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The Neo-Ottoman Turn in Turkish Foreign Policy:  
Analysis of the Security Interests and Identity  
Developments Behind Ankara's New International  
Goals

Prof. Raffaele Marchetti

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SUPERVISOR

Alfredo Sagona, Matr. 088612

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CANDIDATE

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# Introduction

In 1918 the Ottoman Empire, a multicultural political entity which had for centuries controlled vast territories stretching from the Balkans to the Arabian Peninsula and Algeria, suffered a heavy defeat in the First World War. Struggling with internal Arab revolts and surrounded by the Allied Powers, the Ottomans succumbed by the occupation of Constantinople by the French, British and Italian troops in November 1918. In the Treaty of Sèvres of 1920 the winning powers divided the territory of the former empire; most of the Ottoman Middle Eastern provinces, mainly inhabited by Arab majorities, were occupied by the British Empire (Mesopotamia, Palestine) and the French Empire (Syria, Lebanon). The former heartland of the Ottomans – Anatolia – was divided between the Kingdom of Italy (Antalya, Konya), the Kingdom of Greece (Izmir) and the First Armenian Republic. The once-Ottoman capital, Constantinople, was declared to be a free zone and remained under foreign occupation. The Ottomans retained sovereignty only over a small fraction of their former possessions, in central Anatolia. In this context, the Turkish National Movement under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Pasha started a series of military campaigns aimed at ending the foreign occupation of Anatolia and destroying the remaining Ottoman institutions, with the ultimate goal of unifying the Nation under a new institutional framework, the Republic of Turkey. This period, known as the Turkish War of Independence, ended in 1923 with the signing of the treaty of Lausanne and the proclamation of the Republic of Turkey. Mustafa Kemal, who in 1934 was proclaimed “*Atatürk*”, “Father of the Turks”, became the first president of the newborn Country and started a process of radical change of the society and institutions aimed at creating a modern, mono-ethnic Nation State. In his view, the defeat and the disintegration of the empire had been the direct result of the political and institutional inefficiency of the Ottoman State, whose weaknesses laid in its multicultural composition and in its pursuit of pan-Islamism; the latter was considered a dangerous policy, because its realization would have undermined the sovereignty and independence of the Turkish State; rather, the foreign policy of the Republic would have been founded on the defense of the Anatolian mainland by giving up the former Ottoman possessions in the Middle East with a non-Turkish ethnic majority and on closer cooperation with the West, seen by Atatürk as one of the most important foreign policy goals of the newborn Republic. During his years in government, as he attempted to abolish the remaining Ottoman institutions and to modernize the Country – following the Western model as an example – Atatürk focused many of his reforms on the secularization of the social and institutional life of the Country, removing Islam from the public and political spheres; in his view, secularism was the only way to ensure the property functioning of the Republic and to guarantee its independence. From a foreign policy perspective, the fight on political Islam and the enforced secularization and westernization of the Republic contributed to creating a rift with the former Middle Eastern possessions, which considered Turkey’s rejection of Islam, the adoption of a new alphabet based on the Latin script and its alignment with the West a betrayal of the shared cultural and religious bonds. Atatürk’s

approach to government and his political legacy came to be known as Kemalism, which for most of the republican history of Turkey served as the dominant ideology in guiding the internal and external actions of Ankara. In foreign policy, Kemalism was characterized by a strong will of being integrated within the secular West (Turkey joined several Western organizations throughout its history, including NATO and the Council of Europe, however its membership to the most important political experiment for European integration, the European Union, is still pending after Ankara began its application negotiations in 1987), a low level of interest towards the Middle East and Africa (whenever Turkey actively engaged in the region was either for the containment of Soviet expansionism or for signing treaties aimed at guaranteeing its Southern and Eastern borders), by a rejection of pan-Islamism and its Ottoman legacy, as well as the recurrence to multilateralism and bilateralism for solving disputes.

However, in the last two decades the institutional and ideological foundations of the Republic of Turkey have undergone a groundbreaking change, as a new paradigm approach gained prominence within the Turkish arena and challenged the primacy of Kemalism in the political mindset of the Country: neo-Ottomanism. As Atatürk had created an historical narrative on the Ottoman past which associated it with inefficiency and decay, historical revisionism rehabilitated the imperial experience, glorifying it as a history of success for the Turkish nation. The key figure behind this historical change has been Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the leader of the Islamist “*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*” (“Justice and Development Party”, or AKP) who, after becoming Prime Minister in 2003, gradually began a process of centralization of powers in his hands and of Islamization of the public and institutional spheres of the Republic. Despite Islamist groups had existed throughout the whole republican era, they had largely remained marginalized and, when Islamism had grown too visible in the public and political sphere of the Country, the Turkish Army, which under Kemalism represented the supreme defender of the constitutional principles – including secularism – had intervened to restore laïcité. However, since the rise to power of the AKP, Islamist and far-right groups have been fully integrated within the institutional and political life of the Country. Under Erdoğan’s rule, the foreign policy of Turkey dramatically changed, abandoning the mainly defensive and Western-oriented approaches which had served as tenets during the Kemalist years and embracing openly revanchist and Islamist ambitions in several arenas stretching from the Middle East to Africa and Asia. Under Erdoğan, Turkey military intervened in a number of conflicts, such as the Syrian Civil War, the Second Libyan Civil War, or the Somalian Civil War.

This thesis is going to provide an explanation of the variety of reasons which contributed to the paradigm shift in Turkish foreign policy, and how the neo-Ottoman narrative managed to substitute some of the key tenets of Kemalism in Turkey’s relations to the world. It will show how a complex interplay of security interests and non-material elements contributed to changing the path which for decades had been followed by Turkish policymakers.

