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Revisionism as a characteristic of authoritarian ex-empires: a case study of Turkish neo-Ottomanism (1990-2020)**

Abstract

Revisionism is one of the main drivers of international conflict in the 21st century. Sensing the weakening of US global leadership, countries with regional or great power ambitions, especially former empires, increasingly resort to threats and the use of force to alter the *status quo* in their favour. In some cases, this involves military occupation, and even annexation of foreign territory. This article takes a closer look at neo-Ottomanism, Turkey's revisionist foreign policy, and its gradual transition from a soft-power to a hard-power approach, which eventually led to Ankara's military incursion and occupation of parts of neighbouring Syria.

Key words: revisionism; imperial nostalgia; neo-Ottomanism; territorial expansion; Turkey

Introduction

In August 2016, Turkey launched *Operation Euphrates Shield* in northern Syria, effectively removing the Islamic State from its border and driving a wedge between areas held by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). *Euphrates Shield* was the start of an ongoing military endeavour by Ankara and allied Syrian groups to prevent the establishment of a *de facto* autonomous Kurdish-dominated region – known as Rojava – along Turkey's southern border, an entity regarded as terrorist by Turkish authorities. In its place, Ankara is trying to erect a "safe zone," run by Turkey-friendly elements of the Syrian opposition and repopulated mostly by Sunni Arab refugees. The Arabized area is intended to serve as a buffer zone between the territory controlled by Syrian Kurds and the majority Kurdish areas in Turkey.

Although Turkey presented its actions in northern Syria as part of the ongoing "war on terror," it will be argued here that national security concerns were not the pri-

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mary reason for the launch of *Euphrates Shield* and other military operations. Rather, the offensive against the Islamic State (and later the SDF) was used as a pretext, or justification for Turkey's return to areas it has always considered part of its homeland. Such behaviour is characteristic of revisionist powers, especially former empires, unsatisfied with their position and standing in the international arena.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate, through a hypothesis-generating case study, that authoritarian regimes,¹ nostalgic of their countries' former glory, are particularly prone to revisionism and aggressive foreign policies. The case study is conducted within the theoretical framework of Alexander Wendt's constructivism and by means of qualitative content analysis.

The theory

Constructivism challenges the focus of realist IR theory on external, objective, or material factors in the analysis of state behaviour and the explanation of their status in international relations. The clout of a state actor is not to be determined by "objective" or "material" circumstances, such as military and economic potential, size of country, its population, etc., but rather according to its perception of the self and the perception by others. Its actions cannot be understood without the comprehension of its underlying identity. In other words, foreign policy should be viewed as an extension of domestic politics (Jović, 2016: 11-16).

Constructivists use the category of identity in order to fathom an actor's formulation of their interests, from which follow concrete actions (identity → interests → actions). The behaviour of states is determined by answers to questions of identity: are we a *big* or a *small* state? Are we a *powerful* state, in terms of economy, military, politics, and culture? Are we capable of acting independently or do we need alliances and coalitions to accomplish our goals? And most importantly: how great is our power in relation to the power of others? How much power do we need and how much of it do we wish to use in concrete cases? These questions are essential in strategizing and taking action in foreign policy, and they are all connected to a state's identity. Therefore, states (actors) enjoy a central place in constructivist theory, which repudiates the neorealist claim that states do not act as they please, but rather as circumstances dictate (Jović, 2016: 16-17).

This paper argues that constructivism is the most fitting (meta-)theoretical framework for the explanation of Turkey's behaviour in the post-Cold War period. Since the

¹ In 2018 Koray Çalışkan convincingly argued that Turkey moved from tutelary democracy toward its current state of competitive authoritarianism. He also stated that the regime displayed a tendency toward full authoritarianism.

early 1990s, Turkey has been going through a process of identity redefinition, accelerated (but not inaugurated) by the prime minister and later president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party. This process of identity redefinition comes less than a century after the last, which occurred in the 1920s, following the abolition of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of the modern Republic of Turkey. In both cases, identity redefinition led to grand shifts in foreign policy: in the interwar period from Ottoman imperialism to Atatürk's "Peace at home, peace in the world" doctrine (isolationist nationalism), and in the post-Cold War period from a commitment to collective security through the NATO (Euro-Atlanticism) to a more independent and robust foreign policy under Erdoğan (neo-Ottomanism rather than Islamism).

