

Now you see it. Now you don't. Neo-Ottomanism as political illusion

Written by C. Akca ATAC

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C. AKCA ATAC, JAN 10 2010

It is customary for the political theorists to resort to illusionism, the science of pseudo-miracles that wizardly creates a visual trickery representing a distorted version of reality. Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* is the quintessential historical example of the attempts at putting the phantasmagorical into political perspective. His experimentation with "dioptric anamorphosis," which is a lens or mirror that empowers an image out of its actual proportion and meaning, created the famous image of Leviathan and prescribed one of the most influential theories in the history of political thought.

When the graphic designers apply "dioptric anamorphosis," they construct a set of distorted drawings, which resemble, from an unusually close distance, an image familiar to our historical and social memory such as a face from history or a landscape. The "normal" perspective would, however, display some random, sporadic lines by no means resembling the image that the close-up perspective reveals. The principle of anamorphosis suggests that the slight shift of perspective could create an illusion giving the impression of a transition from chaos to order. Some success of political theorists and strategists owes much to their ability of creating political illusionism, preferably as powerful as a dioptric anamorphosis.

The AKP government has provided Turkey with a skilful political illusionist who has apparently mastered dioptric anamorphosis and, from the random, sporadic lines of rhythmic diplomacy, has unveiled the vision of a "mighty" Turkey restoring its influence in its requisite geography, which is the Middle East. Ahmet Davutoğlu, the long-time advisor to the Prime Minister and now the rather fresh Minister of Foreign Affairs, argues in his best-selling manifesto of foreign policy, *The Strategic Depth*, that the Turkish Republic's persistent foreign-policy priority of allying with the US and Western Europe rendered Turkey one-sided, under-capacity, and less exciting. A reconnection with the rest of the world, in particular with the Middle East, would overhaul Turkey's capabilities as a regional and global actor. This strategy is based on the principles of aiming "zero-problems" with neighbours, providing them with both freedom and security pursuing multi-dimensional policies of political and economic integration and conducting rhythmic diplomacy. Once Turkey has thus embraced its larger neighbourhood, its ties with the US and EU would be automatically tightened further. Turkey's just-rekindled relations with Syria, Iraq, Libya, Jordan, and other Middle Eastern countries, which were previously the dominions of the Ottoman Empire, seem to be in compliance with this vision of *Strategic Depth*.

Relying on the principle that a slight shift in perspective will change the ways in which any reality is perceived, Davutoğlu now seems to be advising us to look at the new Turkish foreign policy with a very small angle of view, with a new perspective. The new image that we see greatly resembles the outline of the long-lost Ottoman Empire. The moment that the AKP government has pointed the Middle East as its number-one area of interest, cooperation, and action, Turkish foreign policy has inevitably taken on connotations of an Ottomanist revival. Neo-Ottomanism, as this revival is popularly known, is not peculiar to the AKP government, since the term was first deployed to assess the nature of the foreign missions of the Turgut Özal era in the early 1990s. What did not gain currency back then, however, has stuck strong in 2009 and neo-Ottomanism has come to be understood by an increasing number of scholars and journalists as the backbone of Turkey's ambitious novel design for relaunching itself as a regional superpower.

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The word neo-Ottomanism has never been used at the official level and, as one can be pretty certain, will never be openly heard from a Turkish official, unless perhaps by a Freudian slip. Nevertheless, just as the world has got used to the idea of an "American Empire," neo-Ottomanism is acquiring widespread usage and hence altered the basic tone of the Turkish foreign policy. Although some rejoice in the overt enthusiasm at the idea of Turkey's reclaiming its Ottoman imperial legacy, the author of these lines would like to join with those who stand at a "normal" distance to the illusion created and rather see the chaotic, sporadic and irregular traces left behind the incessant diplomatic visits of Turkish officials instead of the dioptric image of a re-emerging Ottoman Empire. An amazing 40 agreements with Syria and 48 with Iraq were signed within 7 days in October and another 50 agreements signed again with Syria in just one week and the shuttling backwards and forwards by officials negotiating must have meant mounting piles of documents in the archives and a substantial contribution to the world carbon dioxide level, not to mention trees felled for wood pulp.

