

# Understanding the AK Party's Identity Politics: A Civilizational Discourse and its Limitations

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**ABSTRACT** *The AK Party seeks to respond to four challenges stemming from three confrontations (Islamism, Kemalism, and regional balance of power) that are intertwined and intensely interactive: The potential radicalization of Islamist movements through new sectarian polarization, the extension of the Kurdish Question regionally and internationally, the struggle for greater influence among regional powers, and the repercussions of Israel's aggressive policies. The discourse of civilization that Prime Minister Erdogan frequently and recently employs reflects a quest to invent a new political language and an overarching shared identity regarding the future of both Turkey and the Middle East.*

**P** rime Minister Erdogan's address at the AK Party's 4<sup>th</sup> Grand Congress on September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2012 initiated a debate on his party's new ideological inclination and the future of Turkish politics. Certain analysts drew attention to the replacement of the AK Party's previous emphasis on "service" (i.e. economic development and concrete projects) by "ideology" and "mission."<sup>1</sup> Other observers interpreted Prime Minister Erdogan's emotional speech marked with references to historical symbols of "the great nation" as a search for a new "Turkish-Islamic synthesis."<sup>2</sup> His emphasis on the shared history of Turks and Kurds, coupled with the 2071 vision (the millennial of the Battle of Manzikert), were believed to represent proof of such a quest.<sup>3</sup> While some commentators argued that the rising volume of conservative and religious values hinted at the formation of "a new nationalism," others claimed this to be a "normalization" of the relationship between religion and politics.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Prime Minister Erdogan's strongly-worded opposition to Israel's attacks against Gaza on 14-21 November 2012 and his critique of the UNSC's five permanent members was noteworthy. One of the leading themes in this address was Erdogan's emphasis on the Islamic world's role as a crucial actor while accusing the OIC

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and the Arab League of inaction. This position, coupled with his criticism of the West on the Palestinian issue, led some columnists to view Erdogan's position as "an anti-Western front" and "a quest for the Islamic world's leadership."<sup>5</sup>

This article claims that commentaries and analyses of Prime Minister Erdogan's discourse of civilization in recent years point to the AK Party's three key confrontations with the past: (a) the National Outlook movement from where most founding members emerged, (b) the Kemalist ideology that shaped the Republican period, and (c) the regional order that emerged after World War I and entered a period of profound transformation with the Arab revolutions. "Conservative democracy" –a term that connotes the ideological and political framework for all three of these confrontational processes- reshuffles Islamist, nationalist, pro-Western and Ottomanist elements that collectively constitute the Ottoman-Turkish modernization process' alternative ideological currents.

This discourse of civilization presents concepts and symbols dynamically connects with the aforementioned political currents accompanies their changing needs. In line with the period's overall atmosphere, the AK Party that appeared 'pro-Western' in the EU context and now emerges as a 'pro-ummah' and 'Middle Eastern' is seeing actors puts forth one set of credentials without abandoning the others.<sup>6</sup> The party views this synthesis as an extension of Turkey's strategic, historical, economic and cultural coordinates. Thus, it claims that it can

simultaneously push for EU membership and greater integration with the Islamic world. One may regard the story of Ottoman-Turkish modernization as a struggle between competing discourses of civilization (i.e. pro-Western, Islamist, nationalist). This article's purpose is to demonstrate that the AK Party's novel discourse of civilization represents

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represents the latest addition to this tradition and faces noteworthy challenges. In the absence of a strong grasp on this discourse that allows the party to simultaneously legitimize change and continuity, the diversity and flexibility of the AK Party administration's policies –as well as the changes they undergo- are bound to be interpreted as ideological (Islamist) instability or pragmatic reversals. By extension, this would render impossible a well-founded understanding of why society does not respond to the political opposition's criticism based on the party's "failures."

This article first presents the civilizational perspective that encompasses the AK Party's identity, its 10-year performance, and policies. Secondly, it focuses on the ways in which this perspective's multi-layered nature allows for a

simultaneous reconciliation with the party's Islamic past, Turkey's Kemalist ideology, and the Middle East's existing regional order. It analyzes the party's contestation of Kemalism, as it is the most important of these three elements. This analysis includes references to various concepts, such as "the politics of patience," "the politics of controlled tension," and "multilayered civilizational discourse." Finally, it touches upon the kind of challenges that face the AK Party in the aftermath of the Arab revolutions.