In this context, it is especially interesting to point out that Wendt distinguishes between corporate and social identity. In simplest terms, a state's corporate identity shows how a state sees and defines itself, whereas social identity comprises the roles ascribed to the state by other actors in accordance with their perceptions and expectations of the aforementioned state (Kovačević, 2016: 64). In the case of contemporary Turkey, we could argue that it sees and defines itself as the heir to the glorious Ottoman Empire, whose sphere of influence extends across several regions surrounding Anatolia, and whose mission is to protect the interests not only of Turks and the related ethno-linguistic groups but also of all Sunni Muslims within the imagined neo-Ottoman space. This is in stark contrast to the way others, especially NATO allies, perceive Turkey and its geopolitical role. In their view, Turkey is – or should be – a liberal democratic and secular state, firmly rooted in the NATO and acting in concert with Western powers. The dissonance between Turkey's corporate and social identity is what fuels tensions between Turkey and a host of Western countries, who either fail to understand, or refuse to accept, that Turkey's redefinition of national identity has led to a profound recalibration of its foreign policy and to a revisionist longing for the (re)establishment of great power status.

The method

In his book *The Origins of Revisionist and Status-Quo States* Jason W. Davidson begins the categorization of states according to their articulated goals rather than according to actions they might take to achieve them. He argues that a state becomes revisionist when it declares that its foreign policy will pursue changes in the current distribution of goods (territory, status, markets, expansion of ideology, and the creation of or change in international law and institutions). Davidson emphasizes that the initial categorization, based on spoken claims, needs to be corroborated by the willingness of states to incur costs in the pursuance of their goals (2006: 14-15). In simplified terms, the categorization is only valid if words are followed by deeds.

The importance placed by Davidson on the articulation of (revisionist) goals before actions are taken, led to the choice of qualitative content analysis as the main research method used in this paper. By analysing the content of relevant speeches, interviews and commentaries by Turkish heads of state and members of government over thirty years (1990-2020), this paper aims to demonstrate that revisionist foreign policy actions taken by Ankara with the aim to change the distribution of goods (territory, status, etc.) were premeditated and deliberate.

The samples cited in this paper are fragments of speeches, interviews and commentaries *discovered* during research that were either spoken originally or written in English or German, or translated into those languages by credible sources. By no means do these samples represent a complete and definitive list of official statements pertaining to the subject of Turkish revisionism. As the compiled material consists of statements given by various Turkish officials during a 30-year period, coding (identifying key words and expressions used repeatedly) was found to be inapplicable and therefore omitted.

Neo-Ottoman revisionism: the guiding principle of Turkish foreign policy in the post-Cold War era

A century has passed since the last term of the Ottoman Parliament in Constantinople and their announcement of the National Pact (*Misak-ı Millî*), a set of six important decisions including the delineation of the Turkish homeland that was to be established after the breakup of the Ottoman Empire.² In recent years, Turkey's political leadership has explicitly framed its revisionist foreign policy within the framework of the 1920 National Pact (Danforth, 2016). However, neo-Ottoman discourse has been in use for a long time and early examples can be found in the weeks and months following the breakups of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia.

From marginal to core state: reclaiming Turkey's sphere of influence in the 1990s

In December 1991, ten years before Ahmet Davutoğlu published *Strategic Depth*, his seminal work on Turkish foreign policy, and twelve years before Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became prime minister, Turkish President Turgut Özal had been quoted by Germany's foremost weekly news magazine, as saying: "The current historical circumstances

² The National Pact, disclosed on February 12, 1920, envisioned the inclusion of all Turkish (and Kurdish) majority areas not under foreign occupation by October 30, 1918, within the new nation state. The future of Arab majority areas was to be determined by a referendum. Until today, the Pact remains an inspiration for Turkish revisionism and even irredentism toward Greece, Syria, and Iraq.

permit Turkey to reverse the shrinking process that began at the walls of Vienna [in 1683]" (*Der Spiegel*, 1991).

This was not the only time Özal spoke in neo-Ottoman terms. In 1992 he gave an interview for the Turkish quarterly journal *Türkiye Günlüğü*, in which he stated:

When we have a look at the geopolitical area between the Adriatic Sea and Central Asia under the leadership of Turkey, we understand that this area has been shaped by the Ottoman-Islamic and Turkish population, and here the Turkish population is dominant. Today, it is possible to eliminate the ethnic differences by means of an Islamic identification, in a manner that was being realized during the Ottoman Empire period. (Mutlu, 2012: 132)

Süleyman Demirel, Turkey's prime minister from 1991 to 1993 and president from 1993 to 2000, followed suit and proclaimed on Turkish television in August 1992: "The great Turkish world which extends from the Adriatic Sea to the Great Wall of China will live forevermore" (Golan, 1992: 102).

