

Muslim and modern: Why Turkey's turn to the East is no slight to the West

Dalacoura, K. (2015), Muslim and modern: Why Turkey's 'turn to the east' is no slight to the west. *Juncture*, 21: 324-327. doi:[10.1111/j.2050-5876.2015.00826.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2050-5876.2015.00826.x)

Katerina Dalacoura argues that contemporary accounts of a Turkish pivot away from the west are based on a misunderstanding of Turkey's national identity. Ankara's stance on interventions against Isis in Syria, she says, is driven more by Turkey's Kurdish issue than by any Islamist sympathies or anti-western turn.

Is Turkey's strategic direction turning away from its previously western orientation? Over the past few years, a narrative to this effect has gained traction, and it has only been further entrenched by recent acrimony between Turkey and its western allies over how to approach the Islamic state (or Isis) conflagration in Syria and Iraq.

No doubt, there have been changes in Ankara's diplomatic stance over the past decade or so. Following its first electoral victory in 2002, the government of the Justice and Development party (AKP) took active steps toward internal reform, with a view to fulfilling the criteria for accession to the EU, but by the mid-2000s this process had stalled. A similar trajectory is observed in the relationship between Turkey and the United States, for which the AKP set the tone in 2003, at the start of the second Iraq war, by refusing to allow the Bush administration to use the Incirlik base in south-east Turkey. Relations with the Obama administration then improved, particularly after the 2011 Arab uprisings, but they have discernibly cooled over the course of the Syrian and Ukrainian crises since. There have been strains between Turkey and NATO more generally. And Turkey's relationship with Israel gradually deteriorated over the Palestinian issue, reaching a nadir with the Mavi Marmara 'aid convoy' incident in 2009, from which the relationship has not recovered. Indeed, the AKP under former foreign minister and current prime minister Ahmet Davutoglu has promoted an Islamic-oriented or 'neo-Ottoman' foreign policy towards the Middle East.

This alleged shift in Turkey's strategic orientation is closely linked to an internal change in the country's identity. Since late Ottoman times and throughout the duration of the Republic, Turkey has typically been described as a country divided between east and west, between Islam and modernity. Now the east and Islam are winning. The modernist and secularist Kemalist revolution of the 1920s and '30s was imposed on a reluctant population by foreign elites with foreign ideas. Now, these elites have finally been dislodged by the AKP, which, though it may officially deny the label, has a predilection at the very least towards Islamism. Certainly it has a conservative social Islamic agenda. The AKP leader and current Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, now free of the Kemalist oversight previously imposed by the Turkish military, is showing his true colours: authoritarian at home and anti-western abroad. A section of the Turkish electorate is against the AKP and profoundly suspicious of it. However, the AKP has been consistently winning majorities in all contests since 2002. The Turkish 'people', who are at heart Muslims above all else, have given a mandate to 'their' government to move towards the east, and towards Islam.

This picture of Turkish foreign and domestic policies may appear simplistic, but it is not made

of straw – there are many people, inside and outside Turkey, who would endorse it enthusiastically. It is, however, a problematic and somewhat distorted view, not necessarily for what it proposes but for what it omits. First, to see Turkey as split between east and west, modernity and Islam, overlooks the most important element of the country's identity: a strong sense of nationalism which, even to this day, pervades and even dominates all other loyalties, including the religious one. This powerful Turkish nationalism goes back to the late Ottoman and early republican periods, and has been cultivated assiduously by the Turkish state ever since. It permeates all layers of society and is evidence that the Kemalist revolution achieved the most important of its objectives. (It excludes the Kurds, of course, and all other individuals and minorities who choose not to identify themselves as Turks, an issue to which I will return.)

The second point, linked to the first, is that in Turkish history the 'Islam versus modernity' binary has coexisted alongside an alternative perspective, one which does not see these forces as opposites. An illustrious series of intellectuals, going back to the late Ottoman period, conceive of Islam as modern and, as such, as a means of bringing Turkey (the Turkish nation) closer to Europe and the west. A view of the Turkish people as divided into two camps – those who are pro-western and modern in one, and those who are Muslim and anti-modern in the other – would be a caricature. A number of opinion polls demonstrating a seemingly paradoxical mix of political, religious and social values and behaviours testify to the real complexity. I would not hazard to put a figure on it or to attempt to define the categories with any precision, but I would suggest that a great number of Turks – not least the middle classes hailing from the many dynamic urban centres of the Anatolian hinterland – see themselves as both Muslim and modern.

If the east–west/Islam–modernity dichotomy is, at best, a misrepresentation of Turkish identity, it is equally problematic as a lens for understanding Turkish foreign policy. (It is also an only partial explanatory framework for the growing authoritarianism which mars Turkish domestic politics at present, but this is not a matter directly relevant to the discussion here.) A number of AKP ideologues do see the world in such black-and-white terms, but they are only one element in a bigger picture. A country's identity is not directly translated into foreign policy 'outcomes'; rather, it is one strand in a complex process of decision-making. Equally, there is not a one-way flow from identity to strategic direction: identity develops in response to, and in constant interaction with, a country's foreign counterparts. Identity coexists with interests, and the resultant policies are conceived and executed, in the case of foreign affairs, within the realm of the possible as well as the desirable.

