



Turkey's Post-2016 Foreign Policy Drivers: Militarisation, Islam, Civilisation and Power

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Summary

- Roughly after 2012, President Erdoğan broke away from his interest-based alliance with the Gülen Movement and exchanged the support of liberals and proponents of the West for that of nationalists and Eurasianists.
- While the reconfiguration of Turkey's government coalition resulted in the formation of an Islamist, neo-patrimonialist, populist and security-obsessed ruling bloc, it concurrently instigated changes in the state identity and broadened the boundaries of the interactive relationship between domestic and foreign policy.
- Turkey has become engrossed in resorting to military force, reflecting religion in its foreign affairs, viewing itself as superior and unique in terms of its civilisation.
- Nearly all recent foreign policy choices are based on balances and gains in domestic politics.
- Turkish foreign policy during the AKP era can be better understood through domestic political balances and actors' relationships.

Introduction

“Erdoğan, fearing that he would lose his grip on power, merged his figure with the party and made himself the sole decision-making authority in his camp.”

Domestic balances, power struggles and policymaking methods have had a certain impact on Turkey foreign policy choices (Yavuz 2020; Hintz 2018). Despite this historical practise, Turkey had, with few deviations, positioned itself among Western allies from the late Ottoman Empire to the 21st century and as a middle power (Altunisik 2008; Onis and Kutlay 2017) that has portrayed itself as a Western nation without departing from its preference for civilisation and identity (Gol 2009). Turkey has maintained its presence in the world as a secular (*laik* in Turkish) state with a Muslim population (Ozturk and Sozeri 2018) that has actively used its diplomatic channels and that has prioritised security and stability both regionally and globally (Aras and Karakaya-Polat 2007; Grigoriadis 2014).

While some leaders – such as President Turgut Özal in late 1980's and early 1990s – sought to effect changes in these classic foreign policy directions (Candar 2013), they failed to alter Turkey's state identity, priorities in the international arena or behavioural practices. The relatively brief tenures of these leaders can be undoubtedly regarded as a key factor in these 'failures', but the underlying reason for this is that their administrations had varying domestic identities, were unable to maintain diverse groups within a coalition and, as such, were unable to influence state actions (Ozturk 2021, pp. 70-73). These circumstances until the early 2000s were the primary reason for the relative success of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, hereinafter AKP) under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in bringing about changes along the axes of identity, religion, civilisation and power, which began with Turkey's domestic politics and extended to its foreign policy (Dursun-Ozkanca 2019).

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This phenomenon has been widely studied and discussed, but it is worth repeating. The AKP rose to power in 2002 as the product of various coalitions within Turkey. Claiming that Islam and democracy could coexist, and that Turkey must not advance with its classic tutelage system (Tepe 2015), the AKP set out on an alternative path for the region and the world and adopted a broad coalition with liberals domestically and Western powers internationally (Insel 2003). Although it appears that the Gülen Movement only began to support it starting in roughly 2007 (Turam 2007), the structure that emerged from this administration governed the country until 2012-2013 (Yavuz 2018; Watmough and Oztürk 2018). However, the global economic crisis that erupted in 2008, the failure of the Arab Spring after 2011, the appearance of structural economic issues with the 2013 Gezi Protests and their spread to 78 cities (Irak and Ozturk 2018) and, finally, the interest- and power-based struggles between the Gülen Movement and the AKP rekindled the ontological security concerns of the AKP elite (Baser and Ozturk 2017; Waldman and Caliskan 2017; Arat and Pamuk 2019). And the subsequent July 2016 coup attempt compelled the AKP government to establish a security-oriented, ethno-religious and authoritarian structure (Yilmaz and Bashirov 2018). In other words, Erdoğan, fearing that he would lose his grip on power, merged his figure with the party and made himself the sole decision-making authority in his camp. Realising that he was no longer capable of singularly preserving his power after everything that had transpired, he altered the coalition partnerships he had unofficially cultivated up to that point one by one. Despite claims that the tutelary elements of the state-maintained control over his authority, Erdoğan opted to maintain course by crafting new agreements with various segments of society. After 2014, Erdoğan swapped out his alliance with the Gülen Movement for Islamists and other Islamic organisations (Yavuz and Ozturk 2019), and [he exchanged the support of liberals and proponents of the West for that of nationalists and Eurasianists.](#)