## **Understanding the AK Party's Identity Politics: A Civilizational Perspective**

Although Prime Minister Erdogan's lengthy address at the Party Congress featured the term "conservative democracy" only twice, the word "civilization" was used fourteen times. The term represented a source of national and spiritual values, a symbol of belonging to the Middle East and the Islamic world, and a keyword for common humanitarian values. The "civilization" concept's central position in the AK Party ideology and its multilayered nature (national, Islamic, and universal) does not represent a novel phenomenon. From its rise to power in 2002 to 2006, the party utilized the EU membership process as the main engine behind Turkey's democratization drive and presented Western integration as an alliance of civilizations. Again in the same period, a similar conceptualization dominated the party's prescription of democracy and human rights to the Islamic world.<sup>7</sup> In recent times, however, an emerging discourse of "common Islamic civilization" plays a more noteworthy role as part of the AK Party's efforts to control the wave of regional transformation that arose out of the Arab revolutions. This conceptualization of "civilization" is thus employed to prevent sectarian polarization and conflict in the Middle East.

This civilization perspective rejects the possibility of an identity crisis in Turkish foreign policy as well as an exclusive choice between the Western alliance and Islam or the East. From this perspective, Turkey would refuse to view its role as a bridge between the West and Islam, as a frontier region of the West, and as a torn country between two historical, geographic and cultural regions to which it retains strong ties. Quite the contrary, it presents itself as a central country that assumes a constructive role in its surrounding regions. Aware of its position as a leading actor of civilization, Turkey promises to become one of the most important global actors once it succeeds in combining its central country position with its strategic depth.<sup>8</sup> In this sense, the ambiguous nature of the civilization concept increases both its usefulness and attractiveness. Referencing Seljuk and Ottoman sultans and imagining Turkey as a "great nation" and "strong state," Prime Minister Erdogan manages to combine nationalist and Ottomanist elements (such as Ottoman/Turkish cemeteries in 35 countries) while integrating the concept of civilization.<sup>9</sup>

## Claiming ownership of the Palestinian cause and strongly criticizing Israel, the AK Party's foreign policy legitimizes its Islamic solidarity politics as part of its civilizational duty

The emphasis on Seljuks emerges as part of the “great nation” narrative that considers the Kurds to be one with the Turks. This great nation’s rise to its appropriate position among world nations will take place based on its historic experience of coexistence and with the AK Party’s leadership. This makes it clear that Erdogan’s historical references not only work to attach a mission, identity, and sense of belonging to the party but also to construct an identicalness between Turkey’s future and his party.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, Erdogan’s civilizational discourse allots “a vanguard role” for Turkey in creating “a new civilizational consciousness.”<sup>11</sup> The multi-layered civilizational perspective constitutes the framework for a discourse that retains various goals at the same time.

The civilization discourse’s ambiguous yet functional nature compensates for the need for ideology without ideology’s inherent rigidity. This gives rise to a narrative that continuously produces and reproduces party identity.

Although it includes *national* elements when emphasizing Turkey’s integrity, common future and leadership, this narrative bears *regional* motives at times of escalated integration with surrounding regions.<sup>12</sup> When underscoring coexistence with Europe, *universal* symbols enter into this civilizational discourse with its emphasis on “ancient civilization” and “alliance of civilizations.”<sup>13</sup> The discourse of justice adds a Western critique to this universality through its objection to the international order’s inequalities.

Claiming ownership of the Palestinian cause and strongly criticizing Israel, the AK Party’s foreign policy legitimizes its Islamic solidarity politics (i.e. safeguarding the *ummah*’s interests from Somalia and Rakhine to Syria) as part of its civilizational duty. Egyptian President Mohamed Mursi’s address, coupled with Hamas leader Khaled Mashal’s vast appeal and presentation of Erdogan “as a leader of the Islamic world” during the AK Party congress suggest that this political strategy receives positive feedback at a regional level. Again, Nahda leader Rashid al-Ghannouchi’s comment that “the AK Party carried Turkey to the heart of the *ummah* after perhaps more than a century of walking history’s margins” offers the same kind of insight.<sup>14</sup> Prime Minister Erdogan’s address at Cairo University described the Palestinian conflict with concepts such as “the fraternity of cities” and “common civilization” and brought new life to a renewed discourse of Islamic civilization:

Just as Mecca, Madina, Cairo, Alexandria, Beirut, Damascus, Diyarbakir, Istanbul, Ankara are each other’s brothers, so, let the world know and understand that Ramallah, Nablus, Jericho, Rafah, Gaza and Jerusalem are these cities’ brothers and our brothers. Each drop of blood spilled in these cities is the same blood that

flows in our veins. Every living soul that drops to the ground in these cities is the same life as ours. Each tear is our own tear. Let no one misinterpret the silence that dominated this region for almost a century. Let everyone know that sooner or later, the innocent children massacred in Gaza with inhumane methods shall be accounted for.<sup>15</sup>

Thanks to the wave of change that the Arab revolutions brought into the MENA region, it becomes possible for democratization to become more apparent within this discourse. Close relations with Egypt and Islamic criticisms against Israel also help shape its contents. Despite all aforementioned elements of identity, the AK Party's civilizational discourse is aware that its popular support in Turkey rests on the country's economic performance. In other words, economic growth and increasing trade volumes serve as the primary elements supplementing the civilizational discourse in both domestic politics and foreign affairs. A new political economy approach that combines neoliberal economic requirements with welfare state elements (i.e. public housing, education, and healthcare) –known as social neoliberalism– completes this civilization discourse.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, much effort is shown in foreign policy to prevent regional or bilateral tensions from negatively affecting trade relations.

There is no question that Erdogan's strong leadership skills (public speaking, party organization's strength, and mobilization) compensate for the civilization discourse's ambiguity and temporary shifts in its emphasis. This final section will analyze the problems related to this discourse's contradictions (such as emphasizing a geographical continuity with neighbors in order to underline the decreasing importance of borders designed by Western colonial powers in the past or focusing on pragmatic needs of territorial national interests when needed) and its reliance on strong leadership. First, it would be more meaningful to concentrate on the AK Party's own history and its coming to terms with the National Outlook.

## **Re-Inventing the Past: Coming to Terms with National Outlook**

Having distanced itself from the National Outlook movements since its establishment, the AK Party kept in mind not only the securitization that followed the February 28 process but also the Welfare Party's anti-Western, Third-Worldist Islamism. Putting aside the claim that Islam was a state-building political project, the party shifted its relations with the West from opposition to what may be termed "critical integration." In this sense, it is possible to claim that the AK Party's emphasis on internationalization represents a new definition of "universal" that rejects both Eurocentrism and Third-Worldism. While the party focused on alliances with the West (i.e. NATO and the EU), it simultaneously constructed a critique of the Western-centered international





Saudi Foreign Minister Al-Faisal, U.S. Secretary of State Clinton, Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoglu and EU Foreign Policy Chief Ashton, pose at the Global Counterterrorism Forum in Istanbul.  
REUTERS/POOL New

order. Drawing attention to the international system's injustice toward Muslim countries, addressing both underdevelopment and Middle Eastern geopolitics, the party effectively voices a demand for a new international order.

This new approach is one of the reasons why the Islamic world views the AK Party as a model. More specifically, the AK Party's Western policy consistently included two elements. First, it includes Turkey as part of the Western alliance in the context of democratization, human rights, development and –of course– real national interests. The party's claim of ownership over the EU membership process and its nurturing relations with the US underscore this position. However, the second element is a critical stance toward the West based on the injustices in the Middle East and of the international order. This became visible in Prime Minister Erdogan's criticism of the West for their irresponsible support for Israel and disregard of the injustice of Islamophobia. Erdogan's referral to Israel as a terrorist state and critique of the Obama administration during the 8th meeting of the Eurasian Islamic Council served as the most recent example of this bold stance. Declaring that he has no confidence in the

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UN's justice, Erdogan called for solidarity among Islamic countries in the face of world's injustices.<sup>17</sup>

In touch with international institutions but willing to remind humanitarian conscience of the need for justice, this new approach sets an example for the transformation of Islamic movements that recently came to power in Egypt and Tunisia. Erdogan's adding Erbakan to his list of the AK Party's heritage, too, does point to a new stage in his dealing with Islamism. Having secured

judicial action against alleged coup plots, the party declared the end of military coups and securitization of Turkish politics. In this sense, lifting various restrictions on religious education (elective courses on the Qur'an and others in high school curricula) and religious freedoms (veiled students' admission into universities) serve as examples. Similarly, the increasing number of Islamic references in Erdogan's speeches contributes to this trend. This new setting represents a ground for the normalization of Islamism in a new Turkey that the AK Party claims to construct. In other words, these practices serve as an attempt to make up for the impoverishing effects of Kemalism, which cleansed Islamic symbols and references from the public domain.<sup>18</sup> This way, the AK Party integrated Islamist politics into the democratic regime by simultaneously transforming the movement and meeting its demands.