The first chapter is going to highlight the main elements which had characterized Kemalism and the foreign policy of Turkey from its foundation and through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By adopting a mainly historical approach,

it will show how under Kemalism Turkey, and especially during its first years, resorted to multilateralism and civic nationalism in order to guarantee the safety of its borders. This “civic” or “liberal” nationalism is profoundly different from the new aggressive and expansionist form of nationalism proposed by Erdoğan, as it emphasized the defense of the status quo over revanchism and revisionism. It will go through some of the most significant phases in Turkish foreign policy, including the Second World War, the Cold War, and the bid for gaining recognition as a European power through access to Western institutions and the adoption of foreign policy choices in line with the USA and Western Europe. It will also analyze as a case study the Cypriot situation and the intercommunal violence erupting on the island in the 1960s and 1970s, explaining the Turkish intervention on the island in relation to the multilateral treaties signed by Ankara, Athens, and London (and specifically the Treaty of Guarantee of 1960) and the threat of ethnic cleansing and genocide of the Turkish minority living on the island.

The second chapter is going to focus on the material and security interests behind the recent shift in Turkish foreign policy, by adopting a mainly realist approach. The end of the Cold War and the tragic events of 9/11 led to the perception of an increasingly multipolar international system, thus opening several possibilities for new emerging actors in search for hegemony in their respective regions. The development of more aggressive governments in countries like India, China, or Israel, and the growing involvement of these actors in the international arena, generated also in Turkey the hope that a more active foreign policy and an increase in its power could have resulted in a better situation for the Country and even in regional hegemony. In this respect, the geographical position of Turkey – situated mainly on the Anatolian peninsula and surrounded by the Black Sea, the Mediterranean Sea and the Aegean Sea – made control over the oceans a key strategic objective to achieve in order to project power and influence over the broader Middle East, as well as being of pivotal importance in the defense of the Anatolian mainland; Turkey’s new aggressive presence in the seas has come to be known as the *Mavi Vatan* Doctrine, or “Blue Homeland”. A major role was also played by the economic and productive inputs needed to sustain a nation and in particular energy resources such as gas and oil. As Turkey grew more dependent on Russian exports, which, considering the peculiar relations between the two Countries constituted a liability in the eyes of Ankara, Turkey sought to expand and diversify its energy sources, thus getting more involved from a geopolitical point of view in oil and gas-rich regions like the Caucasus, the Eastern Mediterranean and Northern Africa. Similarly, control over the sea routes through which energy transits from Asia to Europe – such as the Red Sea – was considered a fundamental foreign policy objective for the energy security of the Country as well as a bargaining chip in its complicated relationship with Europe. The fact that most of these regions used to fall under the direct control of the Ottoman Empire contributed to fueling the legitimacy of neo-Ottomanism as the ideological umbrella under which these operations have been carried out. Another important scenario in which Turkey has dramatically changed its foreign policy approach is Africa, neglected for a long time under Kemalism but rediscovered as a core strategic region under neo-Ottomanism, due to its geographical position from which power can be projected



over the broader Middle East, the Mediterranean Basin and the Red Sea, the richness of natural resources, the absence of a true local hegemon and the involvement in the continent of actors in direct and open competition against Ankara – such as France or the Saudi-Egyptian-Emirati axis. The case study provided here is Turkey’s involvement in the Second Libyan Civil War, as it exemplifies the complex interplay of energy diplomacy, proxy competition, control over the seas, and the new Turkish African policy all reunited under the common denominator of neo-Ottomanism.

The third chapter will argue that security interests alone, although providing a useful insight on the change from a mainly defensive approach to a more aggressive and revanchist foreign policy, fail at providing a complete explanation of the main drives behind the emergence of neo-Ottomanism and the marginalization of Kemalism. Through the lenses of constructivism, this chapter will look at the role played by non-material elements – such as culture, religion, self-perception, identities, ideas, and history – in shaping the recent foreign policy actions of Turkey. The frustration of the Turkish public at the constant rejection by European policymakers of Turkey’s membership to the European Union, alongside the perception of an intrinsically racist attitude of Brussels towards Ankara on religious grounds, alienated much of the public opinion from the Kemalist objective of integration with the West, instead pushing many to seek new alliances with other Muslim nations; this climate of resentment towards the West and the feeling that Turkey could have played a better role as the leader of the Sunni world – a position which it had held for centuries under the Ottoman caliphate – favored the emergence of neo-Ottomanism and its anti-Western and pan-Islamist policies. The case study presented in this chapter regards Turkey’s peculiar relationship with the State of Israel; Ankara was for decades one of the only Muslim-majority Countries which recognized Tel Aviv’s sovereignty, alongside pre-revolutionary Iran, and the People’s Socialist Republic of Albania, and through the 20<sup>th</sup> century the two Countries found common grounds for assistance and cooperation. Turkey did not always support Israel and some diplomatic incidents between the two did occur even under Kemalism, but Ankara preferred to play a neutral stance on the Palestinian cause, which often drew the condemnation of other Muslim nations. In some cases, Israel and Turkey also increased their military cooperation, for instance under the “Alliance of the periphery”. Cooperation between the two Countries flourished during the 1990s, with Israeli forces carrying out joint military exercises on Turkish soil. The two countries were bound together by a shared sense of identity as being the only non-Arab Countries in the Middle East (alongside Iran) and considering themselves the only two liberal democracies in the region, alongside the strong cultural and political ties linking both Countries to the USA and Europe. The emergence of neo-Ottomanism and of Islamism in the political life of Turkey, however, led to a deterioration of the bilateral relations between Ankara and Tel Aviv, as Turkey portrayed itself as the defender of the Muslim world against Western colonialism and intensified its ties with pan-Islamist and anti-Zionist organizations like Hamas.