While the modification of the various components of the regime's coalition prompted the domestic formation of an Islamist, neo-patrimonialist, populist and security-obsessed

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ruling bloc, it concurrently instigated changes in the state identity and broadened the boundaries of the interactive relationship between domestic and foreign policy. The most fundamental reason for this phenomenon was that the new ruling elements had clear claims and goals in both political realms. Furthermore, despite assertions that the inauguration of US President Joe Biden in early 2021 would precipitate further change, such as de-escalation of the conflict with Greece in the Eastern Mediterranean and efforts to normalise relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, the foreign policy agenda of Turkey’s current, unofficial ruling coalition and the principal elements feeding this agenda arguably are not expected to change in any meaningful sense. This is because Turkey lacks an identity capable of effecting such changes due to both the profile of senior figures in the administration and their institutional capacity. In this context, Turkey’s new foreign policy understanding rests on four inter-related parameters that pertain to the distinct priorities of the elements of the ruling coalition: militarisation, Islam, civilisation and power.

Militarisation: From Syria to Libya and Nagorno Karabakh

According to [data published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute \(SIPRI\) in 2020](#), Turkey’s military expenditures saw an 86 percent increase over a 10-year period. Additionally, and excluding its United Nations and NATO obligations, Turkey has deployed troops and established bases in Iraq, Syria, Qatar, Somalia, Libya and Cyprus. Moreover, Turkey began to ensure that its partner countries and groups in both North Africa and the 2020 Nagorno Karabakh War had the upper hand thanks to its [‘drone army’](#), which it activated in late 2019 and flaunted as a source of great pride. Finally, Turkey is utilising both its own army and, in a slew of proxy wars, its new army in order to amass influence and gain a more prominent seat at the negotiating table in the Middle East and, particularly, Syria. Turkey has undoubtedly always had a powerful army for various reasons, but the more frequent and facile use of its military capacity in foreign politics became a new reality after 2016. Three factors underpin this reality, and they mostly relate to issues of domestic politics.

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The first pertains to the populist and authoritarian policymaking choices that we began to see within Erdoğan’s inner circle in the 2010s but that became more evident after 2013 and 2016 (Esen and Gumuscu 2016). Although a portion of this originates from Erdoğan’s ontological insecurity regarding his own grip on power (Gulsah-Capan and Zarakol 2019; Adisonmez and Onursal 2020), it also relates to the ‘New Turkey’ discourse he has defined domestically and internationally, always in conflict and always alert. These domestic and foreign adversaries positioned him as the indispensable leader in the eyes of his supporters and legitimated his authoritarian political behaviours and populist rhetoric.

The second factor relates to the greater role assumed by branches of the coalition that Erdoğan established after 2016, a group that comprises security-obsessed groups and figures who desire a more active military. Both the fact that former Chief of the General Staff Hulusi Akar occupies a key position within Erdoğan’s cabinet and that the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*-MHP) and the Eurasianists are central and determinant elements within his ruling bloc have prompted Turkey’s current administration to resort to greater military interventions and more aggressive manoeuvres in foreign policy. For example, the establishment of a Libya policy through [the Blue Homeland Doctrine](#) (*Mavi Vatan Doktrini*) by retired admirals such as Cem Gürdeniz and Cihat Yaycı and the promotion of a direct military option in the Azerbaijan-Armenia War (Yavuz and Huseynov 2021) pertain to the fulfilment of the key desires of

this coalition. The new militarised discourse of Erdoğan's administration is also certainly significant in this context.

The third and final element is the role Turkey has crafted for itself. This new role, which emerged during the tenure of former Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and which Erdoğan later sustained despite Davutoğlu's dismissal, relates to how Turkey has assumed an active and determinant position in every issue in the region. While this role may not be described officially as military intervention, Turkey's own executive coalition has manifested itself as the first method used when considering the extreme importance that the authoritarian understanding of governance places on nationalism.

