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The role of MENA region within the collective memory of the Ottoman past in Erdoğan´s political discourse after 15 July 2016*

Abstract

Since the early 2000s, when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his political party took power in Turkey, the changes in Turkish foreign policy orientation have been visible. The events of 15 July 2016 affected this orientation profoundly. The focus has shifted towards the Middle East. This process has been also related to the transformation of the Turkish national identity and historiography. Erdoğan´s usage of the Ottoman past, the values of Islam civilisation, and understanding of being Turk have changed the image of how Turks see their position in the world and how Middle Eastern counterparts should perceive them. The main objective of this article is to show how Erdoğan uses the MENA region in his political discourse in the context of nostalgia for the Ottoman past and how these historical and cultural narratives are used to support the image of Turkey as a leading regional power within Turkish national identity. The main argument is that Erdoğan uses the remembrance of the common Ottoman legacy and shared Islamic cultural values at home and within the MENA region both to strengthen the Turkish political position in the future regional order and to build a new understanding of the MENA region as imagined part of Turkish responsibility. Thus, Erdoğan aims to change Turkish national identity and through that even the support for his political vision at home and abroad. The contribution summarises the main ideas Erdoğan has put into his rhetoric to broaden the memory of the Ottoman past among the public in the aftermath of the coup attempt.

Keywords

Turkey, Political Discourse, Ottoman Past, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkish Politics

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the 21st century, when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) took power in Turkey, the changes in Turkish foreign and domestic policy have been evident.[1] These changes gained momentum after the attempted coup in 2016 and the subsequent cooling of relations with the West, alongside a warming of relations with Russia, due to a number of long-term regional conflicts, such as Syria, Libya, and the Caucasus. Turkey visibly departed from its policy of non-involvement and gradually became an active and important player in the region. The country began to demonstrate its willingness to mediate regional conflicts, speak on behalf of Muslims on the international stage,[2] and boldly criticise and oppose western activities in the MENA region. This Turkish policy has also influenced the perception of Turkey in MENA. Across the MENA region, opinions are increasingly favourable and diverse. Despite a decline in support for Turkey over the years, Arab citizens view Turkey as less of a threat than the United States, Russia, and France, according to the Arab Opinion Survey of 2022. An overwhelming majority of young Arabs named Turkey as an ally (Adar 2024: 5). Since Turkish policy under Erdoğan is highly populist and nationalist, the support and acceptance of these political decisions by Turkish society are also highly desirable (Türk 2018; Sawae 2020). Therefore, changes in Turkey's self-consciousness as a strong and superpower nation, as well as its understanding of its historical position in the region, needed to be achieved. One of the ways this has been done is through a systematic transformation of Turkish collective memory and sentiments regarding the Ottoman past, which is both an object of nostalgia and a stepping stone to the future of Turkey, including the foreign policy vision of "The Century of Türkiye" (Ataman 2023). Similarly, the positive image of Turkey in MENA is, alongside the real foreign policy, influenced by Erdoğan's rhetoric during his visits to MENA countries.

Scholars since Halbwachs (1980) have distinguished between history and memory as opposing ways of recalling the past. While history tends towards accuracy and objectivity, aiming to present the only "true" description of past events, the study of memory allows for different interpretations and interrelationships between the past, present, and future. Martin and Wodak (2003: 10) argue that "history always relates to the present and the future. We cannot understand the present and the future without making references to certain pasts". Memory-making is not merely about rewriting history textbooks, but, even more so, a powerful political tool to strengthen or weaken political power

relations. Since this paper considers history from a discursive perspective, the latter is the topic of interest. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, there is a growing consensus among scholars that collective memories are no longer focused solely on the nation but are starting to become transnational. Political leaders play an important role in this process through their political discourse, aimed both at their homeland audience and abroad (Adams and Baden 2021: 311). Thus, historical narratives in political discourse can affect both the self-understanding of the nation and the perception of this nation abroad.

For a long time, collective memory has been mainly investigated from the perspectives of sociology or cultural studies. Even today, this phenomenon is still not the main focus of political science, despite the growing attention from world leaders and institutions regarding the effect of collective memory on domestic and international politics. Historical events have become part of political campaigns and discourses of many political leaders, particularly with the rise of right-wing or nationalist populism, which is closely connected with nationalism and identity issues (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; Anastasiou 2019; Brubaker 2020). Over the last decade, scholars have started to investigate the relationship between collective memory and political affairs in greater depth. The influence of collective memory on international relations (Langenbacher and Shain 2010; Bachleitner 2021) and its relation to nationalism (Cinar 2015; Gugushvili, Kabachnik and Kirvalidze 2017) has received attention, but the use of collective memory in political discourse concerning domestic affairs and nationhood has not yet received the systematic and in-depth attention it deserves. It is important to recognise that interpretations of the past are as crucial for the study of nationhood as history itself and merit our attention. The literature dealing with Erdoğan's policy primarily focuses on Erdoğan's personality as a political leader (Kutlu 2016; Çağaptay 2017; Akdoğan 2018), his foreign policy (Saraçoğlu and Demirkol 2015; Christofis 2019), and the politics of Islamism (Heper 2013; Axiarlis 2014; Yilmaz et al. 2017). However, the analysis of his political discourse and its impact on collective memory and national identity in the context of the MENA region has only recently started to attract scholarly attention (Erdogan 2017; Dinçer 2023).