# Chapter 1

## *1.1 From the Birth of the Republic to World War II: Kemalism and Foreign Policy*

The Republic of Turkey emerged as a political sovereign entity in the aftermath of the Turkish War of Independence, a conflict fought between the Turkish National Movement led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the Allied powers which had partitioned and occupied large parts of Anatolia following the end of World War I and the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920. The war lasted until 1923, when the Treaty of Lausanne (24<sup>th</sup> July) ended the foreign occupation of Anatolia and Eastern Thrace. Following the end of the war, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey voted for the formal abolition of the remaining Ottoman institutions and declared the establishment of a republican government on October 29, 1923, and Mustafa Kemal became the first President of Turkey. Kemal started a process of radical transformation of the Turkish institutions and society, aimed at dismantling the Ottoman legacy and its multicultural features and creating a monoethnic Nation State. This series of reforms and changes is included within the larger ideological framework of Kemalism, the founding ideology of republican Turkey. Kemalism as an ideology is based on six fundamental pillars: republicanism, populism, laicism, reformism, nationalism and statism.<sup>1</sup> These six guiding principles were designed to guide the conduct of political life within the newly born republic, having deep impacts both at the internal and at the external level. The conduct of Turkish foreign policy in the first decades of the Republic, and particularly in the interwar period, was aimed at gaining recognition as a sovereign country. The principles established by Kemal during his presidency for the conduct of Turkish foreign policy largely continued to guide the foreign policy objectives and the strategic allegiances of Turkey for most of its history, except for the recent revisionist approach under Erdoğan's presidency. One of the most important principles at the basis of both domestic and foreign policy in this respect can be resumed by the slogan "*Yurtta sulh, cihanda sulh*", "peace at home, peace in the world", pronounced by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in a speech given on 20 April 1931; this principle maintained its relevance for decades after Atatürk's death; for instance, it was quoted in 1992 by Prime Minister Demirel when he claimed that Turkish foreign action had to be based on the protection and continuation of peace in the region and peace in the world. The second principle was the modernization of the Turkish society which was carried out through a westernizing process of the institutions and of the habits. This had a great impact also on the geopolitical affiliation of the Republic: rejecting the political experience of the Ottoman Empire meant giving up on the former middle eastern Ottoman provinces inhabited by an Arab

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<sup>1</sup> Tunçay, M. "Kemalism." In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*. Oxford Islamic Studies Online.

majority, while pushing the Country's international allegiances towards the West. This principle continued to be upheld through most of the XX century, with Turkey joining the Council of Europe, NATO and negotiating its accession to the European Union.

The first years of the Republic – in which Ataturk was alive and was the most important actor in the conduct of Turkish foreign policy – can be divided into two phases: the first going from 1923 to 1932, and the second going from 1933 to 1938.<sup>2</sup> During the first 9 years, much of the Turkish foreign policy was aimed at solving the issues which had not been properly addressed by the Treaty of Lausanne. The first of these issues regarded the relations with the neighbouring Kingdom of Greece and the exchange of Greek and Turkish minorities between the two Countries. The Convention providing for this exchange was signed on January 30, 1923, but it immediately caused some problems between the two Countries with respect to the status of the Greek population in Istanbul and of the Patriarch of Constantinople who had come to the city in 1918 and was thus exchangeable under the terms of the Convention. The negotiations between the two Countries continued for years, until an agreement was signed on June 10, 1930. Another important question regarded the relations of the newly born Republic with the United Kingdom, which after the end of World War I had invaded vast territories in the former Middle Eastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Relations between the two countries in those years became particularly strained due to the “Mosul question”, a territorial dispute over the status of the frontier between Turkey and British Iraq. The Mosul Vilayet, a former Ottoman possession, had indeed been occupied by the United Kingdom, but the Turkish republican government considered it as one of the crucial issues determined in the National Pact, and proposed a referendum in the region to determine its status. Nevertheless, the United Kingdom unilaterally applied to the League of Nations in 1924 and an investigative commission was appointed; the commission recommended to keep Mosul under British rule, and Turkey reluctantly accepted this outcome (also because Mosul was predominantly inhabited by Kurds, which in the same years were rebelling in Eastern Turkey against the Kemalist government, and Ankara believed that a greater Kurdish population within its border would have ultimately led to more tensions)<sup>3</sup>. In 1926 Turkey and the United Kingdom signed a treaty which also provided for a share of the oil extracted in Mosul to be given to Turkey and for British neutrality towards Turkey.<sup>4</sup> In the same years Turkey also normalized relations with another neighbouring major power, the USSR. In 1925 the two Countries signed a Pact of Non-Aggression and Security. Two years later, a commercial treaty was also signed, and the volume of trade between the two Countries sharply increased. Cooperation between Turkey and the Soviet Union on the international arena was also strengthened when both Countries signed the Kellogg-Briand Pact in 1928 – the most important

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<sup>2</sup> Göl, A. (1993), *A short summary of Turkish foreign policy:1923-1939*. Ankara Üniversitesi SBF Dergisi.

<sup>3</sup> Volkan, V.D. and Itzkowitz, N. (1984), *The Immortal Ataturk: A Psychobiography*, The University of Chicago.

<sup>4</sup> Evans, S.F. (1982), *The Slow Rapprochement: Britain and Turkey in the Age of Kemal Ataturk, 1919-1939*. Beverley, pp. 95-96

international agreement signed by Turkey after Lausanne – a strong commitment to maintain world peace in compliance with the Kemalist principle of “peace at home, peace in the world”. The solution of the Mosul Question led to a general policy of reconciliation with the West; in May 1928 a treaty of friendship and neutrality between Turkey and Italy was signed, providing that in the event of an aggression against one of the contracting parties by third powers, the other contracting party would remain neutral; it was the first political pact which Turkey had signed with a Western Great Power since the end of World War I.<sup>5</sup> Italy also played an important role in improving relations between Turkey and Greece in 1930. Relations with the other great power in the region – France – had been generally friendly since the 1921 Ankara Agreement which had established the border between Turkey and French-administered Syria as well as providing for a special administrative regime in Iskenderun. The two countries signed a Treaty of Friendship and Good Neighbourliness on February 18, 1926. The conduct of the foreign policy of Turkey in period going from 1923 to 1932 was therefore characterized by a general rapprochement with the neighbouring powers, settling the border disputes and questions left unresolved by Treaty of Lausanne, in order to guarantee the international recognition and the security of the recently established republic by promoting peace and friendly relations in the region and at the world level.