Özal and Demirel's perception of the Adriatic Sea and Central Asia or China as the outer reaches of the Turkish world leads to the conclusion that in the 1990s Turkish leaders fostered a Turko-centric worldview in which the Republic of Turkey was a central, or even a core state;³ thus departing from the Cold War perspective, according to which Turkey was a country on the south-eastern margins of the anti-communist North Atlantic Alliance. It also shows that Özal and Demirel freely combined neo-Ottomanism (with elements of soft Islamism) and pan-Turkism, since the region bordering the Adriatic Sea is not turkophone, and Central Asia has never been incorporated in the Ottoman Empire.

This "new sense of Turkey's importance in the world" (Pipes, 1994: 75) or even "euphoria" (Robins, 2003: 280) among Turkish political leaders in the 1990s did not manifest itself in a form of open irredentism toward territories lost in the aftermath of World War I. Rather, the end of the Cold War and the breakup of multinational socialist federations were perceived in Ankara as a unique opportunity to reclaim Turkey's status of a multiregional power (Balkans, Caucasus, Central Asia, Middle East, North Africa). This task was to be achieved through a three-pronged approach: 1) prompt recognition of independence and establishment of bilateral relations with all newly-formed countries, 2) diplomatic backing of Muslims (Bosnian Muslims – later called Bosniaks – Albanians, Azeris, etc.) in various conflicts that arose in the early 1990s, and 3) generous development aid. The contours of Turkish soft power were starting to take shape.

³ S. P. Huntington contemplated an even greater role for Turkey. In *The Clash of Civilizations* he suggested that Turkey could become the core state of Islam if it rejected Atatürk's secularism.

Turkey was the first country to recognize the independence of former Soviet republics – Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – between October and December of 1991. This move signalled Ankara's resolve to form special relations with Turkic-speaking countries to its east. In February 1992, Turkey extended its diplomatic recognition to Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, even under its disputed constitutional name – the Republic of Macedonia – intentionally causing irritation in the neighbouring Greece. Turkey's recognition of Bosnia and Herzegovina is particularly interesting, as it had happened before the republic held the referendum on the issue. Obviously, early recognitions were seen as a way of creating footholds and securing leverage for the period to come.

Another important aspect of Turkey's early involvement in the areas of the former Ottoman Empire was Ankara's unwavering support of Muslims involved in ethno-religious conflicts. In August 1992, during the early phase of the Bosnian War, Turkey submitted a plan for military action to the UN Security Council, envisaging limited airstrikes on Serb positions and the lifting of the arms embargo against Bosnian Muslims. At the same time, Turkey and several other Muslim-majority countries were already smuggling weapons to their co-religionists in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Vračić, 2016: 8).

In February 1994, Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Çiller and Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto visited the besieged city of Sarajevo in a display of solidarity with the Bosnian people and the beleaguered Muslim-led government. A month later, Turkey was given a long-awaited green light by the UNSC to participate in the peace-keeping operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and by June, it had a regiment of 1,450 troops on the ground (Robins, 2003: 49). Finally, in August and September of 1995, Turkish military aircraft participated – alongside seven other nations – in the *Operation Deliberate Force*, a NATO air campaign against Serb army positions in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Conversino, 2000: 164).

Throughout the conflict, Turkey supported the standpoint of Bosnian Muslims, insisted on the republic's territorial integrity and favoured a political settlement which would give their co-religionists effective control over state affairs. Ankara behaved similarly during the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, backing the Azeri side to the point of closing the border with neighbouring Armenia in 1993 (Cornell, 2017: 92-93).

The Kosovo War of 1998-1999 was a game-changer for Turkey, as it sided – for the first time – with those seeking secession of an autonomous province. Between March and June of 1999 Turkish F-16 fighter jets participated in the NATO's *Operation Allied Force* against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, providing escort for squads of bombers (Vračić, 2016: 16). The sense of brotherhood with Kosovo Albanians, as emphasized by President Demirel (Hale, 2013: 204), trumped over Ankara's predisposition

toward conserving existing state borders, due to Turkey's own headaches with Kurdish secessionism.

Turkey's active participation in NATO military operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995 and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia/Kosovo in 1999 enabled Ankara to act militarily and pursue geostrategic goals outside of Turkish borders, albeit in a multilateral context. This only invigorated revisionism in Turkey and laid the groundwork for unilateral military undertakings that would take place in the future.

