is proactive and rooted into the local history and geography. Davutoğlu was adopting the dominant (but flawed) narrative in the historiography of Turkey and the modern Middle East, the foundations of which were laid during the Cold War period, all but consensually deemphasising Turkey's engagement with the Middle East in the 1930s (Bein 2017).

In Davutoğlu's works, the main evidence of alienation is the fact that Kemalism envisaged the Turkish nation not as the continuation of the Ottoman Empire but as emerging anew from the ashes of the former empire and stressed its difference with the imposition of scientism, secularism, and nationalism as state policies. The emergence of AK Parti, however, has finally provided an opportunity to change the course of Turkish foreign policy. In an interview with the *Financial Times*, Davutoğlu affirmed that before the AK Parti, Turkey resembled a dim-witted man who has strong muscles, little brain, and

an empty stomach.[7] In other words, a mighty army, a weak economy, and a limited vision for the future. His party aimed at changing this and at bringing a diplomatically active country.

The professor, then, adopts a reading totally opposed to that of Kemalism in line with the 1940s conservatism and that of Nihal Atsız's ethnic nationalism. Davutoğlu also adopts many of the 1950s Islamist values and interpretations, such as the nostalgia for the glorious Muslim past. He also reinterprets the "historical depth" and believes that "because for centuries it shouldered the responsibility of the Muslim world, with new qualities, Turkey has all the features for representing the entire Muslim world" (Davutoğlu 2001b: 258). Therefore, Turkey will (re)gain the moral capabilities that derive from being the legitimate heir of the Ottoman Empire and, as the Empire did throughout the centuries, the country should play a role of leadership in the Middle East to recreate a new order not based on hydrocarbons or led by material interests but based on the shared geographical and cultural patrimony. Within this framework, the professor coined the term *tarihdaşlar* (people sharing the same history) to indicate the members of the ecumene created by the Ottoman rule that are also *gönüldaşlar* (people sharing the same heart).[8]

Turkish influence, however, cannot be limited only to the areas once ruled by the Ottoman Empire (in the Balkans, the Middle East, and North Africa). In fact, Turkey "has strong and deep geopolitical, geo-cultural, and geo-economic bonds with Central Asia" and must be recognised also as a Eurasian country (Davutoğlu 2001b: 23).

Davutoğlu's approach is representative of the second generation of neo-Ottomans. The first generation was represented by the centre-right politicians Turgut Özal and Süleyman Demirel, who, after the collapse of Soviet Union and the end of the bipolar world, dreamed of influencing politically and economically Central Asian and Balkan republics and more than once mentioned "a Turkic world stretching from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China" (Tellal 2005: 52). Turgut Özal must be quoted because is he who invented the term "neo-Ottomanism" (or better it was his advisor and columnist Cengiz Çandar) (Torbakov 2017: 135) to indicate a new foreign policy that aimed at the extension of Turkish influence in the areas once behind the Iron Curtain and previously part of the Ottoman Empire or that share cultural and ethnic bonds with Turkey. However, Turgut Özal referred to the Ottoman Empire as an integral part of the European nation (as it was understood in the 19th century) and not as an alternative or in antagonism with the West. Davutoğlu also

provides a restrictive interpretation of the Empire's identity, in which also the multicultural and multi-ethnic elements also vanish (Kıvanç 2015: 24). On the contrary, Davutoğlu denies the existence of a "universal civilisation" as was the 1920s mainstream attitude. He clearly states that the West and the Islamic world have opposite ontological approaches toward politics. However, he fails to define exactly what are these opposite values of the idealised West beside imperialism, consumerism, or immorality (which cannot characterise the entire "West"). These two civilisations are not fated to clash as Huntington (1996) wrote. Nevertheless, for Davutoğlu, the Islamic civilisation is the only one that can resist Western hegemony (Dalacoura 2019: 142).

Nevertheless, it is important to stress that Davutoğlu would not define himself as a "neo-Ottoman" and, when in office, he worked to maintain positive relations with the Western allies. However, as Kıvanç (2015) noticed that, unlike previous intellectuals, Davutoğlu reinterpreted the so-called "Turkish-Islamic Synthesis" and substituted the Turkish element with a new Ottoman identity. This shift has been seen in most Islamist intellectual circles since the 1980s.