The presented survey is based on a political discourse analysis of Erdoğan's speeches during the period between July 2016 and July 2020, i.e. the fourth anniversary of the coup attempt.[3] Four years is period long enough to show the main patterns of the political discourse affected by the events of 15 July

2016 (henceforth, 15 July). The main question of this article is: how Recep Tayyip Erdoğan aims to use the nostalgia for the Ottoman past in his political discourse to support the change of Turkish national identity and perceptions of the Turkish position in the MENA region? This essay presents how Erdoğan defines the MENA region in his political discourse in the context of Ottoman nostalgia and how he uses these historical and cultural narratives to support the image of Turkey as a leading regional power among Turkish citizens as well as in MENA countries. I suggest that the political discourse of President Erdoğan is implicitly but effectively able to transform the collective identity of the Turkish nation through collective imaginaries of the Turkish past and that this collective memory can influence political preferences and the acceptance of political decisions in the future. Erdoğan's historical narrative not only re-writes the official line of Turkish history, but also creates the image of today's domestic and foreign politics of Turkey.

The data that are subject to analysis consist of more than 400 public speeches delivered by Erdoğan between July 2016 and July 2020, officially published in written form on the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey's website.[4] These speeches were chosen as we may consider them as part of the public political discourse of the president and through that as a tool for political action aiming to change the social reality (van Dijk 1997: 21). The study focuses solely on the discourses of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan due to the widespread view that Erdoğan has been the most dominant authority of the ruling AKP and also the most powerful political leader of the country (Görener and Ucal 2011; Aydın-Düzgit 2016). To analyse the official political discourse, this study utilizes critical discourse analysis (CDA) with a special focus on political discourse analysis and discourse analysis of history (van Dijk 1997; Wodak 1989). Following these scholars, I understand the concept of discourse as a socially constructed practice which assumes that discursive acts are embedded in situations, institutions and social structures (Wodak et al. 2009: 8). As Wodak and Martin (2003: 8) suggest, "discourse in the service of power is ever relevant when dealing with 'history' […]. The history of nations, of people, of groups is not a given fact but is constantly discursively constructed anew, in schoolbooks, in the media, by politicians in their commemorative speeches at important events, by administrators, and by laypeople relating their own life-stories".

Collective Memory of the Ottoman Past in Turkish Historiography

Before analysing Erdoğan's political discourse related to the Ottoman past, a brief historical overview of the position of the Ottoman past in Turkish historiography is necessary for a better understanding of the role of the Ottoman narrative in today's Turkey. After the foundation of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk initiated a history-writing project as part of the westernisation and modernisation efforts aimed at the new Turkish Republic (Ersanlı 2002). One of the tasks of the new regime was to erase the Ottoman legacy and reinforce the position of the new Turkey within the modern postwar world. The official approach was patriotic, emphasising nationhood and republican ideals. The entire history of the Turks was described as a continuous path towards the modern nation, with the Turks portrayed as the bringers of civilisation, who first contributed to the development of Central Asia and later to that of Asia Minor. A key goal was to build the image of a unified nation-state composed of Turks and a unified Anatolia. Therefore, the official Turkish historiography of Kemalism emphasised the historical willingness of the Turks to accept non-Turks into the nation and political body. Minorities were seen as elements in the continuous historical process of the formation of a Turkish nation, from antiquity to modern times (Cinar 2015: 17). Similarly, Ottoman rule was understood as a tool for the unification of beyliks into Turkish lands, thus seen only as a piece of the puzzle leading to the Republic of Turkey (Cinar 2015: 27).

Since the Republic of Turkey was founded as a triumph against two enemies — the Allied occupants and the Ottoman Sultanate — the Ottoman past aimed to be mostly neglected in national history, the Ottoman culture and literature were repressed, and the Ottoman Empire became the *Other* for Kemalist Turkish state. Therefore, the official history of modern Turkey began with the War of Independence in 1919 and everything before this time was a different, non-Turkish and archaic historical realm (Çolak 2006: 591). The Ottoman heritage started to be an almost forgotten part of Turkish culture and national identity. History has been an important part of the social transformation of the modern Turkish state and has been under strong state control, which has been under Kemalist hegemony for most of the 20th century.[5] Furthermore, the existence of the only official state history reproduced in textbooks and public space causes people who were brought up solely with this historical narrative to tend to adopt it into their consciousness and memory. It should be noted,

however, that the historiography of the Ottoman past existed outside the official line even throughout the single-party rule. Recent studies show that beside the state-constructed official historical thesis the alternative historiography lines emerged. Although these alternative interpretations deal with Ottoman history in more profound way, they still explain the Ottoman achievements in accordance with the official line of Turkish greatness. They used the positives of the glorious Empire and emphasised the negatives of the late period of decline for the development of Turkishness and Kemalist ideals. The successes and achievements of the Empire were understood as "Turkish" and by contrast the defeats and problems of the Empire were explained as Ottoman (Danforth 2014; Sönmez 2021).