An important characteristic of Turkish foreign policy – particularly following the AKP's second national election victory in 2007, and continuing after the third in 2011 – has been its activist nature and its drive to promote Turkey's role in multiple areas (political, cultural, diplomatic and economic) and regions (the Balkans, the Caucasus, eastern Europe, central Asia, Africa, the Middle East, as well as Europe and the US). The objective is not to diminish the role of Turkey in one area so as to add strength to another, but to be active in all of them. There is no logical reason – unless one sees the relationship between east and west as one of irremediable confrontation – why being a player in the Middle East should mean turning against the west. That the Ottoman empire's centre of gravity (until its final decades, when it lost its lands there) was in the Balkans rather than the Middle East should warn us against facile use of the term 'neo-Ottoman'. Turkey's strategic relationship with the US and membership of NATO is the cornerstone of its foreign policy, and

will remain so. EU membership continues to be a goal, which accords with the preferences of a majority of Turkish citizens (after a decline in support in the early part of the 2010s). If Turkey is dragging its feet over the Ukraine, it is doing so in the company of other states in Europe and NATO that are facing the rising economic costs of confrontation with Russia. As for Turkey's critical position towards Israel, it need not be understood in east/west terms, despite the efforts of many to describe it as such; indeed, there is a growing criticism of Israel in Europe nowadays, and even in the US.

In short, a powerful driver of current Turkish foreign policy is the ambition to turn elsewhere – including to ‘the east’ – without giving up the west. The east/west binary, a perspective shared by many, coexists with this non- exclusivist view, but has not thus far displaced it. It must be noted that on this issue, as with others, the AKP is not the originator, but instead has brought to fruition policies with roots in previous eras. An activist foreign policy which seeks to make a mark in the many regions where Turkey is a player can be traced back three decades to the geopolitical realities that confronted Turgut Özal in the aftermath of the cold war. Following the collapse of the USSR, Turkey was in search of a role in the Balkans, central Asia and the Caucasus. And with the shift of the economy – again under Özal's stewardship – towards a focus on exports, Turkey was in search of markets abroad as well as allies.

Prior to 2011, Turkey's policy towards the Middle East was based on the motto of ‘zero problems with neighbours’, and was marked by growing economic links and political engagement. Ankara scored two notable successes: it turned around the difficult relationship with Syria and established strong links with the Kurdish regional government of northern Iraq (although this came, to some extent, at the cost of its relations with Baghdad). Turkey also offered itself as mediator in the various conflicts in the region. Although relations with Iran were mixed, Turkey – with Brazil – attempted in May 2010, albeit without success, to mediate in the nuclear power dispute between Iran and the west. Quietly, Turkey also presented itself as a model of a country that had managed to combine economic success with a degree of democratisation; for some, the fact that these successes occurred in a Muslim-majority state, under a government with Islamist roots, was an added reason why Turkey was worthy of emulation in the Middle East.

The Arab uprisings of 2011 caused Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East to falter, however. Ankara's support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt soured relations with the new government in Cairo, which overthrew Mohammed Morsi in July 2013. Turkey's relationship with Saudi Arabia – the Muslim Brotherhood's nemesis – is strained. The Syrian imbroglio on its southern borders, which the Turkish government has seriously mishandled, has been even more damaging because of its security implications and the flow of refugees it has unleashed. The Turkish government quickly turned against its former ‘friend’, Bashar al-Assad, and became involved in the struggle for his overthrow by supporting the opposition against him.

The Syrian situation caused tension between Turkey and the west because of the latter's reluctance to intervene in the struggle against Assad, as Turkey wanted, and the meteoric rise of Isis in 2014 only heightened these tensions. Indeed, the Isis conflict has caused a broader realignment between the intervening powers in Syria, as Iran and Hezbollah – supporters of Assad – have found themselves on the same side as the US and other Arab states, such as Saudi Arabia, that have traditionally counted among Iran's enemies.

Turkey, however, cannot wholeheartedly join the anti-Isis camp, for domestic reasons. The

Kurdish Democratic Union party (PYD) in Syria, which is battling Isis, has organic links with the Kurdistan Workers' party (PKK), which has been waging a war in defence of Kurdish rights in Turkey for the past 30 years. Notwithstanding an ongoing Kurdish peace process, Ankara is loath to support the PYD/PKK against Isis, however horrendous the latter's record. Crucially, it is Turkish nationalism rather than Islamist ideology which underpins this position. (The perverse impact it has had underscores the need for the resolution of the Kurdish problem and a rethinking of national identity in Turkey, but this is another matter.) Turkish government policy towards Isis is neither a demonstration of implicit sympathy towards it nor the result of a 'pivot' away from the west.

Turkey's Middle Eastern policy is in tatters, with the country having weak or non-existent relations with Egypt, Syria and Israel, and relations elsewhere, for example in Libya and Yemen, impeded by chaos on the ground. The complex security problems Turkey faces and the constriction of economic opportunities that they entail mean that, for Ankara, the Middle East cannot be an 'alternative' to the west. Europe remains Turkey's biggest trading partner and source of foreign direct investment; NATO provides its security umbrella. Even if we assume that a shift in strategic direction is what the Turkish government intends – a questionable proposition, as I have argued – it is not going to happen any time soon. Its western allies and prospective EU partners have to deal with Turkey on the basis that it will not be the one removing itself from their difficult relationship.

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