During the 1930s, following the Great Depression and the rise to power of Nazism in Germany, the international arena became increasingly polarized, with Germany and Italy challenging the post-WWI order and adopting a revisionist, aggressive foreign policy. In such a volatile international contest, Turkey felt threatened by a possible aggression to its national sovereignty, as Italy and Bulgaria were trying to expand in the Balkans. Ataturk therefore felt the need to reinforce the defence policy of Turkey and to secure its borders by negotiating two treaties – one to the west with the other Balkan countries and one to the east. With respect to the Balkans, Ataturk aimed at establishing a Balkan federation in order to guarantee peace and security in the region. In February 1934, Turkey, Yugoslavia, Romania and Greece signed the Balkan Entente, a pact designed to maintain the post- World War I geopolitical status quo in the Balkans, presenting a united front against Bulgarian revisionist policy in the region. Turkey became also wary of Italy, especially after a 1934 speech by Mussolini in which Italy had expressed interests in expanding in Africa and Asia. The Italian invasion of Ethiopia further preoccupied the Turkish political elite. Peace in the Balkans was not only seen as a means to stop Bulgarian and Italian expansionism in the region, but also to counter German imperialism. The relationship between Turkey and Germany in those years was indeed complex. Economically, the two Countries became extremely interconnected, with Nazi Germany becoming Turkey’s major economic partner by the mid-1930s<sup>6</sup>. However, at the same time, Ataturk was strongly convinced that Turkey had to remain neutral and increase its business relations with third countries like the United Kingdom. The strong cooperation

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<sup>5</sup> Howard, H. (1966), *The Partition of Turkey: A Diplomatic History*. New York, p.343

<sup>6</sup> Harris, G.S. (1985), *Turkey: Coping with Crisis*. Colorado: Westview Press, p.183

between Germany and Italy further increased Turkish suspicion. The volatility of the international stability and the growing fear of an Italian aggression and expansion in the Eastern Mediterranean further contributed to pushing Turkey towards Greece and the United Kingdom. In 1936, Turkey, Greece, Yugoslavia and the United Kingdom signed the Mediterranean Pact, pursuant to which the British government committed to assisting the other contacting parties in the event of an unprovoked aggression against them in violation of the Covenant of the League of Nations. In the same year, Turkey also managed to change the regime governing the Turkish Straits which had been in place since 1923. Pursuant to the Straits Convention of the Lausanne Treaty, the Dardanelles had been demilitarised and the Straits had been opened to unlimited civilian and military maritime traffic, supervised by the International Straits Commission of the League of Nations.<sup>7</sup> Following the Italo-Turkish War of 1912, Italy had occupied the Dodecanese islands off the Aegean coast of Turkey, and had later constructed fortifications on Kos, Rhodes and Leros. After the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, the Turkish government feared an imminent attack on the Turkish Straits which would have allowed Italy to become a hegemon in Anatolia and the Black Sea region. Therefore, in April 1935, the Turkish government consigned a diplomatic note to the signatories of the Treaty of Lausanne, requesting a conference to agree on a new regime for the Straits and asking for the authorization to reconstruct the Dardanelles forts. The Turkish foreign minister Aras justified this proposal claiming that the international situation had dramatically changed, and the security of the region could no longer be guaranteed under the previous regime. The note was met favourably by most powers in the region, including the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom, whereas Italy refused to attend. The agreement was ratified by all of the conference attendees – except for Germany – and came into force on November 6, 1936. Perhaps the biggest Turkish diplomatic victory under the Convention was the possibility to close the passage of the Straits to all foreign warships in times of war or in the event of imminent aggression, as well as being authorised to close the transit of all merchant ships belonging to countries at war with Turkey.<sup>8</sup>

After securing its western borders by reinforcing alliances and achieving pivotal diplomatic victories such as the Balkan Entente, the Mediterranean Pact and the Montreux Convention, the Turkish government also looked at its eastern neighbours and applied the same strategy to maintain stability; therefore, in 1937 Turkey signed the Treaty of Saadabad with Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan, a pact of non-aggression, friendship and solidarity. Following Ataturk's death in 1938, Turkey maintained its policy of neutrality through the World War II. The conduct of foreign policy during the first 20 years of republicanism were strongly shaped by Kemal's personality and his vision on the political and historical future of Turkey. Those years were fundamental in cementing Turkey's adherence to the European state system, securing the borders of the Turkish state through cooperation with its neighbours and by upholding the principles of international law,

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<sup>7</sup> Akgün, M. (1994), *Great Powers and the Straits: From Lausanne to Montreux*. The Turkish Yearbook of International Relations.