The first steps of change were made with the beginning of multipartyism in Turkey in the 1950s. Democrat Party (DP) put back the significance of local traditions and gave a larger place for the Ottoman past in textbooks. The Ottoman past was no longer limited to political point of view and the social and cultural dimension started to be developed. However, more significant changes that have become evident even in complex political vision began during Turgut Özal's era after 1980.[6] He began to use the Ottoman legacy to invoke the collective cultural memory of the shared past; and propagate the concept of Turkish-Islamic synthesis as a tool for returning the religion into the public without threatening the principles of Kemalism. This form of neo-Ottomanism was under control of Kemalist establishment and was used for their political goals. As Çolak (2006: 592) mentions, "[H]istory textbooks preached the goodness of the Turks' Ottoman past, making all history part of Turkish collective memory, but on the basis of Kemalist legitimacy". The aim of returning both the Ottoman past and Islam to public and political life was to soften the polarisation of Turkish society. Özal began to use the Ottoman past to reevoke cultural diversity in Turkish society and policy. This renewed collective memory was subsequently used to change Turkish foreign policy toward post-Ottoman territories, namely the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Middle East. Parallel to this change in foreign policy, space opened up for a cultural identity other than Turkish. With all these transformations, the understanding of the MENA region also began to change.

The economic and political crisis of the 1990s brought the popularity of the Ottoman Empire back into the public eye, e.g. through memoires and historical novels, "Ottoman" cuisine, or shops with ancient souvenirs (Özyürek 2007: 2). Contrary, after the death of Özal in 1993, the political emphasis on the Otto-

man past and culture decreased until Erdoğan took and consolidated power in the 21st century also by way of using the emerging Ottoman nostalgia in society for his political visions. Erdoğan's policy has followed the course of Özal with an elaborated connection of the Ottoman and Islamist narrative as the element of his formulation of political identity in opposition to the Kemalist Republican People Party (Özyürek 2007a: 121). Contrary to Özal's conception, Erdoğan began to formulate a new Turkish identity and policy in the context of Ottoman and Islamic heritage as part of a large revision of the principles of Kemalism. The collective identity was based on shared values of the region and religion which resulted in gradual change of self-understanding of Turks as well as the new view on Turkish foreign policy towards post-Ottoman territories. The image of the Ottoman Empire started to be both the symbol of Turkish national power, and modern symbol of religious and cultural tolerance (Danforth 2014: 674). The symbols Turkey wants to embody in the world. I suggest that the success of this Erdoğan's political vision has led to the gradual incorporation of it into the collective identity of the Turkish nation, even more after the 15 July coup attempt. Thus, contemporary Islamically-rooted Ottoman nostalgia and related image of the MENA region have predominated within Turkish society. The discursive narratives of the Ottoman heritage, which Erdoğan uses in his rhetoric in the above-mentioned socio-political context, are the subject of the following parts of this article.

Ottoman Empire in Erdogan's Political Discourse in the Aftermath of 15 July

As mentioned above, Erdoğan put Islam and the Ottoman past in his political discourse substantially. As a follow-up to events of 15 July, the themes of Islam values and glorious past became a very popular topic of Erdoğan's speeches. All the heroes who fell victim to the coup are designated as martyrs in accordance with Islamic tradition. Those who were wounded during the coup, but survived, then have the title of *gazi*, which is associated with the designation of fighter for the faith in Islamic tradition. In addition to the citizens who took to the streets, Erdogan also praises all those who prayed at home for the end of the coup, which in his view also contributed to the success of the Turkish nation. During the analysed period, 15 July also becomes a crucial milestone in Turkish history, the beginning of a new era in which nothing will remain the same in Turkey. When Erdogan talks about 15 July, he repeatedly claims

that Turks have written a new "heroic epic" [*kahramanlık destanı/kahramanlık hikâyesi*], or that the name of every defender of democracy is written in Turkish history in "golden letters" [*altın harflerle*].[7] With these phrases, Erdogan connects the heroism of today's Turks with the heroes of Turkey's past, and at the same time tries to create the idea that the legacy of 15 July, like other historical milestones, will be handed down to future generations.

15 July has been constructed as a new "national myth" associated with victorious periods of Turkish history. The 15 July is mostly associated with the battle of Çanakkale (Gallipoli) of 1915, one of the last successes of the Ottoman Empire in the World War I. To a lesser extent, 15 July is commemorated in the context of the Battle of Mantzikert of 1071, where Erdogan emphasises the courage of the Turkish nation, which then helped to turn Anatolia into a Turkish homeland and now, according to him, helped defend this homeland. The motive of historical victories promotes in society the idea that the Turks will win every battle and overcome every crisis today just as they did in the past. And Erdogan cites the 15 July as the first proof of these modern victories and as the first step on the way to a better future. These intentions in political rhetoric can be noticed in real steps with the aim to interconnect the commemoration of 15 July with the above-mentioned vision of the glorious history of the Turks. As an example, we should mention the 15 July Museum of Democracy [*15 Temmuz Demokrasi Müzesi*], which was open in 2021, next to the Presidential Palace in Ankara. This museum connects the description of 15 July's story not only with the wider history of Turkish coups but in connection with the exposition of the greatest achievements of Turkish history, starting with the Seljuk tombstones of Ahlat. The highlight of the museum is the glass dome under which a twenty-three-meter-high artificial plane tree is "planted", whose roots symbolise the past of Turkey and the branches the bright future of the country as well as referring to the famous Osman's dream — the mythical vision of the Ottoman Empire's glory. This museum seeks to present Turkey's current developments in the context of the whole of Turkish history, thereby strengthening long-term efforts to transform the collective perception of the nation's past.