Between 2002 and 2009, the professor heavily influenced foreign policy that adopted the motto "zero problem with neighbours" and aimed at erasing the conception that Turkey was constantly under the siege of hostile forces. A psychology that gave origin to the siege syndrome and has forced foreign policy makers toward defensive and suspicious approaches towards neighbouring countries. In Davutoğlu's new policy, Turkey aimed at becoming the centre of new positive relations with the main regional and global actors, and no more the "bridge", as formulated by foreign policy makers in the post-Cold War international order, in need to prove their usefulness to Europe and to advance Turkish agendas for Eurasia and the Middle East (Yanık 2009). In Davutoğlu's new policy, Turkey also aimed at becoming the economic, energetic, and cultural hub that connects different geopolitical areas (Balcı 2021: 298). One of the advantages of this policy would have been the reduction of the importance of the military, which was gaining legitimacy for its *tutelage* (*vesayet*) with the continuous need to protect the country against internal and external enemies. The military was, however, also representing a Kemalist stronghold. Davutoğlu's policy was remarkably successful and increased Turkish soft power, as well as helped in building positive relations with all neighbours. Also, the economy grew thanks to the opening of new markets and an incredibly positive image of the country. Inevitably, Davutoğlu became even more popular and convinced of his ideas, so that when the Arab Spring started, he boldly defined Turkey

as "the owner of the new Middle East" on 27 April 2012.[9] Despite Ahmet Davutoğlu's optimism, the Arab Spring opened the way to a series of national and international crises that forced a sharp change in Turkish foreign policy. On the global stage, authoritarian regimes retook power with the international community's blessing. The civil war in Syria and the failure of the central state in Iraq opened the way to the emergence of ISIS and the strengthening of the Partîya Karkerén Kurdîstan - PKK[10] along Ankara's borders. These terrorist organisations sponsored a wave of attacks in Turkish cities. On the national front, the Gezi Park protests and the Gülen Movement sponsored coup increased the fear of being under threat, and there was a return to a nationalist discourse and to the accent on "popular sovereignty" (*millî irade*), which in the conservative political discourse means a majoritarian democracy. At this point, the emphasis on civilisation and Ottoman heritage declined, whereas the necessity to provide security and the protection of borders returned to dominate foreign policy as it was before the introduction of the "zero problem with neighbours" policy. It is at this stage that Davutoğlu was forced out while the *Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* (Nationalist Action Party, MHP), strongly weakened by internal strife, and the *ulusalcılık* movement (strongly supportive of the Kemalist worldview)[11] started to support the AK Parti government.

İbrahim Kalın

Another interesting intellectual and advisor to President Erdoğan is İbrahim Kalın, now head of the National Intelligence Organisation (*Millî* İstihbarat *Teşkilatı Başkanlığı*, MİT). Kalın was greatly influenced and helped in his career by Davutoğlu but remained close to the President even after his mentor's disgrace. When Turkish foreign policy started to be inward-looking and militarised, in August 2013, Kalın defined the new policy as "precious isolation" (*değerli yalnızlık*).[12] This expression was now foreseeing a foreign policy where Turkey was pursuing its objectives even if it had to do that alone and in opposition with the international powers. This policy was possible because Turkey was no longer a society with little brain and an empty stomach but on the contrary internationally, economically, and culturally powerful. However, this policy provided also a justification for the decline of Turkish influence after 2013.

İbrahim Kalın was born in Istanbul in 1971 and studied history at Istanbul University — one of the key history departments where the rediscovery of the Ottoman past became its central aim. He completed his MA at the International

Islamic University in Malaysia in 1992— in the same years when Davutoğlu was teaching politics there. Then he moved to George Washington University where in 2002 he finished his Ph.D. with a thesis on Mullā Sadrā, the sixteenth-century Persian philosopher and theologian. Between 2005 and 2009, he set up and headed the policy think-tank Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (*Siyaset, Ekonomi ve Toplum Araştırmaları Vakfı*, SETA), which today is strongly pro-AK Parti government and essentially involved in propaganda. In 2009, Kalın became chief advisor to the Prime Minister and since 2014 to the President.

In his early phase, Kalın shared many of the main arguments of Davutoğlu and published in the academic journal and with the publisher linked to BİS-AV. He described with enthusiasm the new ontology of Davutoğlu's policy and defined Turkish foreign policy under AK Parti as the result of "Erdogan's strong political leadership" and the contribution of Davutoğlu, as "the main figure to articulate and execute Turkey's new foreign policy" (Kalın 2013a: 435). He also shared Davutoğlu's critique of earlier foreign policy that focused on building good relations with the Western powers but keeping a minimum engagement with neighbouring countries. This policy was based on Atatürk's understanding of foreign affairs and determined by "Eurocentric thrust of Turkish modernization and its ideological preferences" (Kalın 2013a: 433).