The success of this integration leads to the analysis that the AK Party allowed Turkish Islamism to be absorbed or coopted into "secular hegemony" and even capitalism.<sup>19</sup> This analysis, which by and large, focuses on the absorbent influence of the party's neoliberal economic policies fail to account for the multilayered civilizational perspective's opportunities (ideological and discursive empowerment, elasticity of political identity, and successful management of inconsistent policies) for Turkey's Islamist movement. Perhaps the most underrated aspect of the AK Party's civilizational discourse is its ability to make room for temporary designs that allow for a complex and multifaceted confrontation with Kemalist ideology.

## **Confrontation with Kemalism between Restoration and Reconstruction**

The AK Party primarily claimed ownership of the EU accession process to confront the Kemalist tutelary regime. This allowed the party to garner strong sup-

port from various social groups (including liberals and Kurds) to liberate the country from Kemalism's securitizing policies. Once in power, the AK Party embarked on a Europeanization mission by passing various 'harmonization' packages and used foreign policy as an instrument to transform domestic politics. A number of crucial developments such as the abolishing of the infamous State Security Courts and the National Security Council's rearrangement took place in this period. In this sense, democratization became part of Turkey's foreign policy. In other words, foreign policy became an instrument of transforming the country's political system with help from the conservative elite and with as little conflict as possible. Turkish society's support for the EU membership process and the AK Party's claiming ownership of the process also helped the party to overcome legitimacy issues that it encountered in domestic politics.<sup>20</sup>

'Politics of patience' serves as a key concept to describe the AK Party's strategy during its first term (2002-2007) in power. This approach effectively employs the EU membership process and foreign policy to establish a civilian control over the military. In an attempt to accumulate actual power without antagonizing the military and the Kemalist establishment, the party highlighted the bureaucratic elite's authoritarianism to get support from the liberal sectors of Turkish society. Although this strategy meant that the demands of the Islamic electorate had to be delayed for a certain time, 'the politics of patience' fulfilled two functions. First, it managed to legitimize its patient wait for meeting demands for religious education and the headscarf with reference to the strong state minded reflexes of the Sunni tradition. This way, the AK Party accumulated considerable room for maneuver. The social, political and economic opportunities that became accessible to the party by merit of its being in power rendered this wait easier.

The second aspect of the politics of patience was the maturing of Islamist demands during this period and their elimination of arguably anti-democratic elements. Waiting for a consensus among the secularist elite with regard to religious demands may also be added to this list. This political position that aims to reform itself and its opposition, remained the party's main strategy until the contestation over the 2007 presidential election.


The 2007 presidential election and a 2008 closure case against the AK Party were formative in a new political strategy, the 'politics of controlled tension.' This approach worked to erode the Kemalist elite's hegemony and allowed the AK Party elite to accumulate real power by successfully containing various crises that the Kemalist elite initiated. The process began with harmonization packages that altered civil-military relations at the latter's expense and continued with several coup trials including the Sledgehammer case, the September 12 trial and the February 28 case. Having thus undone the Kemalist elite's hegemony, the AK Party repositioned itself at the political system's center and suc-



ceeded in centralizing political power in its hands by aligning its future with the country's prospects.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the party significantly transformed the Kemalist foreign policy through its new foreign policy perspective with Turkey at the center. The 2010 constitutional referendum effectively disempowered the high judiciary, the final Kemalist stronghold, as a containing mechanism for the AK Party government. Following its electoral victory in June 2011, the party found nearly no limitation to its agenda to transform Turkey.

These developments notwithstanding, this centralization of political power and transformative role deprived the AK Party of a notable political capital: its discourse to oppose Kemalism despite being in positions of power. Erdogan's frequent accusations against the Republican People's Party based on recent historical developments may be regarded as an attempt to continue the low-cost, high-yield confrontation with Kemalism. However, expecting criticisms of the RPP to offer a long-term replacement for the lack of political capital stemming from the Kemalist center's demise would be unrealistic. While on the one hand "Kemalism as the other" becomes less impressive, the AK Party is on the other hand frequently charged with restoring the Kemalist structure for its own ends.