The 15 July theme also appears in speeches to foreign audiences, especially to MENA countries. The main line is gratitude for the support of Turkey and prayers for the Turkish nation from Muslims around the world, especially in the countries of MENA. For Erdogan, 15 July is "a demonstration of exams the Islamic world must face", proving the importance of Muslim unity and

brotherhood. Erdogan tries to outwardly present 15 July not only as the Turks' fight for their homeland, but as a Turks' fight for the rights of all, for the future and independence of the "oppressed", thereby consolidating the image of Turks and Turkey as the successor of Ottoman heritage in the region. The second topic, which is discussed in both speeches for domestic and foreign audience, is criticism of the West for its double standard in its attitude towards terrorism in Europe and the Middle East, an attitude that resonates strongly in the MENA countries. Erdogan positively refers to the support of regional politicians who visited Turkey after the coup and expressed their support for the Turkish government. He mentions, for example, Qatar or Saudi Arabia, i.e. countries with which Turkish economic or military cooperation has grown significantly in the last decade. These comments in political rhetoric can positively impact not only the image of Turkey in MENA countries, but also the understanding of the Turkish regional belonging among Turks. Thus, 15 July complements the rhetoric that Erdogan uses in his Ottoman-Islamic political vision, attempted to portray the West as enduring imperialists who refuse to treat the countries of the Middle East and Africa as equals. The aim is to strengthen Turkey's ties to the Middle East region and the Islamic world.

The Ottoman Past in front of the Turkish Audience

During the period under review, the 15 July also became a tool for mobilisation of the nation toward the implementation of Erdogan's political goals. The most visible example is of Erdoğan's political vision "Turkey 2023-2053-2071" and the continuous achievement of the goals of great Turkey in the 21st century.[8] He tries to invoke the image that there is no power able to stop Turkey on its way to an envisioned bright future promised by the government; and that the Turkish future is based on all of the main historical periods: 2023 represents the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923; 2053 refers to 1453 conquest of Constantinople and the Ottoman period; and 2071 means the 1000th anniversary of 1071 Battle of Manzikert, when pre-Ottoman Turks entered Anatolia. He also puts emphasis on the continuation of the Turkish states. Erdoğan frequently emphasises that Turkey has had a 2200 years long state tradition and criticises Kemalist historiography for neglecting the Ottoman period in accordance with the traditional anti-Kemalist view on Turkish historiography. He reminds the nation that today's Turkish Republic is not the first Turkish state as could be understood from Kemalist history textbooks, but the very last one; and aims to restore the collective image of the

Ottoman Empire as the biggest state founded by the Turks whose real borders did not exist anymore, but still rests in the hearts of Turkish people around the world. This imagination gives space to the transformation of collective identity, reframing the position of Turkey in the future world as a superpower, and putting the MENA region back into Turkish national imaginaries. Furthermore, it helps to strengthen the positive attitude towards Turkish foreign activities in the MENA region since MENA has been restored as an integral element of the imagined historical commitment of Turkey.

The relation between Turkey and MENA region as part of the Ottoman Empire is also reflected in the question Erdoğan asks domestic audience: "Do you know how we get to 780 000 square metres"? He presents the question together with the answer: "We get there from almost 20 million square metres".[9] This information aims to strengthen the image of Turkish greatness, as well as support the sense of obligation to protect the Ottoman heritage and to care for the former Ottoman territories, such as the MENA region. Although this question can be understood as the aim to revise Turkish borders, in the broader context we should see more of the aim to strengthen Turkish self-confidence and superpower national consciousness among Turkish citizens. That is because Erdoğan stresses the fact that there is no importance in what the physical borders of today's Turkey are, more important are the "borders of the heart" [*gönül coğrafyası*]. These proclamations concentrate on the fact that the Turkish nation should change its negative and inferior feelings about the Ottoman past based on the Kemalist interpretation for a long time; and focus on the civilisational and cultural heritage of the Ottoman Empire with a superpower basis.

At the same time, he tries to point out the fact that the historical loss of territory for Turkey does not mean a loss of interest in the fate of the inhabitants, and although Turkey has its homeland within its current borders, the boundaries of the sense of belonging and receptivity can touch a wider area, at least the MENA region. This point of view is used to spread the interpretation of the Turkish understanding of regional foreign policy. Erdoğan uses these phrases to stimulate the feeling of responsibility for the former Ottoman territories and the people who live there and with whom Turks have had deep-rooted relations. He talks about the people of the territories as "brothers and sisters that Turkey has to protect" and emphasises that Turkey cannot turn its back on them.[10] Even the mentality of humanism and a willingness to help Erdoğan puts into the Ottoman past's perspective. The Ottoman Empire is remembered as "the

shelter of the world" in his speeches. He supports this claim for example by the inscription at the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul *"ya vâliye külli mazlumin"* (The shelter for all the oppressed).[11] Today's conflicts and problems in the MENA region are, from Erdoğan's perspective, part of the "ancestors' legacy" and Turkey's active participation is required to address these issues.