Because it is based on the model of Western modernity, the experience of Turkish modernisation is seen by Turkish conservatism in general and by Kalın as the root of the previous governments' incapability to determine a strong foreign policy. For example, Kalın fully shares the ideas of the protagonist of the celebrated conservative novelist Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar's novel *Huzur* (*A Mind at Peace*, 1948): "[d]espite being the better-dressed nation in the world, we live star naked in the richness of unlimited Asia. Geography, culture, everything expects a new synthesis from us; we are unaware of our mission. We are trying to live an experience of another nation" (Kalın 2013b: 109).

To fulfil the national mission — Kalın (2010) argues — it is necessary to build a new imagination (*muhayyile*) that will be based on self-centred re-examination of Turkish identity and here the intellectual uses the term *ben-tasavvuru* to indicate a self-imagined identity devoid of Western hegemonic ecumene. Kalın's idea is based on Davutoğlu's distinction between identity (*kimlik*) and self-perception (*idrak*) (Davutoğlu 2001a; 2018). The former is a social recognition that needs two parties and might be given or imposed by some authorities. The latter, though, may become an identity, but it is a self-perception.

Kalın's political views are also accompanied by a good dose of romanticism. Besides his institutional roles and academic past, he is a poet and a performer of traditional Anatolian music, which expresses the feelings of a pristine society. Commenting on the verses of the singer and poet of the Turkish folk literature, Aşık Veysel, "[don't complain about your heart's troubles/High mountains are proud of their snow" (*Ey gönül derdinden etme* şikayet/*Yüce dağlar gurur duyar karından*), he gives a political message to it by saying that "if you aspire to be a great mountain, you should acquiesce to a snowy peak."[13] Namely, a country that aspires to be a powerful international player should accept the troubles that that role implies.

Unlike Davutoğlu, Kalın places no emphasis on Turkish-Islamic or *Ottoman*-Islamic synthesis. He is closer to the late nineteenth-century conservative poet Namık Kemal and the early twentieth-century Islamist Mehmed Akif Ersoy and remains a believer in the unity of Islam and, despite his training in Ottoman history, appears to see Ottoman heritage as part of Muslim history. However, he also sees Islam as a clearly distinct civilisation. Contraposed to Islam there is the West, which has emerged also thanks to its contrast with the Muslim world and "Europe's modern history is equally the history of [bad] European-Ottoman relations" (Kalın 2013c: 17). He also argues that civilisation is a wide central concept: civilisation includes worldviews, the concept of existence, cosmology, ethics, social and political order, aesthetics, urban life, culture and other concepts and institutions (Kalın 2010: 4).

Kalın intends the word Islam as a religion based on the faith and way of life based on the Qur'an but also as the culture and history of all societies that have accepted the religion despite their geographical and historical peculiarities. Islam, however, is not a geographical entity because even though it emerged in the Arab peninsula, from there it has expanded worldwide, assuming endless cultural, artistic, architectural, and linguistic forms. The West, instead, is a geographical entity based on the Eurocentric conception of geography and history. The West also indicated the Judeo-Christian religious understanding, even though this religion has its origins in the Middle East and that the Greeks and Romans — who have so much influenced the West — were pagans (Kalın 2013c: 26–27). In the 19th century, the West adopted an even more intolerant understanding of different societies and — thanks to its technological and military advancement, adopted the *mission civilisatrice* to impose all forms of Western civilisation on the world. Today, this vision dominates the West and unfortunately "for Europe or America, which still is willing to see itself as the

only actor at the centre of history and civilisation, it is not easy to develop an image of the other that is peaceful and embracing" (Kalın 2013c: 176).

Consequently, with its new self-conscience, AK Parti has transformed the country into a regional power, an economic powerhouse, and a major diplomatic force in a new post-Cold War world. The country's new geostrategic position was reinforced by "its historical and cultural ties to the mainland of the Ottoman Empire, pushing Turkey to a natural position of regional leadership" (Kalın 2013a: 435). Accordingly, the Balkans and the Middle East are seen as "Turkey's traditional hinterland" (Kalın 2013a: 433).

Conclusion

Kalın does not openly mention what this new self-image of Turkey should be. It is truly clear, though, that he intends the Islamic and Ottoman heritage as a key element of contemporary Turkish identity. His main references are classical Muslim philosophers and al-Fārābī. However, all based their understanding on Platonic political tradition, which is in deep contrast with liberalism and democracy. The Platonic political tradition also denies the possibility of the existence of multiple identities, which, for example, characterised the Ottoman Empire. The conservative authors to whom both Davutoğlu and Kalın refer also have different imaginations of their past. For instance, Tanpınar's protagonist talks about (pre-Islamic) Asia, as Turkish nationalists also look at the Central Asian steppes as an integral part of their identity. Thus, it is very unlikely that Turks may agree on a single imagination that would lead their foreign policy.

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Notes

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