The party's being charged with losing its focus on EU membership and becoming more authoritarian despite its "advanced democracy" discourse serves as a good example of this process. At times, the charge of authoritarianism may take the form of over-generalizing and ideological assessments claiming that the AK Party engages in a "top-down Islamization" of the country with government resources. However, more sophisticated criticisms posit that the AK Party's insufficiently liberal approach to macro-level democratization results in a failure to broaden individual rights and liberties at the micro level, and therefore lead to "Islamization from below."<sup>22</sup> In other words, ten years of AK Party rule gave rise to dominant party politics due to its emphasis on executive power. However, this dominant position leads opposition parties to view their rise to power as an impossibility. Moreover, it is not uncommonly argued that the party fails to prevent the deepening of Turkish society's mass polarization. Whether or not a dominant party unable to bring about consensus can actually consolidate liberal democracy remains to be seen.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the reaction against the AK Party's centralization of power motivates Kemalist social groups to view the military as a guardian of the regime and, by extension, favor military coups. The direct consequence of this phenomenon is that Turkey fails to engage in constitutive politics to consolidate its democracy.<sup>24</sup>



**The increasing number of Islamic references in Erdogan's speeches represents a ground for the normalization of Islamism in a new Turkey that the AK Party claims to construct**

More significantly, Turkey has yet to construct a new political language and overarching identity to replace Kemalism's uniform and exclusive nationalism and build a "new Turkey." Expected to lead a new social and political consensus to resolve the Kurdish Question among other issues, the AK Party also failed to develop a novel definition of citizenship. Thus, the question remains what is to replace the traditional nationalism that cannot meet Turkey's changing needs. While the message that members of Turkey's society are heirs to a shared "civilization" dating back to Manzikert and same ancestors under Islam may be seen as discursive elements that could facilitate coexistence, these

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nonetheless are bound to fall short of meeting Kurdish nationalist demands.<sup>25</sup> It is noteworthy that Kemalism managed to forge a Turkish nation from various ethnic groups – with the notable exception of Kurdish nationalists. Similarly, Mustafa

Kemal's significance as a national symbol must be acknowledged. From this perspective, the AK Party's paradox between restoring and undoing/reconstructing Kemalism becomes more evident. The emphasis on "Ghazi" Mustafa Kemal and "the founding spirit" of 1923 in Erdogan's address hints at this paradox and need.

In one way, this emphasis serves as a response to the criticism that the AK Party drives Turkey to a regime change. As a matter of fact, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, too, did describe the AK Party period's active development and foreign policy strategies as "the fourth restoration effort" after the Tanzimat, the Republic, and World War II. Davutoglu, who insisted on using the term restoration as opposed to revolution or paradigm shift, pointed out that this was a "EU-focused move with an emphasis on liberty."<sup>26</sup> However, it demonstrates a need for "New Turkey" to retain certain critical, unifying elements and symbols from old Turkey. While the government chose to redefine nationalism and secularism, two main principles of the Kemalist ideology, it established civilian supervision over the military – a primary actor in safeguarding the ideology.<sup>27</sup> More significantly, it removed the figure of Atatürk, the symbol of the Kemalist ideology, from its over-emphasized central position in Turkish modernization and gradually historicized and normalized its image. Instead of positioning Mustafa Kemal opposite to Abdulhamid II – the actual modernizing leader in the eyes of Islamists – it placed the two figures next to one another in an attempt to solidify continuity of modernization movement and render ideological opposition ineffective.<sup>28</sup>

The paradox that the AK Party experienced in its transformation of the Kemalist establishment led to various observations. A notable critique was that the EU membership process' decreasing importance provided incentives for the

party to maintain the newly-achieved status quo in civil-military relations and to not problematize a military-centered state tradition.<sup>29</sup> This was met with a competing claim that the AK Party did not lose its reformist edge and followed a “conscious politics of gradual reform.” According to this approach, the reforms’ primary goal was not to “inject its color and ideology into the state or the regime.” Instead, the party strived to reform these institutions within its own tradition to promote a democratic structure.<sup>30</sup>

From 2002 to date, the AK Party’s most significant strength has been its ability to lead its competitors in reformism and democratization. Furthermore, the party positioned itself as the main actor behind economic growth and stability. Its ability to impose this claim across a variety of social groups ensured this success.<sup>31</sup>