This topic is significantly related to the interpretation and defence of Turkish actions, especially in foreign policy. In his speeches, Erdogan especially connects helping the needy in Turkey with the organization TIKA, which, from Erdogan's point of view, continues the legacy of the ancestors, who emphasised the establishment of foundations and helping people in need in accordance with Islamic and Ottoman tradition.[12] It is the phrase "ancestral heritage" [*ecdadın mirası*] that is central to all speeches on the domestic scene, in which Turkey's active involvement in the solution of events in the Middle East is addressed, especially in the issue of Iraq, Syria and Libya. The second topic where this connection is used on the domestic scene is Turkish aid to Syrian refugees who fled to Turkey. Erdoğan also emphasises that Turks have been the nation who, contrary to other nations, conquer to flourish, not to destroy the territories.[13] For Erdoğan, the key example of this approach is the conquest of Constantinople which was not destroyed by Ottomans but rebuilt to the beauty of today. Erdoğan also emphasises that the basis of Turkish conquest is the "conquest of hearths" [*gönüllerin fethi*] which is important even today for a long-lasting and strong relationship with the people of the former Ottoman territories.[14]

As I mentioned above, Erdoğan strongly emphasises centuries-long state tradition which is related to the experience and ability to establish and preserve the safety and peace not only in Turkey but also in the whole region with Turkish/Ottoman historical legacy.[15] Concerning state tradition, it is also worth mentioning the comparison of Turkey to the life of a tree in Erdoğan's rhetoric. He uses terms such as "the seeds planted in Anatolia" from which "young sprout grew up to the huge plane tree" of the Ottoman Empire.[16] The Turkish republic is presented as "a fresh tree that rejuvenated the old Ottoman plane tree".[17] In the same way, Erdoğan tries to promote knowledge of Turkish history and cultural heritage through notions such as "keep and protect the roots", the people who do not know their history are described as "the dry leaves that will be dispersed by wind in all directions" or "the tree whose roots are dead".[18] This narrative of Turkey as a big plane tree aims to renew the understanding of the Ottoman mythology in which the state is rooted in Anatolia but connected to a broad territory around (Balkan, Middle East, Northern

Africa) through its branches. This narrative is based on the above-mentioned mythical dream of Osman Gazi, the founder of the Ottoman Empire, in which he dreamed of the plane tree that arose from his belly and its branches covered three continents, just as the Ottoman Empire governed three continents during the centuries. Through this lens of Ottoman nostalgia, Erdoğan tries to rebuild the definition of the MENA region for the Turkish audience and consolidate the acceptance of Turkish regional-power ambitions as part of a new national identity.

The Rhetoric of the Ottoman Past Towards the MENA Region

In Erdoğan's speeches addressed to the foreign audience, mostly in the Middle East states, we can identify several topics related to historical narrative. The most visible is the emphasis on the shared historical past. In speeches to the Islamic world, such as at the meetings of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the Eurasian Islamic Council, or at the conference on a peace vision for the Middle East held in Bahrain Erdoğan frequently uses phrases such as "the territory in which we live together in the brotherhood for a thousand years".[19] However, the meaning of this connection varies depending on the context in which is used. Sometimes it means the region of the MENA, sometimes together with the Balkans, or the region of the entire Black Sea and Central Asia. Nevertheless, the key point here remains common, namely the connection of a shared past with a common vision for the future. Erdoğan also appeals to other Islamic countries in the region for their interest in the events in countries such as Syria, Iraq or Libya; and calls for solidarity and willingness to help based on the feeling of brotherhood of all Muslims and people who live in the same region because, as he says, "our geography is our common destiny".[20] As we can see, the narrative of unity and humanism rooted in the Ottoman past is similarly used for audiences at home and in the MENA region. This suggests the purpose to build a common regional identity with a leading role of Turkey and gain support for Turkish foreign political intentions among the MENA states.

The second important topic is the defence of Turkish efforts to be the mediator between West and East through the historical narrative. Erdoğan in this context says that Turkey, as the successor of the Ottoman Empire, is also the heir of the Ottoman experiences in diplomacy. He lays stress, similarly to the

narrative at home, on the fact that Turkey is not a nomadic state [*çadır devleti*] but an entity with one of the longest uninterrupted state traditions in the world. These proclamations aim to strengthen the awareness of Turkey as the successor of the superpower empire not only within the Turkish nation but also on the international scene. In addition, Erdoğan tries to present Turkey as "a big brother" from whom other countries should inspire in the field of state management. Erdoğan presents the same image of Turkey in his speeches towards the Islamic world since he presents Turkey as the country with thousand years long state tradition; moreover, with the Ottoman legacy of leading the Islamic world. Thus, as a country that is the best potential leader of the Islamic world on the international scene and as the best mediator that understands Western as well as Eastern positions and problems.