Development aid was to become another important tool of Turkey's self-promotion in its burgeoning sphere of influence. In 1992, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) was established. Its original goal was to assist the newly founded turkophone countries in Central Asia with their social, economic and cultural development.⁴ However, in just a few years' time, TİKA started expanding its area of involvement to other regions. In 1995, it opened an office in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where it carried out around 900 projects in the fields of education, health care, infrastructure, historical and cultural heritage protection, etc. (Anadolu Agency, 2020). The protection of historical and cultural heritage, especially, served as an important instrument of promotion of a neo-Ottoman identity among the local population, heavily concentrated on the restoration and reconstruction of Ottoman-era mosques, madrasas, hammams and bridges.⁵

Neo-Ottomanism in the 21st century: Turkey's semi-official foreign policy doctrine

Even though the period between 1991 and 2001 is well-stocked with examples of neo-Ottoman rhetoric and foreign policy manoeuvres, it was the first decade of the new millennium, which saw neo-Ottomanism rise to the rank of Turkey's semi-official foreign policy doctrine. The doctrine was only partially formal because Turkish authorities denied the very existence of neo-Ottomanism (Tanasković, 2010: 45). Turkish politicians are aware that Ottoman history and heritage can be as divisive as they can be unifying, and that even Muslim populations might bear grudges against their

⁴ The *About Us* on TİKA's website is curiously frank regarding Turkey's attitude toward Central Asia: "Turkey and the countries in Central Asia consider themselves as one nation containing different countries."

⁵ Where there are not any damaged or destroyed mosques, the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) is dedicated to build new ones, admittedly in the style of the Ottoman architecture of the classical period (15th to 18th century). That way it creates Ottoman heritage where there was not any. The most lavish example of such a project is the ongoing construction of the Great Mosque of Tirana, intended to become the largest in the Balkans.

former overlords. Therefore, neo-Ottomanism is simultaneously implemented and disavowed.

The person responsible for giving neo-Ottomanism a meticulous theoretical groundwork is university professor, foreign policy advisor, minister of foreign affairs, prime minister, and, since 2019, opposition politician Ahmet Davutoğlu. In his book *Strategic Depth*, Davutoğlu postulates that, as the heir to the Ottoman Empire, Turkey possesses considerable historical and geographical, and hence strategic depth. This depth provides Turkey with a comparative advantage in relation to other countries of the Eurasian geopolitical area. In order to realize its potential, Turkey must pursue a proactive and amiable foreign policy, in all directions at its disposal. By using the historical, cultural and spiritual elements of its Ottoman past as “building material,” Turkey can recreate the sphere of influence, roughly covering the domain of the former Empire, and thus regain its status of a regional power and an important global actor (Tanasković, 2010: 37-43).

Once the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, and Erdoğan was sworn in as Turkey’s prime minister in 2003, it became obvious that neo-Ottomanism would decisively shape Turkish foreign policy. To understand the meaning of the term, and to be able to work with it, it is essential to define it. A comprehensive definition of neo-Ottomanism has been formulated by Serbian Orientalist Darko Tanasković, an expert on Turkish engagement in the Balkans:

Neo-Ottomanism is more than ideology. It is a philosophy of history, a civilizational paradigm and worldview characteristic of most members of the contemporary Turkish nation, and especially of its intellectual elite. Neo-Ottomanism is the rationalization of the lingering imperial nostalgia of a great historic nation dissatisfied with its place and role in the world. (2010: 105)

In accordance with Davutoğlu’s vision, Turkey led a proactive, and for the most part, a neighbourly foreign policy, throughout the 2000s. In 2004, Erdoğan openly supported the Annan Plan for the reunification of Cyprus on a federative basis. The Plan was seen by the Greek side as strongly favouring Turkish Cypriots and Turkey, since it included a limited right of return of Greek Cypriots to the north of the island, with no guarantees for restitution of lost property. It also envisioned the granting of Cypriot nationality or permanent resident status to Turkish settlers who arrived after 1974, as well as the continued presence of Turkish troops on the island (ekathimerini, 2004). The Plan was discarded after 76% of Greek Cypriots rejected it in the referendum.

A year later, Erdoğan sent a letter to Armenian President Robert Kocharyan, proposing the establishment of a joint history commission to study the “events of 1915” and share findings with the international public. Ankara hoped that such an initiative would constitute the first step toward the normalization of bilateral relations with Ye-

revan. Even though Turkish and Armenian officials started working on a mechanism for addressing this difficult issue, the initiative ultimately failed due to strong opposition in both countries (Phillips, 2017: 101-104).