The AK Party’s ability to present itself as the single most important political party to further reforms served a double function. On the one hand, the party managed to monopolize the domain of democratization and reform to effectively problematize the opposition’s democratic credentials and criticism. On the other hand, it found an opportunity to make its mark on Turkish politics and society within the framework of its conservative democrat identity. It was precisely in this sense that the discourse of civilization functioned to provide self-confidence, a notion of *mission (dava)*, and dynamism to the party-powered elite and the broader social base.<sup>32</sup>

The oscillations between restoration and reconstruction emerge as the AK Party’s litmus test for exercising political power. Although the party continues to lead others in fulfilling reformist expectations, its ever-stronger inclination to maintain stability created challenges in manipulating the opposition vis-a-vis the Kurdish Question and others. Although the criticism regarding imprisoned journalists and restrictions on liberty may be viewed as a discourse to limit the AK Party’s exercise of power, one must nonetheless bear in mind that losing the reformist edge and focusing on stability alone would inevitably erode the party’s power.

The opposition’s push for an alternative celebration of the Republic’s 89<sup>th</sup> anniversary and the government’s response demonstrated how political polarization may turn an agreed-upon matter into an issue of political contestation in the domain of daily politics. More significantly, the attempt to prevent these demonstrations based on “intelligence reports” suggesting that armed groups will plot a conspiracy entailed a possibility of the threat of the democratic republic turning authoritarian.<sup>33</sup>

Although it is true that tensions around secularism, the Republic, and Kemalism tend to work to the AK Party’s advantage, such polarization’s toll on a

consensus-based transformation must nonetheless be noted.<sup>34</sup> In other words, the politics of controlled tensions and Erdogan's superior performance in manipulating public debate allows the AK Party to effectively take advantage of these polarizations and to solidify popular support. Particularly with its current power, ruling over the politics of symbols and values represents an easy task for the party. However, the successful marginalization of main opposition RPP entails high costs in other areas such as drafting the new Constitution that necessitate a high level of compromise. As such, the party proves unable to translate its alleged role as a dominant party into the political system's institutional and democratic transformation.

The large-scale changes that the Arab revolutions brought about in the Middle East add yet another dimension to the restoration-reconstruction issue. Simultaneous democratization and conflict in the region result in a heightened sense of AK Party's shared destiny with the region's peoples.

### **Coming to Terms with the Regional Order and the Need for a New Political Language in the Middle East**

Kemalism had no interest in coming to terms with the regional order that emerged in the aftermath of World War I. It also was careful to not become involved with the problems of former Ottoman countries and peoples. However, the 1990s proved that the Kurdish Question prevented Turkey from isolating itself from the region. The AK Party's new foreign policy with its strategic depth claimed ownership of regional problems and the need for reconciliation. Aiming for greater regional integration through its "zero problems with neighbors" conceptualization, this foreign policy perspective worked to develop relations without antagonizing the regional powers. The "zero problems with neighbors" approach represented a cause to transform Turkish foreign policy's traditional conceptualization of security. The cooperation and economic integration between Turkey and Syria, two countries that were on the verge of war in 1998, until August 2011 exemplifies this intention.

However, the Arab revolutions not only altered the balance of power in the Middle East but also emerged as a litmus test for Turkey's claims for regional leadership based on soft power tools.<sup>35</sup> Having stood by the people during the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, the AK Party did not stand idly by in the face of the Assad regime's massacres against the Syrian people and offered active support to the opposition. The Arab revolutions' repercussions in Syria have posed and continue to bring about challenges for Turkey's new foreign policy. Criticizing the Kemalist foreign policy for its constant lamenting of problems surrounding the country and engendering an isolationist mindset, the AK Party now faces serious regional security issues. The Syri-

an crisis not only entailed a refugee problem but also boosted Turkey's competition with Iran over regional leadership and engendered the risk of PYD, a PKK-affiliated organization in Northern Syria, emerging as the local authority. Simultaneously experiencing tensions with Iraq's Maliki government over Baghdad's repressive policies against the Sunni population, Turkey finds itself in a spiral of multi-faceted security issues. This made it clear that multi-party diplomatic negotiations and mutual economic dependence proved insufficient in establishing a new regional order and resolving conflicts. The Syrian crisis in particular compelled the Turkish government to replace its soft-power-based "zero problems with neighbors" approach with *controlled tensions* policy that resorts to some hard power. The country played a leading role in organizing the Syrian opposition in order to force Bashar Assad out of power. Having discredited great power involvement as a legitimizing factor in regional interventions, Ankara accused international organizations of inaction during both the Syrian civil war and Israeli attacks against Gaza. Moreover, the country has been holding talks with Russia over enabling a peaceful transition in Syria without Assad. This active involvement in Syria represents Turkey's difficult position as it faces the balance of power (Russia's support for the Assad regime and Iranian front of resistance) in the Middle East.