The third important topic for the international audience is the Turkish responsibility for peace, stability, and solidarity in the MENA region and, through peace in the region, for peace in the whole world. In this regard, the Israel-Palestinian conflict became the key issue. Erdoğan frequently divided the history of this place into two periods: first under the rule of Turks and the Ottoman Empire as the period of peace and toleration; and second under the influence of the West as the period of conflicts and oppression. He emphasises that Jerusalem lived for 400 years in peace under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. Through this narrative, Erdoğan aims to support Turkish efforts to get involved in conflict resolution as one of the most important milestones in regional peace and stability. The Turkish feeling of historical responsibility for peace and humanism is also related to the question of tolerance and migration. Erdoğan shows Turkey as the "safe harbour for refugees" and reminds the audience that many Christians and Jews fled to the Ottoman Empire before the persecution in Europe and that the Ottoman Empire was a symbol of religious and ethnic freedoms and toleration.[21] This kind of narrative related to the nostalgia for the Ottoman past endeavours not only to reinforce the legitimacy of Turkish political ambitions in the region, but also to spread the acceptance of the Turkish definition of the MENA region and its connection with Turkey among the MENA states and communities.

The last motive related to the image of MENA in Erdogan foreign political discourse is the revision of orientalist view on themselves. This Orientalist approach is emphasised by Erdogan mainly because of the western attitude towards solving the refugee crisis. In addition to criticising the West itself, Erdogan also emphasizes the need for MENA countries to deal with the Orientalist

view of their own history, and thus build a better future by "liberating themselves from the shackles" that now prevent the solution of regional problems. Erdogan shows that the region should not look at its past through the prism of complexes but should begin to see its history as an example of strength and courage. He also associates the continuing orientalist view with terms such as "white man's view" or "arrogance […] based on white supremacy".[22] According to Erdogan, this view of MENA persists and needs to be dealt with by coming to terms with the colonial past. At the same time, Erdogan reminds here that the Middle East was a centre of civilisation, science and knowledge, and the wars brought to the region by western powers have turned these centres in Syria or Iraq into ruins and places of pain. On the one hand, this rhetoric is directed against the western world, but on the other hand, Erdogan does not expect a real solution to the problems with the participation of western states. On the contrary, all this criticism of the West in his speeches is aimed at the representatives of the countries of the Middle East and Africa. And in this direction, Turkey wants to be a supportive partner that does not have an imperialist or colonial mentality, and at the same time has strong historical and cultural ties with the countries of the region.

Criticism of the West is thus firmly connected with the call for the MENA region to free itself from western subjugation, to replace the mutual conflicts brought into the region and still supported by western interests and power rivalry with cooperation based on a thousand-year common history in these latitudes, and to solve the current problems of the region by its own efforts. It is evident that Erdogan uses the Ottoman narrative towards the MENA region with the double aim to strengthen Turkish position in the region and, on the contrary, to weaken the West and challenge the self-understanding of the MENA countries within the post-Ottoman realm.

Conclusions

The findings of this research suggest that Erdoğan's political discourse in the aftermath of July 15 seeks to reinforce the national superpower identity founded on the sentiment of the glorious Ottoman past. The main narratives of national history related to nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire involve the thousand-year success story of the Turks and the brotherhood with the peoples of the former "Turkish" lands (Balkans, North Africa, Near East or Central Asia) as well as and the thousand-year state tradition with problem-solving experiences in the West and Middle East. The MENA territories are presen-

ted as Turkey's "core region" toward which Turks have a responsibility and in which they must assure peace and stability and help people in need, as when "an elder brother" takes care of his smaller and weaker brothers. From this perspective, Erdoğan builds a new national identity on the foundation of nostalgia for the glorious Ottoman past with the goal of strengthening the potential position of Turkey as the only possible leading power in the region. This narrative is used at home to find support for contemporary Turkish policy and to reinforce Turkish national self-confidence; on the international scene it is used to encourage other regional and even Western countries to cooperate with Turkey on conflict resolutions and to perceive Turkey as the leader of the region. Since the events of 15 July complicated the relations with West, the MENA region is presented as a key domain of foreign policy and a partner for a new glorious future not only for Turkey but the whole region. Erdogan's rhetoric toward MENA countries seeks to show Turkey as the best partner because of its shared history and values, and the West as something to get rid of because of a different worldview. Interpreting historical events through this kind of "political memory" is tendentious and creates a kind of myth that should continue in the individual and collective memory of Turkish society even after the end of Erdoğan's political career. The last election in Turkey and today's course of Turkish foreign policy towards the MENA region confirm the relevance of this political discourse for the Turkish society as well as for the regional political leaders.

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Notes

1 - The English translation of the party's name is Justice and Development Party (JDP). Since this analysis is based on Turkish texts, the original name and its acronym were preferred.

2 - For example, Erdoğan's speeches at the conferences of The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), at the meetings of the UN, or the summits of NATO.

3 - The findings of this research are part of the author's dissertation project focusing on Erdoğan's discursive practice related to collective memory and nationalism in Turkey and have not been published yet.

4 - All the speeches are accessible at www.tccb.gov.tr/receptayyipErdoğan/konusmalar/ (last accessed 6 April 2025)

5 - In 1930 even the Committee for the Study of Turkish History was founded. This

institution was under the control of the state and governmental Republican People's Party/ *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* (CHP) and aimed to investigate the official history of the Turkish nation, produce textbooks of History for students, and propagate this historical narrative to the population. This Committee developed the famous Turkish History Thesis which was the cornerstone of the official national history of Turkey.