Sunni Islam as a Tool for Regional Domination and Global Impact

Sunni Islam, whether it is perceived instrumentally or as a fundamental objective of the current AKP administration, is one of the most important aspects of the 'New Turkey.' The Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, Diyanet) possesses a larger budget than many ministries and is extremely active both domestically and internationally (Ozturk 2016; Gozaydin 2020). [It operates, for example, as far away as Cuba and constructs, with other Turkish state institutions, the largest mosques in the Balkans, Eastern Europe and elsewhere in the world.](#) Diyanet representatives engage actively with Turkey's other Islamic organisations in countries such as Germany and the Netherlands where a significant Turkish population resides. These groups also operate in the Balkans, North Africa and Central Asia, which Turkey describes as its historical relatives and kindred (Ozturk 2018). Erdoğan positions himself in many places as the representative and, in fact, leader of the Muslim world. This new role was central to the deterioration of Turkey's relations with Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia and France. Turkey, despite being constitutionally a secular state, is synthesising religion with nationalism and actively using the resulting product as a tool of foreign policy. This itself has three underlying causes relating to domestic politics.

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First, Erdoğan's government, when it emerged victorious from the conflict with the Gülen Movement, began to gradually reallocate the positions he had given to the members of the Movement or that they had otherwise filled to his new coalition partners. In this reshuffling, various branches of the Menzil and Naqshibandi sects as well as religious organisations such as İsmailağa became more prominent (Ozturk 2019). The impact of these changes on state bureaucracy as well as the private sector certainly reverberated in Turkish foreign policy, because these structures had been organised since the 1970s, particularly in continental Europe (Ozkan 2019). They formed an international union with the AKP after 2014 and began to implement its policies first within the diaspora, then among Muslim migrants to the West and later globally. After 2014, Turkey's official and unofficial transnational religious apparatuses became more apparent as they functioned in co-ordination with the regime.

The second factor pertains to the intimate relationship Erdoğan's administration cultivated with the Muslim brotherhood. The National Outlook Movement, from which Erdoğan draws his ideological roots, had a [close relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood](#). And while this affinity may have been disrupted in 2002, it was rekindled with the Arab Spring. These two structures coexist, converging in the anger they felt towards Western thought and in their hostility to the Islamic Union and Wahhabism, though the Arab Spring for now appears to have ended in failure. They have a more active global discourse, of which Erdoğan is frequently seen as the most legitimate

representative and which he articulates by elevating religious themes in Turkish foreign policy (Ozturk 2021).

The third factor should be examined collectively with the first two. The announcement of Mohammed bin Salman's status as crown prince of Saudi Arabia, Iran's desire to export the ideology of the Islamic Revolution and, moreover, [the desire of Erdoğan's Turkey to control the global Muslim population through the Muslim Brotherhood and its own state apparatus](#) have produced a competition among Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey over who will secure influence over Muslims everywhere. This prompted Erdoğan's Turkey to intensify its previously crafted religious foreign policy. This policy precipitated a greater degree of influence for Erdoğan over religious segments both domestically and internationally.

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Different Civilisational Claims and Drifts from the West

Civilisation, or Turkey's changing perception of civilisation under AKP rule, is another determinant factor of 'New Turkey's' foreign policy. It is perhaps the only element to have produced a real effect, despite being normative in nature. [Turkey's new perception of civilisation is both inter-related to other elements and has a profound historical basis.](#) And while it appears to be normative, it could be viewed as the most important variable, because it could precipitate state identity change. However, this normative variable is a product of various perceptions of civilisation that have been affixed to one another.

As a substantial body of research has pointed out, the National Outlook Movement constitutes the backbone of the AKP; this is a movement that traditionally positions itself in opposition to Western civilisation and defines its perception of civilisation through Sunni Islam (Ceran 2019; Kaya 2019). Another ideology articulated from this perception of civilisation during the AKP era is that which former Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary Professor Ahmet Davutoğlu emphasised in his academic work and which he later sought to implement during his government term. This ideology synthesises Islam with Ottoman history and Asianness with Anatolianess, separating Turkey from both the West and other global civilisations (Grigoriadis 2014). Reference to the Ottoman Empire is vague, as it omits specificity about which era of the empire is relevant, what is being referred to with Turkishness and what is being emphasised with Turkey's Muslim identity. One point that is unambiguous, however, is that Turkey experienced a harsh and dramatic rupture in its perception of civilisation in the years after the modern state was founded. Finally, Turkism has been integrated into this perception of civilisation in the new coalition that Erdoğan established with nationalists and Eurasianists after 2016. While the product of this perception of civilisation is defined as neo-Ottomanism, it is important to mention that various schools of thought have disparate perceptions of the Ottoman Empire and that, for this reason, it is unclear what exactly this neo-Ottomanist ideology is expressing (Yavuz 2020).

