

Islam and foreign policy making in Turkey

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HARRIET FILDES, JUL 26 2011

The relationship between Islam and foreign policy has become increasingly important since the Iranian revolution and reached new level of analysis post 9/11. Western scholars now seek to understand the influential role religion plays in Islamic states, and are particularly interested in what has been termed 'political Islam' or the Islamization[1]. Theories expressed by scholars such as Huntington have encouraged Orientalist and 'othering' assumptions which conclude that Islam is fundamentally incompatible with democracy leading to the importance of religion being overlooked[2]. Turkey is perceived to be a 'bridge' between the 'civilized' West and the religious Middle East or a 'torn' country[3]. Yet, such theories overlook the complex multiple and entangled modernity visible in Turkey's functioning 'Muslim Democracy[4]' where coexistence rather than domination of Islamic values and Westernization is possible and happening. This historical tradition of commitment to both modernization and Westernization has been a consistent political feature of Turkey since the fall of the Ottoman Empire.

To assess the whether or not a causal relationship between Islam and foreign policy exists I will first critically analyse Turkey's historical identity within the context of modernity, then going on to examine the impact Islamism has had upon the AKP's relations with the West, specifically focusing on the issue of EU membership and historical relations with the USA which are reflective of Turkey's inherent connection to the West. This analysis will eventually lead to a comprehensive study of Turkey's role in regional politics, examining their pragmatic development of relations with other Middle Eastern countries based upon securitization. Concluding that the AKP's foreign policy has always been based upon pragmatism and negotiating its role as an important regional player which has resulted, not in the development of political Islam but in the emergence of Turkey as an important global actor, showing that recent claims and traditional understandings of the Justice and Development Party's foreign policy as somehow Islamized are simplistic and derive from misleading theories and political propaganda.

Identity and modernity in Turkey

To understand fully the implications of Islam for Turkish foreign policy it is crucial to first understand the identity of Turkey as a modern nation state. By overtly focussing on how ideologies impact upon foreign policy we miss the crucial political and economic reasoning behind Turkish foreign policy decisions. These misconceptions lead us to understanding Turkish foreign policy as driven by religion or neo-Ottomanism and refuse to take into account the importance of the countries sociological context and geostrategic position as a driving force behind active foreign policy in the region. Turkish foreign policy has always been analysed by incorporating it into an ideological debate, assessing the clash between eastern and western identities[5]. However, Turkey is not subject to a torn identity, this is a Western perception based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the basis of Turkish secularism or laiklik. While we understand secularism as the complete separation of religion and state, this is political myth making and it is arguable that the Kemalists understood the impossibility of this task and as such placed Islam within full control of the state[6]. Fears in the West of Islamic revivalism stem from a popular belief in the Kemalist 'smoke screen of a complete secular revolution.' [7] The AKP have not shown themselves to have an overt Islamic agenda, nor have they show any will to introduce Shariah law into the country or implement hudud laws, and as such we can conclude that within Turkey's reflexive Muslim society we can see the complex interdependency between secularism and democracy, not a clash of Islam and Westernization. The AKP has arguably adopted a maqasid orientated approach towards both domestic and foreign policy making, although it does not publicly recognize this due to the constitutional constraints of secularism. Maqasid is an Islamic notion which concentrates on the higher goals and values of the

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religion based on a liberal reading of the Quran rather than a literal one, these values are based around notions of justice, accountability, transparency, economic reform and human rights issues[8].

Does the AKP have an Islamist agenda?

One of the key questions which needs to be assessed in order to analyse the causal relationship between Islam and foreign policy in Turkey is whether or not the core tenants of Turkey's foreign policy are shifting towards a more Islamic or Middle Eastern orientation. The AKP have shown no ambitions towards challenging either Turkey's pro-Western policies or towards withdrawing their EU membership proposal, which as Islamists they were expected to. They have emphasized their western values through advocacy of EU membership, democracy, human rights discourse and globalization[9]. Turkey's new foreign policy outlook is pro-active in diplomacy, particularly in the Middle East, which is complemented by their 'zero problems with neighbours'[10] attitude. This is based upon Turkey's geostrategic and demographic situation and improved relations with Middle Eastern countries, reflecting its commitment to peace in the Middle East and its ethnic diversity, not a commitment to Islamic universalism. As a democracy, Turkey is held accountable by public demands to secure peace and security in communities which have a high representation in the country, such as Bosnia, Kosovo and Chechnya. In this respect foreign policy is determined by democracy which embodies the issues and societal concerns of the general public. There has been a perceived change in policy towards EU membership which can be said to be a result, not of Islamization, but of disappointment with European policies and a lessening in public support. Although this change is not in line with the Kemalist vision, it is not a result of Islam controlling the state; rather, it is a rational response to the European approach to Turkey[11]. Nevertheless, the modernization and Westernization policies laid down by Ataturk will continue, which means that plans to join the EU, Turkey's most important trading partner, will not be scrapped in favour of Islamization of the state. The AKP maintains a moderate path and does not allow Islamist tendencies to influence foreign policy but does allow for some changes to be made on the restrictive secularism imposed on the Islamic community, in terms of the removal of the headscarf ban, allowing the community to express more of their religiosity than previously allowed by law[12].