Turkey's "zero problems" policy toward its neighbours intensified after Davutoğlu became minister of foreign affairs in 2009. It was under his supervision that Turkey established high-level strategic council meetings with Iraq, Syria, Greece, and Russia. Davutoğlu openly talked of spreading Turkish soft power in the region, of avoiding threats and prioritizing civil-economic power (Foreign Policy, 2010). With the exception of Israel,⁶ Turkey in fact maintained decent relations with neighbouring countries, up until the onset of the Arab Spring in 2011.

It was in this mature period of neo-Ottoman foreign policy that its objectives and *modus operandi* became clearly discernible, mostly due to Davutoğlu's surprisingly candid appearances in his new role as foreign minister. In his address to the conference *The Ottoman Legacy and the Balkan Muslim Communities Today* in October 2009 in Sarajevo, Davutoğlu said:

In the 1990s, we faced many difficulties in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia. When those difficulties occurred, the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Albania, and Kosovo turned their face to Turkey because of their special historical relations... For all these Muslim nationalities in the Balkans, Caucasasia and the Middle East, Turkey is a safe haven and homeland. You are most welcome as well, because Anatolia belongs to you; and make sure that Sarajevo is ours. If you come to Turkey for whatever reason, you will be most welcome; but first and foremost we want you to be safe and secure here as the owners of Sarajevo and Bosnia-Herzegovina. (2009: 17-18)

According to Davutoğlu, Turkey is the guardian of Muslims living in the regions surrounding Anatolia. It will always be a "safe haven and homeland" to them, but the Turkish Foreign Minister would prefer Muslims to be the "owners" of their respective countries. By stressing his wish that Muslims remain "safe and secure" in Bosnia and Herzegovina, instead of emigrating to Turkey, Davutoğlu hinted at the concern that an "evacuation" of Muslims from the Balkans would undoubtedly lead to a decrease of Turkish influence in the region.

A Western diplomat reportedly asked 'Why are you, the Turks, parachuting on this issue' to question our involvement in Bosnia-Herzegovina. I responded to our Ambassador who brought the news that 'We did not go to Bosnia with parachutes, we went there by horse and stayed there with Bosnians sharing the same destiny'. Our

⁶ Erdoğan's quarrel with Shimon Peres over Israel's offensive in the Gaza Strip at the Davos Forum in January 2009 and the Israeli raid against the "Gaza Freedom Flotilla" in May 2010 indicated that Ankara's guardianship of the Palestinians would inevitably bring Turkey into conflict with Israel.

understanding is that whatever happens in the Balkans, Caucasia and the Middle East is just like a national issue. (2009: 18)

This is the “historical depth” Davutoğlu wrote about in 2001. He highlights the fact that Turks came to the Balkans and other regions on horseback (i.e. in the distant past), whereas other international actors “parachuted” there more recently. Therefore, their presence and involvement could never rival that of Turkey.

Our foreign policy aims to establish order in all these surrounding regions; the Balkans, the Middle East and Caucasia... For a diplomat from the West or another part of the world, the Bosnian issue is a technical issue to deal with, a technical diplomatic process. But for us, it is a life and death issue, it is so important. The territorial integrity of Bosnia-Herzegovina is as important for us as the territorial integrity of Turkey... This is not only the feeling of responsibility of our statesmen; this is the feeling and emotion of any individual Turk living in Turkey. (2009: 19)

If Bosnia is indeed “a life and death issue” for Turkey, then it would be no exaggeration to say that Turkish leaders perceive the long-lost territories as “their countries’ phantom limbs” (Ioffe, 2015). MedicineNet website defines *Phantom limb syndrome* as “the perception of sensations, often including pain, in an arm or leg long after the limb has been amputated.” In the same way, Turkey’s leaders, and probably a substantial portion of Turks in general, experience Bosnia, Crimea, Palestine, etc., as limbs amputated by the nation’s enemies, leaving behind a rump state, barely able to survive.

The frustration caused by the shrinking process that began in 1683 and was finally stopped 240 years later – with the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne – was voiced by President Özal in 1991, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Merely episodic during the 1990s and 2000s, it has become a recurring theme during Erdoğan’s presidency, more precisely, since the summer of 2016. What preceded this were three traumatic events that essentially transformed neo-Ottomanism from a soft-power to a hard-power approach to Turkish foreign policy, including the threat and use of force in international relations.