<sup>8</sup> Macfie, A.L. (1972), *The Straits Question: The Conference of Montreux (1936)*. Balkan Studies.

trying to maintain the status quo set out by the Lausanne Treaty while at the same time solving the issues which had been left unsettled. In the words of Roderic H. Davison: “Turkey’s good foreign relations were a consequence of Ataturk’s unyielding resistance to any revival of Ottomanist, pan-Turian, or Pan-Islamic expansionism”.<sup>9</sup> The abolishment of the caliphate and of the previous existing Ottoman institutions, together with the laicization of the state, had huge impacts on the geopolitical affiliation of Turkey in those years and through most of its history, pushing the country closer to the West and to the European system of statehood. Renouncing on the former Ottoman, Arab-majority provinces helped strengthen Turkey’s alliance with France and the United Kingdom, and even when disputes with these two Countries arose, such as in the Mosul Question or the Question of Hatay, they were solved through peaceful means and international law.<sup>10</sup> Turkey was able to obtain international recognition and acceptance by the other European powers by adopting peaceful means of conflict resolution rather than pursuing an aggressive revisionist foreign policy like Italy or Germany. This liberal, anti-Ottoman foundation of the Turkish foreign policy would have contributed to push Turkey closer towards the Western, American-led block following the end of WWII, and towards a greater political and diplomatic integration with the European state system.

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<sup>9</sup> Davison, R. H. (1988), *Turkey: A Short History*, 2. Edition. Huntington: The Eothen Press, p.142

## ***1.2 The Post-War Period and the Path Towards Integration with the West: NATO Membership and Negotiations for Accession to the EU***

Turkey remained neutral through most of the Second World War. When the global conflict erupted, PM İnönü believed that Turkey had nothing to gain from joining the war and would only risk high civilian losses, economic disruption and perhaps even occupation<sup>11</sup>. The economy of Country was indeed still highly dependent on Germany, and at the same time the risk of a Soviet or Nazi occupation was perceived as extremely likely by the political establishment in the event of a Turkish active intervention in the conflict. However, despite its determination to remain nonbelligerent, the Turks understood they could not risk isolation in the future global scenario which would have emerged after the conflict. Therefore, several meetings were held with the leaders of the Allied powers – and in particular the US and the UK – in which Turkish statesmen asked for guarantees in the form of military and economic aid in exchange for Turkey’s active participation in the war. After Roosevelt and Churchill reacted positively to these demands, Turkey severed economic and diplomatic relations with Germany in August 1944, and eventually declared war on Germany and Japan on 23 February 1945. Thanks to this move, the Country managed to secure a place at the San Francisco Conference, after having signed the Declaration of the United Nations on 27 February 1945. Although Turkish participation in World War II was mostly symbolic, its alliance with the Western democracies was pivotal to prepare the Country for the struggle which would have followed the global conflict. Indeed, before the outbreak of World War II, the relations of Turkey with one of its most powerful neighbors, the Soviet Union, were already deteriorating: when the Turks severed their economic and diplomatic relations with Germans, the move was met warmly by the US and the UK, but Stalin complained that it was too little and too late, and that because of Turkey’s “evasive and vague attitude” in the past years, its decision-making power in geopolitical postwar matters had to be limited. The Soviets’ attitude reflected what Turkish statesmen had feared since 1939, when Moscow had demanded bases on the Straits. As soon as World War II ended – in March 1945 – the Soviets denounced the 1925 Pact of Non-Aggression and Security with the Turks, and Soviet media started to aggressively address Turkey, depicting it as a threat to their security. Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov asked the Turkish government to review some of the clauses of the previous treaties regulating relations between the two Countries, in order to reach a new agreement; the Soviets requested a rectification of the Turkish-Soviet border which had been established in 1921, and, most importantly, demanded the creation of Soviet military bases in the Dardanelles, asking for a revision of the Montreux Convention. Soviet journalists and historians

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<sup>11</sup> VanderLippe, J. M. (2001), *A Cautious Balance: The Question of Turkey in World War II*. *The Historian*, 64:1, 63-80

claimed that an area reaching as far as Trebizond had to be incorporated into the USSR for historical and geographical reasons.<sup>12</sup> In addition to the request for shared control of the Straits, the Kremlin also increased naval activity in the Black Sea and mobilized their troops in the Caucasus. The polarization of international relations after the end of the war and the rise of the Soviet Union as a major center of global power threatened the existence of an independent Turkey. The fear of Soviet aggression caused Turkey to progressively abandon its isolation in the international arena and to establish closer diplomatic relations with the American-led West. Similarly, US officials understood that the protection of Turkey and its inclusion in the Truman Doctrine was of the utmost strategic importance, in order to prevent the Soviets from establishing military bases in the Dardanelles, Kars and Ardahan, considering Stalin's fierce opposition to the Montreux Convention.<sup>13</sup> The Iran Crisis of 1946 and the movement of Soviet troops in the direction of Maku and Razi further increased American suspicion of a possible Soviet offensive in Turkey. The State Department suspected that the Soviets regarded Anatolia – and the Turkish Straits in particular – as a vital region to control in order to protect the Russian inland and to gain access to the Mediterranean, from which they could have easily severed the British Empire's "jugular" at Suez and become hegemonies in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>14</sup> For this reason, in a message delivered to Congress on March 12, 1947, President Truman urged the United States to take immediate action in order to protect Turkey (and Greece, which in the same years was on the verge of a communist uprising), providing it with massive economic and military assistance.<sup>15</sup> Relations between the two Countries became even closer with the outbreak of the Korean War, shortly after the election of the Menderes government in the first free multiparty elections in Turkey. The Turkish government offered military aid to the US, dispatching 4500 troops in the Korean peninsula. This move, alongside the exemplary conduct of the Turkish troops in Korea, increased the prestige of the Turkish Republic in the eyes of Western Countries; in the same year, NATO participants invited Turkey to join the military planning of the Alliance in the Mediterranean region. Turkey persistently asked to be accepted as a full member of the group, and a positive response eventually came in 1951, when the USA proposed an enlargement of NATO to Greece and Turkey. Formal membership to the alliance was finally granted to the Turkey on February 18, 1952. This event was met warmly by Turkish statesmen; Turkey viewed its alliance with the USA, of which NATO was seen as an extension, as a guarantee of its security and independence against Soviet aggression. The positive opinion Turkish leaders had in those years towards the United States is reflected in a speech given by Prime Minister

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<sup>12</sup> Sadak, N. (1949), *Turkey Faces the Soviets*, Foreign Affairs Vol. 27, No.3, pp. 449-461

<sup>13</sup> Leffler, M.P. (1985), *Strategy, Diplomacy, and the Cold War: The United States, Turkey, and NATO, 1945-1952*. The Journal of American History Vol. 71, No. 4. Oxford University Press.