Foreign policy and the US

Although in recent years Turkey's expansionist and active foreign policy in the Middle East, the Balkans and Africa has posed a threat to the US, bilateral relations between the two have generally been positive. As a member of NATO, the Council of Europe and long standing ally of the US during the Cold War and the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, diplomatic ties between the two countries are strong[13]. The Turkish Ministry of Affairs confirms this close relationship by confirming that the two countries have shared values and beliefs in democracy, law, liberal market forces and human rights[14]. Nevertheless, recent developments of stronger economic and diplomatic ties with Iran and Iraq have made the US uncomfortable. Concerns over Muslim solidarity have been exacerbated by AKP's 'zero-problems with neighbours'[15] policy which has made it clear that relations with the West are to develop alongside relations with the East. Turkey is of key strategic interest to the US as it serves as a buffer or energy corridor between East and West and is crucial to reforming the regional security environment.[16] Relations between the two countries have been tested over the years, for example; when Turkey rebuffed US plans to overthrow Saddam Hussein, largely due to their fear of the establishment of an independent Kurdish state in the region or when the US criticized the Turkish intervention in Cyprus. This once again shows that the role of religion within foreign policy has minimal influence compared to the role of securitization and strategic thinking within the framework of a realist state-system. Turkey's reaction to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 was also controversial; they were criticized for Islamic unification and separating themselves from the West which led to a degradation in US relations with Turkey. However, Turkey's new policy of engagement in regional diplomacy stems from the idea of regional interdependence[17]. By improving cooperation with these countries, in terms of economic relations, trade and diplomacy Turkey has improved its security environment. As aforementioned, this policy initially caused tensions in the West however the significance of Turkey as a regional mediator has only become more apparent in recent years.

Securitization and pragmatism

These new active policies in the Middle East derive from strategic interests in re-exporting the stability Turkey earned

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from the EU process and reaffirming its role as an important regional player. Although Turkey's presence can be felt in almost all parts of the Middle Eastern region, this is reflective of their role as a mediator in the Arab world. Turkey's foreign policy has often coincided with US and EU interests, complimenting them instead of causing conflict, this can be seen when on October 10th 2009, Turkey signed historic accords with Armenia, putting an end to the conflict and normalising relations[18]. Turkey's relations with Syria also exemplify this as the strategic agreement between the two has encouraged Syria to enter peace discussions and established normalized relations between them and the US. Turkey's unique political, geo-economic and geostrategic position has enabled it to form alliances' and to hold the unique position of negotiator in the region. This serves to better Turkey's own security position and also helps serve European and American interests in the region. Turkey's new and assertive foreign policy does not need to be interpreted as a move away from Western civilization back to its historical identity as Huntington hypothesized; it can be seen as a pragmatic approach to representing Turkey as the credible strategic partner to the West that it is, enhancing and normalizing EU relations instead of undermining them. Turkey's relations with Israel are demonstrative of this as during Israeli incursions into Palestine, Turkey signed a military cooperation agreement and have been strategic allies since 1995, emphasizing Turkey's political differences from Muslim countries in the region. Turkey's diplomatic ties with Israel had improved dramatically until recently, with trade doubling between 2002 and 2008[19]. As the first Muslim country to recognize Israel in 1949 they have engaged in diplomatic discussions with Hamas representative Mashal in an attempt to put an end to the violence[20]. Turkey also operated as a mediator between Syria and Israel until recently however Turkey's foreign policy towards Israel has changed dramatically since the flotilla incident in 2010[21]. This has exacerbated concerns in the US that Turkey's commitment to Islamic principles of independence and justice have been internalized by AKP, an idea confirmed by H.Kansu, founding member on AKP when he stated that 'Israel should leave all these lands and Palestine must be an independent state[22].'

Conclusion

I believe that recent changes to Turkish foreign policy reflects a pragmatic shift in discourse and a desire to combat regional difficulties not through military confrontation but through an increased use in diplomatic dialogue, engagements and use of soft power. The use of this power is determined by its geopolitical position within a historical context and by issues of identity and cultural associations[23]. Turkey's geopolitical situation is of particular importance as it can be perceived to be a crossroads in terms of global energy issues and security concerns which compel Turkey to behave as an active player in the region. Turkey's economic realities are also of importance as it has the 17th strongest economy in the world and the 6th largest in Europe it needs to assess and combat security threats in the region in order to attract investments[24]. Turkey's relentless focus on Middle Eastern issues has been presented to the West as a security concern; however, this criticism is misleading as Turkey has been involved in issues all over the world, from the Balkans to central-Asia and the focus placed on Middle Eastern nations is simply reflective of the pivotal role played by these countries in Turkey's security environment and Turkey's policy of engagement. As aforementioned, the change in foreign policy towards these countries which has taken place since AKP came to power has caused considerable tension in the West over Turkey's future as the only secular democracy in a predominantly Muslim country. AKP's lenient treatment of the Sudan's Oman al-Bashir and the developing relationship between Turkey and Iran has been a source of worry and embarrassment to the West, particularly when Turkey voted alongside Brazil, against tighter sanctions on Iran whilst a temporary member of the UNSC[25]. Which, once again is not reflective of their Islamic nature, rather, it shows that 'In this case, Turkey preferred negotiations instead of the sanctions[26]'. Concerns that Turkey is acting upon Muslim have arisen due to the Islamophobic lens in which the West perceives the East. Nevertheless, although certain policies put forward by AKP have made the US and the EU uncomfortable, Turkey is more economically stable, democratic and pragmatic in foreign policy making than any government before them. AKP's religious leadings can be said to be limited by their economic, institutional and strategic ties with the West, therefore they are subject to international opinion.

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Date written: November 15, 2010