Boots on the ground – the third phase of neo-Ottomanism

In January 2011 protests against President Ben Ali erupted in Tunisia. In a matter of weeks, they spread throughout the Arab world, transforming into an open revolt against autocratic regimes, including the one in Damascus. Even though Turkey had courted Syria’s Bashar al-Assad for years, including a joint vacation of the Erdoğan and Assad families in the Turkish resort town of Bodrum (Çağaptay, 2020: 72), in 2011 Ankara opted in favour of backing the Syrian opposition. It had two good reasons for doing so. Firstly, at that time, the AKP still enjoyed mass popularity in Turkey, which meant that supporting “the people” against an authoritarian regime was a reasonable

and logical policy. Secondly, the opposition in Syria turned out to be mainly Islamist, making it a natural ally for the Islamo-conservative AKP (İşıksal, 2018: 13). The Syrian revolution, and the ensuing civil war, were the first of the three shocks that would transform neo-Ottomanism into a typical hard-power foreign policy.

The second shock was domestic, although it could be considered an offshoot of the Arab Spring. In May 2013, activists staged a sit-in in Istanbul's Gezi Park, located near the central Taksim Square. They protested the government's plans to bulldoze the park in order to accommodate a replica of the Ottoman-era Military Barracks, including a shopping mall and possibly a residence. The excessive use of police force against environmental activists in Istanbul triggered a wave of mass demonstrations across Turkey. In the following weeks, around three million people took to the streets, protesting a range of concerns connected with increasingly authoritarian measures taken by the government in Ankara (Zihnioğlu, 2019: 11). The Gezi Park protests of 2013 showed, for the first time, that there existed massive opposition to Erdoğan's rule in Turkey, especially in larger urban centres and among more educated and pro-Western segments of the population.

The third and most profound shock for Erdoğan and the ruling AKP was the failed military *coup* of July 15-16, 2016. Sections of the Turkish Armed Forces attempted to seize key locations in the country and capture the President himself but failed due to fierce resistance by loyalist troops and numerous ordinary citizens. What followed was an unprecedented purge of suspected putschists and their alleged sympathizers, as well as a drastic deterioration of diplomatic relations between Ankara and a number of Western governments, accused by Turkish authorities of cooperating with, or at least rooting for, the plotters. Turkish pro-government circles were so convinced that the attempted *coup* was a part of an international plot against Turkey that it led to a drastic change in Ankara's foreign policy. From then on, Turkey's best defence would be good offence (Danforth, 2020).

The stage for a more aggressive foreign policy had already been set in May 2016, when Davutoğlu was pushed out of office by AKP leadership. A new security concept was developed under the guidance of the President's most loyal advisers – İbrahim Kalın and Berat Albayrak (Erdoğan's son-in-law) – who discarded Davutoğlu's "zero problems" policy toward their neighbours and introduced the notion of "precious loneliness." The new concept was distinctly hawkish as it foresaw the neutralization of emerging threats beyond the country's borders (Flanagan *et al.*, 2020: 36-39).

The first manifestation of Turkey's new aggressive posture occurred between August 2016 and March 2017 – *Operation Euphrates Shield*, a cross-border military operation conducted by Turkish Armed Forces and allied Syrian groups against the Islamic State in north-western Syria. Although the principal target was the Islamic State terrorist group, the operation's real objective was driving a wedge between areas

controlled by the SDF, a Kurdish-led and US-sponsored military coalition established in October 2015, with the goal of eradicating the self-proclaimed caliphate.

Turkey's main national security concern is not Islamic extremism, but Kurdish secessionism, and the prospect of a Kurdish-dominated autonomous region along Turkey's southern border has haunted Ankara ever since Kurdish fighters defended the city of Kobanî on the Syrian-Turkish border against Islamic State militants in early 2015. The Battle of Kobanî changed the course of Syrian conflict and propelled Syrian Kurds to the position of one of its crucial actors. However, for Ankara, the SDF was nothing more than a fig leaf for the terrorist-designated Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its local affiliates. Therefore, in the following years, it would concentrate its military and diplomatic efforts on the complete removal of the SDF from Syrian-Turkish border areas and their replacement with pro-Turkish militias. In doing so, Ankara did not mind risking a serious falling-out with Washington. In February 2018, for example, Erdoğan threatened US troops stationed in northern Syria with an "Ottoman slap"⁷ if they tried to hinder the Turkish army's advance on the SDF-held town of Manbij (Joppien, 2018).

Turkish unilateral military incursions into Syria from 2016 to 2019 (characterized as invasion and occupation by their opponents) were designated by Ankara as anti-terrorist operations. However, the discourse of Turkey's leadership in that period suggests that Turkish military activities in Syria, and to a smaller degree in Iraq, had the purpose of securing Turkey's dominion over former Ottoman territories, more specifically – over areas included in the Turkish homeland by the authors of the already mentioned National Pact of 1920.