6 - Turgut Özal (1927–1993) was the Turkish prime minister between 1983 and 1989 and then President of Turkey between 1989 and 1993, and a political leader of the 1980s era. He played a major role in increasing liberalisation of the Turkish economy and propagated Turkish-Islamic synthesis.

7 - See e.g. Erdoğan, R. T., *Bakanlar Kurulu Toplantısı Sonrasında Yaptıkları Basın Açıklaması*, 20 July 2016,

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www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/51194/2016-2017-adli-yil-acilis-toreninde-yaptiklari-konusma (last accessed 4 April 2025); Erdoğan, R. T., *15 Temmuz Şehit Yakınları ve Gazileri ile Yemek Programında Yaptıkları Konuşma*, 15 July 2018,

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8 - Turkish reform political vision for years 2023, 2053 and 2071 with reform goals in every socio-political area of Turkey. It was released by Erdoğan during 2010 and 2011 and it has been continuously updated until today.

9 - See e.g. Erdoğan R.T., *28. Muhtarlar Toplantısında Yaptıkları Konuşma*, 19 October 2016, www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/55704/28-muhtarlar-toplantisinda-yaptiklari-konusma (last accessed 30 April 2022); Erdoğan R.T., *"Türkiye'nin Yeni Güvenlik Konsepti" Konferansında Yaptıkları Konuşma*, 22 November 2016,

www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/61114/turkiyenin-yeni-guvenlik-konsepti-konferansinda-yaptiklari-konusma (last accessed 4 April 2025); Erdoğan R.T., *AK Parti Grup Toplantısında Yaptıkları Konuşma*, 6 February 2018,

www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/89335/ak-parti-grup-toplantisinda-yaptiklari-konusma (last accessed 4 April 2025).

10 - See e.g. Erdoğan R.T., 29. *Muhtarlar Toplantısında Yaptıkları Konuşma*, 26 October 2016, www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/55757/29-muhtarlar-toplantisinda-yaptiklari-konusma (last accessed 4 April 2025); Erdoğan R.T., 35. *Muhtarlar Toplantısında Yaptıkları Konuşma*, 19 January 2017, www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/71110/35-muhtarlar-toplantisinda-yaptiklari-konusma (last accessed 4 April 2025); Erdoğan R.T., *44. Muhtarlar Toplantısında Yaptıkları Konuşma*, 24 January 2018, www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/89317/44-muhtarlar-toplantisinda-yaptiklari-konusma (last accessed 4 April 2025); Erdoğan R.T., *İstanbul Süryani*

Kadim Vakfı Mor Efrem Süryani Kadim Ortodoks Kilisesi Temel Atma Töreninde Yaptıkları Konuşma, 3 August 2019, www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/107206/istanbul-suryani-kadim-vakfi-mor-efrem-suryani-kadim-ortodoks-kilisesi-temel-atma-toreninde-yaptiklari-konusma- (last accessed 4 April 2025); Erdoğan R.T., *Ak Parti Grup Toplantısı'nda Yaptıkları Konuşma*, 14 January 2020, www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/115288/ak-parti-grup-toplantisi-nda-yaptiklari-konusma (last accessed 4 April 2025).

11 - See e.g. Erdoğan R.T., *TİKA Koordinatörlerini Kabulünde Yaptıkları Konuşma*, 10 April 2018, www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/92347/tika-koordinatorlerini-kabulunde-yaptiklari-konusma (last accessed 4 April 2025); Erdoğan R.T., *AK Parti Grup Toplantısında Yaptıkları Konuşma*, 30 October 2019, www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/112501/ak-parti-grup-toplantisinda-yaptiklari-konusma (last accessed 4 April 2025).

12 - The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı*) is an organization providing foreign aid and projects in developing parts of the world; it is managed by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Turkey. In addition to development projects, TIKA also works on the restoration of Turkish cultural heritage in the countries where it helps.

13 - See e.g. Erdoğan R.T., *İzmir Ticaret Odası Özel Meclis Toplantısında Yaptıkları Konuşma*, 28 April 2018,

www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/92689/izmir-ticaret-odasi-ozel-meclis-toplantisinda-yaptiklari-konusma (last accessed 4 April 2025); Erdoğan R.T., *Anadolu'nun Fethi Malazgirt 1071 Töreninde Yaptıkları Konuşma*, 26 August 2018, www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/96277/anadolu-nun-fethi-malazgirt-1071-toreninde-yaptiklari-konusma- (last accessed 4 April 2025); Erdoğan R.T., *Malazgirt Zaferi'nin 948. Yıldönümü Kutlama Programında Yaptıkları Konuşma*, 26 August 2019,

www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/109350/malazgirt-zaferi-nin-948-yildonumu-kutlama-programinda-yaptiklari-konusma- (last accessed 4 April 2025).

14 - See e.g. Erdoğan R.T., *31. Muhtarlar Toplantısında Yaptıkları Konuşma*, 7 December 2016, www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/65283/31-muhtarlar-toplantisinda-yaptiklari-konusma (last accessed 4 April 2025); Erdoğan R.T., *Anadolu'nun Fethi Malazgirt 1071 Töreninde Yaptıkları Konuşma*, 26 August 2018, www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/96277/anadolu-nun-fethi-malazgirt-1071-toreninde-yaptiklari-konusma- (last accessed 4 April 2025); Erdoğan R.T., *30 Ağustos Resepsiyonu'nda Yaptıkları Konuşma*, 30 August 2019, www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/109465/30-agustos-resepsiyonu-nda-yaptiklari-konusma (last accessed 4 April 2025).