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Despite the uncertainty created by the amalgamation of these various normative elements, there is one incontrovertible point in this context. 'New Turkey's' perception of civilisation symbolises a separation from Western civilisation. And while this may not directly produce a 'clash of civilisations', it certainly impacts the decisions Turkey makes, primarily in its own region. These decisions compel Turkey to adopt more 'Sunni', Turkist and aggressive policies. Moreover, while this may appear to be a vote-oriented choice in domestic politics, it culminates in actions such as the Hagia Sophia decision that will influence Turkey's relations in foreign affairs. Finally, Turkey, which perceives itself as possessing a unique civilisation, sometimes struggles to forge alliances and is mostly

destined for isolation on the global level. This unpleasant situation can be re-instrumentalised by the ruling bloc in domestic politics by describing these circumstances as 'valuable' or 'prideful' isolation.

Between Hard, Soft and Sharp Power: An Ambiguous Power

"...particularly after the Arab Spring and the subsequent 2016 coup attempt, Turkey endeavoured to view and portray itself as more powerful than it actually was. It is important to note that the fundamental reason for this related to both the policy preferences of domestic coalition partners, the gradual rise of authoritarianism around the world."

Though power, influence, persuasion and coercion appear to pertain directly to realism in international relations, each underpins a different theoretical explanation (Guzzini 2001; Brown 2007), and they are concepts that define the fundamental desires of states. Regardless of the theoretical perspective used to scrutinise Turkey, emerging from this analysis should be a country that aims to make itself more powerful, seeks to amass influence in the region and elsewhere in the world, and desires to coerce the countries with which it maintains relations. This was the situation in the early Republic, and it is the same today during the AKP era. But much more than an outcome through which Turkey characterises itself as a power during the AKP era and in which this characterisation reverberates in foreign policy, this is one factor determining its foreign policy.

Following a period before the AKP when Turkey practiced a somewhat restrained and deliberate foreign policy, the AKP emphasised an image of a rational soft power between 2002 and 2011 by using elements such as religion, culture and history in its doctrine and decisions, despite being a middle power. This rationality certainly tied into domestic democratic reforms and the positioning of the world along a relatively liberal axis. But particularly after the Arab Spring and the subsequent 2016 coup attempt, Turkey endeavoured to view and portray itself as more powerful than it actually was. It is important to note that the fundamental reason for this related to both the policy preferences of domestic coalition partners, the gradual rise of authoritarianism around the world, the European Union's sovereign debt crisis, Brexit, the Trump administration policy and the decline of liberal international order.

However, this change compelled Turkey to speak about many global issues in which it had no direct relevance and resulted in its intervention in affairs that were, when considering its fragile economy (Erkoc 2019), 'over its head'. Second, as a country that was domestically authoritarian, frequently deployed military forces in its foreign policy and used elements of religion, ethnic identity and culture to a greater degree than necessary, it would be challenging to discuss Turkey as a soft power. Although it still describes itself in that manner, Turkey today no longer embodies an element of regional security and stability. The most important reason for its intervention is its inability to accurately assess its own power. The assessment of Turkey's power alters both the role it plays and its visibility in foreign policy. It would be difficult today to describe Turkey as a soft power, but it is moving rapidly towards a characterisation as a 'sharp power' (Walker 2018), suffering from numerous weaknesses, not the least of which being its economy. Therefore, it is better to define Turkey as an ambiguous power.

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Conclusion

Turkey's change or metamorphosis is not limited to domestic institutions or the gradual loss of democratic values. Rather, Turkey is experiencing substantial transformation in foreign policy as well. It has become engrossed in a status in which it resorts to military force to an unprecedented degree, reflects religion in its foreign affairs in a multi-faceted manner, expresses itself in power terms and, moreover, views itself as superior and

unique in terms of its civilisation. This results in Turkey's isolation from its historical allies in the international arena – to put it more bluntly, causing it to falter. But it is important to remember that these changes, though they appear in foreign policy, are steps taken for the domestic public, because the situation fully embodies the 'boomerang effect'. Nearly all the foreign policy choices Ankara produces today are based on domestic political cost-benefit analysis. Turkish foreign policy during the AKP era can be misinterpreted or difficult to analyse without understanding domestic political balances, actors and their multi-faceted, complicated relationships.

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