<sup>14</sup> McGhee, G. (1990), *The US-Turkish-NATO Middle East Connection: How the Truman Doctrine Contained the Soviets in the Middle East*. New York: Saint Martin's Press.

<sup>15</sup> Satterthwaite, J. C. (1972), *The Truman Doctrine: Turkey*. The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science.



Şükrü Saracoğlu in 1946, when he declared that the Americans were “taking firm and undaunted steps in the path of creating a peaceful international order and a united world by upholding the flags of humanity, justice, freedom, and civilization”. NATO membership was perceived by the Turkish political elite as a formal recognition of Turkey’s equality with other Western great powers and its status as a European Western Country, a foreign policy goal which had been pursued since the early stages of the Republic.<sup>16</sup> Turkish alignment with the West throughout most of the XX century was also testified by its accession to other institutions aimed at European and Western integration. In 1949, Turkey became a member of the Council of Europe, an international organization created for the purpose of protecting human rights, democracy and the rule of law in the European continent. Having Westernization as one of the pillars of the Country’s foreign policy, Turkish statesmen felt the need to apply to another European institution designed to achieve greater political and economic integration among European liberal democracies: the European Economic Community, the predecessor of the current European Union. Turkey applied for association with the EEC on July 31, 1959, less than two months after the Greek request for membership.<sup>17</sup> On September 12, 1963, Turkey signed the “Agreement Creating An Association Between The Republic Of Turkey And The European Economic Community”, also known as the Ankara Agreement. The Agreement recognized Turkey as eligible for membership, and after signing it, the Commission President at the time, Sir Walter Hallstein, stated that “Turkey is part of Europe”. The process of integration of Turkey with Western Europe continued throughout most of the XX century. Turkish association with the European Community was further expanded in 1970 with the “Additional Protocol”, which set 1995 as the year by which a customs union between the European Community and the Republic of Turkey had to be established. On April 14, 1987, Turkey applied for formal membership into the European Community; the European response came two years later, in 1989, when the European Commission presented its Opinion confirming Turkey’s eventual membership but at the same time recommending postponing the date to start negotiations, due to the peculiar economic and political situation of the Country in those years, citing its poor relations with Greece and Cyprus. On January 1, 1996 the custom union, as envisaged by the 1970 protocol, was established between Turkey and the European Union, with the signing of the Customs Union Agreement (CUA). However, a major delay to the quest for Turkish membership to the EU came in 1997 with the Luxembourg Summit, when the European Council did not include Turkey in its enlargement process. The Commission confirmed Turkey’s eligibility for membership, but at the same time stated that the near future prospects for Turkish membership were very limited. The reasons for this rejection were mainly based on concerns over human rights violations, the tense relations with Greece and the presence of Turkish troops in Cyprus. This led to a diplomatic crisis between Turkey and the EU, with PM Yılmaz

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<sup>16</sup> Yılmaz, Ş. (2012), *Turkey’s quest for NATO membership: the institutionalization of the Turkish–American alliance*. Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, 12:4, 481-495

<sup>17</sup> Çakmak, C. (2003), *Human Rights, the European Union and Turkey*. Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations, Vol. 2, No. 3 & 4

accusing the EU of creating a “new, cultural Berlin Wall” to exclude Turkey and discriminate it on religious grounds.<sup>18</sup> However, in 1999 with the Helsinki European Council the European Union officially recognized Turkey as a candidate on equal footing with other potential candidates. This reignited Turkish hopes for European membership and recognition as a Western Country. The new millennium brought another milestone in the EU-Turkish process of integration, with the December 2002 Copenhagen European Council, pursuant to which “the EU would open negotiations with Turkey ‘without delay’ if the European Council in December 2004, on the basis of a report and a recommendation from the Commission, decides that Turkey fulfills the Copenhagen political criteria”. In 2004, the European Commission indicated 3 October 2005 as the date to start accession negotiations with Turkey. However, the process towards Turkish integration within the EU has since then been stalled by a number of internal and external problems. The progressive erosion of democracy and secularism under the government of Erdogan, as well as the rising tensions with neighboring EU member states Greece and Cyprus, have halted the process of Turkish integration with the rest of Europe, pushing it once again towards isolationism in the international arena. Turkish membership in the European Union may bring enormous benefits to both parts; for instance, given the peculiarity of Turkish geographical position (bordering regions of critical importance for the EU interests, as well as its proximity to oil and natural gas pipelines) and its military capability, Turkish membership could be an asset for EU crisis management under the Common Foreign and Security Policy.<sup>19</sup> Turkey could therefore become a security provider for the Union as a whole; based on the report of the Independent Commission on Turkey, published in September 2004, Turkey’s accession to the bloc would falsify Huntington’s theory of the clash of civilizations, and it would strengthen the Southern Dimension of the Union; the Report argued that Turkish membership would indeed undermine the conception of the EU as a Christian Club, allowing the Union to act as a bridge between the Western and Islamic civilizations and therefore presenting an alternative to the exclusive, sectarian and closed society depicted by Islamist propaganda. Furthermore, Turkey has been an important ally in security operations conducted in regions strategically important for the EU such as the Balkans or the Middle East under the shield of NATO. Turkey would also be of pivotal importance for the Southern Dimension of the Union due to its geographical position in the Eastern Mediterranean, contributing to spreading and strengthening the Union’s influence and soft power to the Southern and Eastern shores of the Mediterranean Basin. Finally, Turkey’s geographical location at the crossroads between the EU and several strategically vital, volatile regions endowed with natural resources (namely the Caspian region and the Persian Gulf) means its membership would increase energy security in the whole Union.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the recent developments in