15 - See e.g. Erdoğan R.T., *10 Kasım Gazi Mustafa Kemal'i Anma Töreninde Yaptıkları Konuşma*, 10 November 2016, www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/61155/10-kasim-gazi-mustafa-kemali-anma-toreninde-yaptiklari-konusma (last accessed 4 April 2025); Erdoğan R.T., *AK Parti Grup Toplantısında Yaptıkları Konuşma*, 24 April 2018,

www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/92474/ak-parti-grup-toplantisinda-yaptiklari-konusma (last accessed 4 April 2025); Erdoğan R.T., *29 Ekim Cumhuriyet Bayramı Kabul Töreni'nde Yaptığı Konuşma*, 29 October 2019, www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/112354/29-ekim-cumhuriyet-bayrami-kabul-toreni-nde-yaptigi-konusma (last accessed 4 April 2025).

16 - See e.g. Erdoğan R.T., *AK Parti Genel Merkezinde Yaptıkları Balkon Konuşması*, 24

June 2018, www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/94716/ak-parti-genel-merkezinde-yaptiklari-balkon-konusmasi (last accessed 4 April 2025); Erdoğan R.T., *Gaziler Günü Töreninde Yaptıkları Konuşma*, 19 September 2018, www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/98641/gaziler-gunu-toreninde-yaptiklari-konusma- (last accessed 4 April 2025); Erdoğan R.T., *Harp Okulları Diploma ve Sancak Devir Teslim Töreninde Yaptıkları Konuşma*, 31 August 2019,

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17 - See e.g. Erdoğan, R. T., *İstanbul'da Yapımı Tamamlanan 80 Okul ve 59 Okul Spor Salonunun Toplu Açılış Töreninde Yaptıkları Konuşma*, 2 April 2018, www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/92197/istanbul-da-yapimi-tamamlanan-80-okul-ve-59-okul-spor-salonunun-toplu-acilis-toreninde-yaptiklari-konusma (last accessed 4 April 2025); Erdoğan, R. T., *Atatürk'ü Anma Programında Yaptıkları Konuşma*, 10 November 2018, www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/99718/ataturk-u-anma-programinda-yaptiklari-konusma (last accessed 4 April 2025); Erdoğan, R. T., *TBMM 27. Dönem 3. Yasama Yılı Açış Konuşması*, 1 October 2019, www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/110910/tbmm-27-donem-3-yasama-yili-acis-konusmasi (last accessed 4 April 2025).

18 - See e.g. Erdoğan, R. T., *35. Muhtarlar Toplantısında Yaptıkları Konuşma,* 19 January 2017, www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/71110/35-muhtarlar-toplantisinda-yaptiklari-konusma (last accessed 4 April 2025); Erdoğan, R. T., *'Vefatının 100. Yılında Sultan Abdülhamid'i Anlamak' Konulu Konferansta Yaptıkları Konuşma,* 10 February 2018,

www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/90385/vefatinin-100-yilinda-sultan-abdulhamidi-anlamak-konulu-konferansta-yaptiklari-konusma (last accessed 4 April 2025); Erdoğan, R. T., *Atatürk Havalimanı'nda Halka Hitapları,* 15 July 2019,

www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/107087/ataturk-havalimani-nda-halka-hitaplari (last accessed 4 April 2025).

19 - See e.g. Erdoğan R.T., *Atatürk'ü Anma Töreninde Yaptıkları Konuşma*, 10 November 2017, www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/87289/ataturku-anma-toreninde-yaptiklari-konusma (last accessed 4 April 2025); Erdoğan R.T., *34. İSEDAK Toplantısında Yaptıkları Konuşma*, 28 November 2018, www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/99980/34-isedak-toplantisinda-yaptiklari-konusma (last accessed 4 April 2025).

20 - This statement is based on the famous quote by Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406; a prominent Arab philosopher and historian). See e.g. Erdoğan R.T., *Bahreyn'de "Türkiye'nin Ortadoğu'da Barışa Yönelik Girişimci Vizyonu" Konulu Konferansında Yaptıkları Konuşma*, 13 February 2017, www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/71040/bahreynde-turkiyenin-ortadogudabarisa-yonelik-girisimci-vizyonu-konulu-konferansinda-yaptiklari-konusma (last accessed 4 April 2025); Erdoğan, R. T., *Türk-Alman Üniversitesi Yeni Binaları'nın Açılış Töreninde Yaptıkarı Konuşma,* 24 January 2020, www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/115366/turk-alman-universitesi-yeni-binalari-nin-acilis-toreninde-yaptiklari-konusma (last accessed 4 April 2025).

21 - See e.g. Erdoğan R.T., *4. Uluslararası Ombudsmanlık Sempozyumunda Yaptıkları Konuşma*, 2 March 2017,

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22 - See e.g. Erdoğan, R. T., *3. Afrika Ülkeleri Dini Liderler Zirvesi'nde Yaptıkları Konuşma*, 19 October 2019,

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