Looking at the region from a broader perspective, the AK Party government finds itself compelled to deal with the radicalization of Islamist groups while supporting the Muslim Brotherhood (and its offshoots) that came to power in Egypt and Tunisia. The Syrian opposition's Islamist rhetoric against the Assad regime bears the potential to entail regionwide influences. Against the background of an ongoing struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia with sectarian overtones, the AK Party faces the possibility that this sectarian competition might drag diverse Muslim groups into a spiral of conflicts. This international environment where Iran and Saudi Arabia compete as model countries forced Turkey to either develop an "active multilateralism policy" to overcome sectarian polarization and promote democratic transitions or to assume a passive stance by letting go of regional competition. The emergence of a new order in the Middle East based on sectarian polarization, securitization, and factionalism would inevitably lead to outside actors becoming more involved in regional issues. If the new regional order can emerge out of a gradual



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reform process based on economic integration and diplomatic compromise, this would create fertile ground for a regional cooperation perspective to accompany a new, non-radical critique of the West.<sup>36</sup>

In addition, the Middle Eastern order's fragility became clearer in the face of Israel's attack on Gaza. In a strongly-worded criticism of Israel's bombing of civilians, Prime Minister Erdogan elevated the Western critique to a new level by pointing out that there was no representative of the Muslim world in the UNSC. Having long emphasized the international order's injustices, this call underscored the need for solidarity in the Muslim world.<sup>37</sup> The AK Party's harsh statements on Palestine increasingly position Israel as "the other" of Turkish foreign policy. Paradoxically, however, the poor relations between the two countries do not extend to economic ties. Although the Felicity Party pointed out this contradiction between Turkish foreign policy's discourse on Israel and its practical repercussions, this criticism exerted limited influence over the AK Party's Islamist base. The main reason for this was that the controversy was concealed by a strong leader's politics of rhetorics with a civilizational discourse.

Moreover, the new Middle East poses the following four challenges to the AK Party:

- a- The possibility of rising Islamist movements' radicalization through a new sectarian polarization;
- b- The Kurdish Question, a national *and* cross-national/regional issue across four countries (and ongoing tensions between Baghdad and Arbil);
- c- Administering power struggle among regional powers (i.e. Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt);
- d- Israel's continued aggression and resistance against the changes ushered in by the Arab revolutions, and the likelihood of a regional conflict with US support.

In relation to these rising challenges, it is possible to talk of a new phenomenon that became visible over the past two years with the introduction of Islamic themes in foreign policy discourse and Erdogan's call to "raise a religious generation." The AK Party feels compelled to strengthen itself with a political identity that matches its performance, strong leadership and accumulation of power.

There appear to be two main reasons for this:

Primarily, the party becomes increasingly aware of its lack of a political language and identity necessary for the new equilibrium arising out of the Arab revolutions. This aggravated the need for a clearer political identity as Islamic movements in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya appealed to the Turkish experiment

for legitimacy and were willing to learn from the AK Party government. It is peculiar that the two top explanations for Turkey's inability to serve as a leader to the Middle East are that the country is not Muslim enough (23%) and that it has a secular government (13%).<sup>38</sup> These two responses collectively (36%) point out that the Turkish experiment's relationship with religiosity continues to seem problematic to the Muslim population of the Middle East, despite Erdogan and his party's Islamist credentials.

Again, the Arab revolutions made clear the need to develop a political discourse dealing with the Islam-democracy and Islam-secularism relations. The AK Party experience, successful in coming to power and exerting power in practice, fails to deliver the same kind of appeal for Islamist groups at a discursive level. It is also possible to claim that the Sunni-Shia polarization in the region, coupled with Saudi Arabia's sectarian transnational political discourse and activities, make things more challenging. In this sense, it does not seem plausible for the AK Party to counter this trend with a call for secularism as part of its efforts to develop a language to overrule this polarization. The Egyptian Islamists' rejection of Erdogan's secularism proposal demonstrates that the Turkish Islamists' achievement in political performance cannot conceal their discursive weaknesses.