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<sup>18</sup> Müftüleri-Bac, M. (1998), *The never-ending story: Turkey and the European Union*. Middle Eastern Studies, 34:4, 240-258

<sup>19</sup> Bilgin, P. (2003), *The ‘Peculiarity’ of Turkey’s Position on EU-NATO Military/Security Cooperation: A Rejoinder to Missiroli*. Security Dialogue, Vol. 34, No. 3, 345-349

<sup>20</sup> Üstün, Ç. (2010), *Turkey and European Security Defense Policy Compatibility and Security Cultures in a Globalized World*. Vol. 12. London; New York: Tauris Academic Studies.

the Turkish political system have made Turkish membership to the Union extremely unlikely in the short run, due to its poor performances in terms of human rights and rule of law and the exacerbation of conflicting and rivaling views in terms of security and foreign policy in the Mediterranean, the MENA region and the Sahel. The path towards Turkish membership to the EU has become harder, and Countries towards which Turkey had been historically tied by friendly relations, such as France, are growing more intolerant towards Ankara's behavior in the international arena. Turkish membership in the EU may provide enormous benefits for both parts, in terms of economics, energy, military capabilities, soft power, and population and geographical size. A European Turkey reembracing its secular and Western-oriented foreign policy would greatly contribute to bringing stability in the whole Mediterranean Basin and would serve as a model for neighboring Countries to embrace liberal democratic values. Turkey's participation in the EU would allow the Union to expand its economic and political influence over the Muslim world, given its privileged relationship with other Muslim-majority Countries (and in particular in Northern Africa), as well as projecting the Union towards Asia, facilitating a greater EU economic expansion in the Asian and Northern African markets, as well as its soft power in those regions.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Gurbanov, R.; Bilan, Y.; Strielkowski, W. (2015), *Economic Advantages and Disadvantages of Turkish EU Accession*. Montenegrin Journal of Economics, Vol. 11, No. 2, 7-30

### *1.3 Case Study: Analysis of the Turkish Involvement in the Cyprus Conflict*



Map showing the current *de facto* political status of the island of Cyprus; British Broadcasting Corporation, 2017.

Cyprus is an island located in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, 75 kilometers south of Anatolia. The third biggest island in the whole Mediterranean Basin, its geographical position is extremely important, facing the Lebanese, Israeli and Syrian shores to the east and the Egyptian coast to the south, thus being located at the crossroads of maritime traffic between three continents. Its strategic importance has historically been recognized by all major thalassocracies which ruled over the Mediterranean Sea: colonized by Mycenaean Greeks since the second millennium BC, the island was later occupied by the Assyrians, the Egyptians, the Persians, the Macedonians, and eventually the Romans and the Byzantines. Control over the Cypriot territory was at the center of major conflicts between the Byzantines and the Umayyad Caliphate between the 7<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> centuries AD; after becoming an independent kingdom under the French Lusignan family between 1192 and 1489, it was conquered by the Republic of Venice before being seized and annexed by the Ottoman Empire in 1571. Under the Ottomans, communities of Muslim Turks from Anatolia settled in the island, which until that moment still had a predominantly ethnic-Greek, Orthodox Christian population. The Ottomans

administered the island, as well as the rest of their empire, with the help of their subject millets, and therefore the Greek Cypriot culture was able to endure, administered by the Archbishop of the Church of Cyprus. The population size of Muslim Turks and Christian Greek populations on the island highly fluctuated during the centuries, with the Turkish Cypriot population gradually becoming a minority since the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>22</sup> In the Congress of Berlin in 1878, the Ottoman Empire agreed to let the British Empire occupy Cyprus, although retaining sovereignty; however, when the Ottomans allied with the Central Powers in World War I, the United Kingdom de jure annexed the island. Many Turkish Cypriots fled, moving to Turkey or to the United Kingdom; in the same years, a growing number of Greek Cypriots started to advocate for the “*enosis*”, the political union of the island of Cyprus with the Kingdom of Greece. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the proclamation of the Republic, the Cypriot territory was left outside the boundaries of the National Pact. This caused other waves of emigration of Turkish Cypriots towards Anatolia. On December 12, 1949, Makarios II, the Archbishop of Cyprus, asked British authorities’ permission to hold a referendum on the political status of the island, which was still under British domination. Despite British opposition, Greek Cypriots held a referendum on enosis with Greece in 1950, with more than 95% of voters supporting reunification. In the 1950s, a paramilitary organization, EOKA, was established under the command of Greek Army officer Georgios Grivas, with the specific aim of fighting for ending British dominion and achieving unification with Greece. In response, Turkish Cypriots created their own paramilitary organization, the TMT (*Türk Mukavemet Teşkilatı*, “Turkish Resistance Organization”), fearing that if EOKA was to succeed, they would have been forced to leave their homes as had already happened to Cretan Turks in the 1920s. In opposition to enosis, TMT members supported “*taksim*”, i.e., the partition of the island between the two communities. By 1958, political violence and armed conflict between the two communities broke out. Diplomatic talks between the governments of Greece, Turkey and the United Kingdom, as well as Cyprus community leaders, led to the London and Zurich Agreements of 1959, which drafted a constitution for the political status of Cyprus, pursuant to which the island was to become an independent republic, where both communities enjoyed political representation, with a Greek Cypriot President elected by Greek Cypriots and a Turkish Cypriot Vice-President elected by Turkish Cypriots, who had veto powers, and granting 30% of seats in the House of Representatives to the Turkish minority. Two other treaties were also signed in addition to the London and Zurich Agreements: they were the Treaty of Guarantee (1960), with Turkey, Greece and the UK promising to prohibit the promotion of either partition of the island or its union with any foreign power, and reserving the right to intervene unilaterally, but only after consultation with the other parties had failed, and a Treaty of Alliance.