As I have always said, our physical boundaries are different from the boundaries of our heart. From Europe to the depths of Africa, from the Mediterranean to the limitless steppes of Central Asia; our brothers living in these geographies are all within the boundaries of our heart. To us, the Balkans are one half of our heart and the Caucasus the other half... How can I see Aleppo different from Gaziantep, Hasakah from Mardin, Mosul from Van? (TCCB, October 26, 2016)

In this example, the Turkish President differentiates between the internationally recognized boundaries of Turkey and those that will forever exist in the hearts of patriotic Turks. The towns specifically mentioned as being "within the boundaries of our heart" are Aleppo and Hasakah in Syria and Mosul in Iraq. Those are the towns that the authors of the National Pact had hoped to keep within the Turkish homeland after the breakup of the Ottoman Empire.

⁷ The "Ottoman slap" is said to be a very efficient open-hand striking technique, allegedly practiced by Ottoman troops in hand-to-hand combat.

When our nation began the War of Independence, they set a goal, which is *Misak-ı Milli* (National Pact). We, of course, appreciate and welcome all the things we gained in the Lausanne Treaty but it does not stop us from voicing our rights which were included in the *Misak-ı Milli* but we had to forgo in the Lausanne Treaty. The Lausanne Treaty is not an indisputable text. And it is by no means a sacred text. Surely, we will discuss it and work to achieve better. (TCCB, November 22, 2016)

Here, Erdoğan speaks of “rights” included in the National Pact, which Turkey had to forgo in the Treaty of Lausanne. Keeping in mind the text of the National Pact, it is only plausible to conclude that what he meant were the rights to certain lands. By emphasizing that the Treaty of Lausanne is “by no means a sacred text,” the Turkish President hints at the possibility of it being changed in Turkey’s favour, i.e. at the possibility of Turkey gaining additional territory. “We cannot act in the year 2016 with the psychology of 1923... We did not voluntarily accept the borders of our country” (Time magazine, December 7, 2016).

This quote is a fine example of Erdoğan’s dismissal of Atatürk’s legacy. According to Erdoğan, Turks of the 21st century cannot be satisfied with the borders gained in 1923; and they must think bigger.

The developments in our region, especially in Syria, Iraq, Palestine and Libya, closely concern the future of our country and nation... The fact that it is not possible for Turkey to secure its future unless it resolves the issues in its geography prompts us to pursue a more active and more determined foreign policy which, when the need arises, takes higher risks... You cannot be at the table unless you are on the ground. (TCCB, December 31, 2017)

This part of Erdoğan’s New Year’s Address shows his intention to put Turkey “at the table,” meaning on equal footing with the powers shaping the Middle East. In order to do so, Turkey must be “on the ground,” i.e. it must be present militarily in its wider neighbourhood. Unlike the speeches quoted above, this one shows no desire for territorial expansion, just a determination to improve Turkey’s status in the global arena, using hard power if necessary. “We side with stability, justice, tolerance and peace in our region and across the world. In this spirit, we defend the rights of Al-Quds, Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, Tripoli, Sarajevo and Crimea” (TCCB, December 31, 2018).

In this compressed revisit of neo-Ottomanism, Erdoğan vows to “defend the rights” of former Ottoman cities and regions, beginning with Al-Quds (Arabic name for Jerusalem). The message is clear: Turkey may no longer be the owner of Al-Quds, Damascus, Baghdad, etc., but it will always be their guardian. “We are not only just Turkey, but also Damascus, Aleppo, Kirkuk, Jerusalem, Palestine, Mecca and Medina... We are the grandchildren of a great civilization” (Al Arabiya, March 3, 2019).

After a similar listing of former Ottoman cities and regions, Turkish Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu uses the phrase “grandchildren of a great civilization,” to un-

derscore the continuity between the former Empire and the Republic of Turkey. The self-designation “We are the grandchildren of the Ottomans” (*Osmanlı torunuyuz*) has already been detected by researchers as playing an important role in the neo-Ottoman discourse of the current government (Joppien, 2018).

Revisionist, but what kind?

In this paper we have analysed examples of Turkish foreign policy discourse since the end of the Cold War, an approximate period of 30 years. Qualitative content analysis reveals that from 1991 onward the language of Turkish political leaders has been riddled with unmistakable expressions of revisionism and imperial nostalgia.⁸ This applies to all three phases of neo-Ottoman foreign policy: the early, unstructured phase between 1991 and 2001, the phase of mature and theoretically grounded neo-Ottomanism between 2001 and 2016, and the most recent phase of belligerent, or hard neo-Ottomanism beginning in 2016. Throughout this period, neo-Ottoman discourse has been complementary to Turkish diplomatic, economic and military reengagement in the areas of the former Empire.