While the AK Party experiences no difficulties with the ambiguity of its discourse (conservative democracy) and has even turned this into an advantage thanks to its active leadership, it is forced to abandon this approach in this new period. Pressured into clarifying its political identity's relationship with Islam, the AK Party moved to addressing this need with yet another ambiguous concept (civilization). In this respect, the notion of justice became more prominent in Turkey's foreign policy rhetoric. Again, foreign policy helps alleviate a parallel need to emphasize identity in domestic politics.

Secondly, there is a clear indication of a need for the party identity to become institutionalized as the strong leader's term in prime ministry comes to an end after a decade in power. The inadequacy of political language and identity emerged as a result of politicians with Islamic credentials not employing Islamic references. Enjoying the opportunities that arose out of the Kemalist hegemony's demise, the party either abolished or bent secularist/securitizing restrictions to accommodate the conservative/Islamic base's identity-related demands. In addition to political power's various benefits, the need for a renewed identity and language becomes necessary to freshen up this social

**Pressured into clarifying its political identity's relationship with Islam, the AK Party moved to addressing this need with yet another ambiguous concept (civilization)**

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base's mobilization. Approaching the issue from this perspective, the debate that followed Erdogan's call to "raise a religious generation" would not appear to aim at Turkey's Islamization through a Jacobean project. It represents solely a venture related to the frail political identity from which his party and religious social base suffer. It is seen as mandatory for the continuation of AK Party rule in the next decade. The multilayered discourse of civilization serves precisely this need.

The following are the critical questions on the AK Party government to which we shall seek answers in the near future: Will the multi-layered and ambiguous civilizational discourse prove adequate in addressing the aforementioned challenges? How long can the party absorb the contradictions that arise among concrete political decisions within its discourse? Can the AK Party's discourse engender the necessary consensus in domestic politics? How can the AK Party combine its discourse with the existing dilemma between strong leadership and institutionalization?

### **Conclusion**

The AK Party seeks answers to four challenges that arose out of three intertwined and strongly interactive confrontations (Islamism, Kemalism, and the regional balance of power): The potential of Islamic movements' radicalization through a new sectarian polarization, the extension of the Kurdish Question's repercussions and power strifes regionally and internationally, and the effects of Israel's aggressive policies. It is necessary to interpret Erdogan's recent emphasis on the civilizational discourse in light of these challenges. Both this discourse and the party's 2023/2071 visions represent a quest to invent a new political language and common overarching identity in Turkey and the Middle East. With its various layers bringing together national, regional and universal elements, the civilizational discourse proves to be rather useful for the country. However, whether this discourse can respond to the Middle East's sectarian shifts and simultaneously develop a democratic language and practice to help the region integrate with the rest of the world remains the main question. The Islamic element's dominance within this discourse will also play a decisive role in answering this question. Neither an out-of-touch secularist discourse nor a sectarian Islamist language shall prove beneficial in this regard.

It is evident that Erdogan's strong public speaking skills employ the discourse of civilization to shape new Turkey's identity. In addition to the AK Party's centralization of political power, Erdogan's frequent use of the civilizational discourse increasingly causes the following to penetrate the mainstream: The

opportunities and criticism of strong leadership. Focusing on Erdogan's leadership solely in terms of centralized power causes the leadership's role in the party's rising popular support and continued appeal to be underrated. Strong leadership not only compensates for the AK Party's ambiguous party identity but also helps balance and keep in check policy reversals and contradictions. In this sense, the party finds it possible to simultaneously take yet another step in resolving the Kurdish Question by granting the right to use native languages in the court of law, and to adopt a nationalist discourse to spark public debate on reinstituting the death penalty. More significantly, strong leadership emerges as an instrument to manage rising expectations and inequality-related grievances in an increasingly resourceful Turkish economy.

Along with all these elements, it is noteworthy that not only the liberal and left elites but also conservative and even Islamist elite groups engage in some criticism of the AK Party based on authoritarianism and populism. Over the next decade, the party's ability to supplement its civilizational discourse with democratization practices, and its success in institutionalizing the strong leader's charisma will determine the AK Party's new political identity and political prospects. ■

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