Mesmerized by the anamorphosis seen through the dioptric lenses of Davutoğlu, Turkish *bien pensant* literati are currently competing to praise the expanding geography of the Turkish foreign policy, Turkey's new aptitude for solving problems and stimulating dialogue in the Middle East, and the visibility of a Turkish "soft power" embedded in the neo-Ottomanist discourse. An ambitious railroad project connecting Europe with Basra and beyond, alongside the attempts at establishing a free-trade area within the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, and becoming the indispensable energy hub of Eurasia are envisaged as instruments to empower the political illusion at hand.

Those who are familiar with the theories of empire would know that the spread of imperial security, equality, welfare, and prosperity requires one simple fact; the imperial power needs to have all those at home in abundance. To be able to judge what Turkey's resources are, some indicators other than just the official growth figures are required. A brief scrutiny of the UNDP's Human Development Index demonstrates how much regional disparities in Turkey have widened; social and gender inequality has deepened; youth unemployment has reached record highs, and persisting adult illiteracy has been ignored. A comprehensive and effective government campaign against the honour killings of women is long overdue. Whereas the Turkish delegates step forward to sign new treaties all around Turkey's immediate and distant periphery with the promise of international dialogue -and there is talk of Turkey negotiating the 'Social Chapter' with the EU- the AKP government has denied the workers of the privatized TEKEL (State Alcohol and Tobacco) factories any dialogue whatsoever over the drastic change in their working conditions and emoluments. Whereas at home, the AKP government is producing fruitless deafs' dialogue alone, its promise of compassionate international dialogue within its new, dynamic foreign policy is contradictory and far from being convincing. Turkey needs to put on the oxygen mask itself first before trying to revive its neighbourhood with neo-Ottomanist ideals.

Davutoğlu and his entourage must also come to terms with the fact that Ottomanism has a heavy historical baggage; it is burdened with post-colonial discourse, rarely evidence-based, mostly value-charged historical analyses, political clichés, many of them unconsciously reflecting a sense of Turkish superiority over subject peoples. If Turkey sets to launch a fully enhanced foreign-policy strategy that will undo its previous "*faux-pas*," as some would argue such as turning to the West and neglecting the East and undermining its global-actorness capacity, it should be able to construct a rhetoric brand new, more universal than ever and reminding of no past exemplar. Association with past creates reasonable doubt over the virtue of the message aimed to be conveyed. Equally important, neo-Ottomanism has strong religious connotations, creating the suspicion that it may just be a form of political Islam. The AKP's Islamic emphasis on real politics and the Prime Minister's unconditional support for the Muslim world leaders, including some very problematic names such as Hamas's Mashaal, Iran's Ahmedinejad and Sudan's Al-Bashir, inevitably create reservations over the partiality of neo-Ottomanism. Furthermore, neo-Ottomanist diplomacy in the Middle East has not so far achieved a positive, tangible impact in Turkey's EU bid. On the contrary, it may have underpinned the un-Europeaness of Turkey in the eyes of Europe's Turco-sceptics. But perhaps this does not worry 'Neo-Ottoman policy makers.'

Amin Maalouf's recent book *Le Dérèglement du Monde* urges leaders and peoples around the world, particularly those in the Middle East, to avoid the past reflexes that had ended in certain catastrophe and to proceed towards an unprecedented new phase in human history. Only the opening of a phase in which the legitimacies, identities, values,

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and norms will be recreated from the beginning could, as Maalouf argues, save our common civilisation lethally endangered by partiality. Turkey, with its large secularised and modern middle classes and increasingly modern industrial society, ought to be taking part in the creation of such universality rather than to create yet another separate segment, partiality or political illusion in the world community.

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