Although there is a strong undercurrent of irredentism in Turkish foreign policy discourse, from Özal’s wish to “reverse the shrinking process that began at the walls of Vienna,” to Erdoğan’s Lausanne Treaty-defying “boundaries of our heart,” neo-Ottoman revisionism is not concerned with annexation of territory, but rather with Turkey’s restoration of the status of a multiregional power. A multiregional power has the ability to decisively influence the behaviour of states in more than one region. In the case of Turkey, this is the area of the former Ottoman Empire, together with the turkophone countries of Central Asia. On the scale between small powers and super-powers, a multiregional power can be pinpointed between regional powers and great powers, in the golden mean of state power in international relations.

Turkey’s multiregional approach to foreign policy is yet another strong argument for the choice of constructivism as the theoretical foundation of this paper, since it points to Ankara’s ambition of defining or creating its own region of influence, independent of already existing geographic regions and with Turkey as its focal point.

⁸ Samples used in this paper are derived from ten statements and speeches given by five Turkish senior officials in the period from 1991 to 2019. Having only rudimentary knowledge of the Turkish language, the author has used quotations found in reliable English and German language sources.

Conclusion

Neo-Ottomanism's gradual transformation from a soft-power to a hard-power foreign policy, leading to Turkey's military intervention in Syria (and later in Libya), closely shadows the parallel process of Turkey's democratic backsliding into a hybrid regime combining autocratic and democratic features. This leads to the conclusion that authoritarianism coupled with imperial nostalgia and visions of grandeur eventually generates an aggressive form of revisionism which is bound to challenge the *status quo*. This is especially true in the geopolitical context of the US' gradual retreat from areas viewed as non-essential or belonging to the other major players' zone of interest.

The hypothesis generated in this case study can and should be tested on other cases where authoritarianism and imperial nostalgia converge, for example, in Russia's annexation of Crimea and Moscow's support for various breakaway states in Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia, or in Beijing's policies toward the Himalayas, Taiwan, and the South China Sea. In all aforementioned cases, military incursions and violent territorial acquisitions are regularly used as a threat or have already occurred.

In the end, the question that should be answered is why Turkey's military occupation of areas in northern Syria has not led Ankara to formally annex them. First of all, Turks are a small minority in northern Syria, a region dominated by Arabs, Kurds, and Assyrians. This means that Ankara is not in the position to present itself as the protector of its ethnic kin (as it did in northern Cyprus in 1974) and it can hardly count on the willingness of the local population to be incorporated into the Turkish state.

Secondly, despite persistent tensions between Ankara and a number of states within the NATO, Turkey is still a member of the Alliance, which restrains its behaviour in the international arena. Turkey's annexation of occupied territory in northern Syria would go against the North Atlantic Treaty of 1949, and would almost certainly entail the suspension (expulsion is not possible) of Turkish membership in the NATO.⁹ The same consideration prevented Turkey from annexing northern Cyprus in the 1970s and 1980s.

Lastly, there is the issue of protection by a third party. Syria, or the Assad regime, to be more precise, enjoys the protection of Russia, a great power, and receives significant military aid from Iran, a regional power in the Middle East. This complicates the situation for Turkey, since a Turkish annexation of northern Syria would inevitably bring it into conflict with Russia and Iran – two historical adversaries of the Ottoman Empire. From a geopolitical point of view, this is the principal reason why Turkey refrains from incorporating parts of Syria it has occupied militarily since 2016.

⁹ Turkey annexed the Hatay State (Sanjak of Alexandretta) in 1939, but that was ten years before NATO's foundation.

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Revizionizam kao karakteristika autoritarnih postimperija: studija slučaja turskog neosmanizma (1990–2020)

Sažetak

Revizionizam je jedan od glavnih pokretača međunarodnih sukoba u 21. stoljeću. Osjećajući slabljenje američkog globalnog vodstva, države željne statusa regionalnih ili velikih sila, posebice nekadašnja carstva, sve se češće okreću prijetnjama ili upotrebi sile kako bi promijenile status quo u svoju korist. U nekim slučajevima to uključuje vojnu okupaciju, pa čak i aneksiju teritorija drugih država. Ovaj rad pobliže će razmotriti neosmanizam, tursku revizionističku vanjsku politiku i njezinu postepenu tranziciju od meke prema tvrdoj sili, što je u konačnici dovelo do turskog vojnog upada i okupacije dijelova susjedne Sirije.

Ključne riječi: revizionizam; imperijalna nostalgija; neosmanizam; teritorijalna ekspanzija; Turska