The complex ethnic and religious cleavages existing in the island, however, were not solved through diplomacy and the creation of a liberal-democratic political community; indeed, the Greek Cypriot political elite believed that the rights conceded to the Turkish Cypriot minority under the 1960 constitution were too

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<sup>22</sup> Hatay, M. (2007), *Is the Turkish Cypriot Population Shrinking?* Peace Research Institute Oslo Report 2/2007

extensive and had to be limited in order to create a stable government for the island; moreover, enosis was still an objective for many Greek Cypriots; therefore, in those years a secret plan, known as the Akritas Plan, was designed by the secret organization EOK, whose members also included several cabinet ministers of the Makarios III's government. Pursuant to the Akritas Plan, the constitution needed to be reformed to grant the Greek Cypriot majority political control of the island, and the Treaties of Guarantee and of Alliance had to be revoked; this would have made enosis legally possible. Expecting a Turkish Cypriot revolt if the plan was to succeed, it also envisaged the violent suppression of any form of Turkish Cypriot opposition "in a day or two".<sup>23</sup> On November 30, 1963, Makarios III proposed thirteen constitutional amendments, whose provisions envisaged the first part of the Akritas Plan, strongly limiting the political representation of Turkish Cypriots. The proposal was met with fury by the Turkish minority, and tensions quickly escalated, leading to the Bloody Christmas (*Kanlı Noel*), when in the night between the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> of December 1963 intercommunal violence erupted between Greeks and Turks living on the island. The political violence soon turned into a civil conflict which continued until 1964 and resulted in the killing of 364 Turkish Cypriots and 174 Greek Cypriots. The events were described by the Daily Telegraph as an "anti-Turkish pogrom". The Cyprus Crisis of 1963-1964, with ethnic cleansing of Turkish communities in Omorphita, Ayos Vasilios and Mathiatis and the desecration of mosques and Muslim shrines, resulted in the creation of Turkish Cypriot armed enclaves, while thousands of them became refugees and fled the island to seek shelter in Turkey or the United Kingdom. Makarios III unilaterally changed the constitution, and the UN deployed its peacekeeping forces on the island, dividing the national capital, Nicosia, with the United Nations Buffer Zone in Cyprus, also known as the "Green Line". In the same year, Turkey threatened to invade Cyprus in order to end ethnic violence against Turkish Cypriots, but it was stopped by US president Johnson who threatened to withdraw NATO support to Turkey in case of Soviet invasion if the Turkish army was to unilaterally invade Cyprus.<sup>24</sup> The situation remained tense for the following years, with protests erupting once again in 1967 when Turkish Cypriots asked for more freedom of movement; the dispute was settled only after Turkey once again threatened to invade the island, and the Cypriot government agreed to ease some restrictions to the freedom of movement and access to supplies for the Turkish minority. In 1974 the conflict dramatically escalated when, on July 15, president Makarios III was removed from office by a military coup staged by the Greek military junta under the leadership of Dimitrios Ioannides. The Greek Army replaced Makarios III with Nikos Sampson, a nationalist member of EOKA who supported enosis and who had played a "brutal role" in carrying out ethnic violence targeting Turkish Cypriots in 1963/1964<sup>25</sup>; the Country adopted the name "Hellenic Republic of Cyprus",

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<sup>23</sup> Solsten, E. (1993), *Cyprus: A Country Study*. Washington D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>24</sup> Landau, J.M. (1979), *Johnson's 1964 Letter to İnönü and Greek Lobbying of the White House*. Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Leonard Davis Institute for International Relations.

<sup>25</sup> Hoffmeister, F. (2006), *Legal Aspects of the Cyprus Problem: Annan Plan and EU Accession*. Leiden; Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.

becoming a de facto puppet state of Athens. The Turkish government, led by Ecevit, issued a list of demands to the Greek government, including the request to immediately remove Niko Sampson, withdraw their troops and let Turkish troops on the island to protect the population, as well as equal rights for Turkish Cypriots. Turkish officials also asked the US to intervene diplomatically as a mediator and urged the British government to take immediate action under the Treaty of Guarantee, claiming Greece had violated Cyprus's neutral status. However, when both the British and the Greek refused to listen to Turkish demands, Turkey launched Operation Attila, the military invasion of the island, starting from the city of Kyrenia. Turkish leaders claimed their right to intervention was granted by the Treaty of Guarantee, though this claim was deemed unlawful by the UN. When the Security Council issued a ceasefire on the island, the Turkish army had already occupied 3% of the island. In response to the invasion, the Cypriot National Guard stormed the Turkish Cypriot enclave of Limassol, and according to reports from eyewitness, children were killed by the Cypriot military<sup>26</sup>. Shortly after the Turkish invasion of Cyprus, the Greek military junta collapsed, democracy was restored in Athens and Sampson left his office in Cyprus. Two rounds of peace talks were held in Geneva in the summer of 1974, with the participation of the British, Greek and Turkish governments, as well as representatives of the two ethnic communities on the island. During the talks, Turkey proposed the creation of a federal state on the island and a population transfer; however, Clerides, the Cypriot acting president, asked for more time to consult with the Greek government and representatives of the Greek Cypriot community. Turkey rejected his proposal, and as the situation in Geneva became more tense, the Turkish government ordered a second military operation on the island, and Turkish forces advanced south until occupying 37% of Cypriot territory. The northern territory of Cyprus, as far as the Green Line, fell under Turkish occupation and became de facto a separate political entity, which was named a "Federate Turkish State" by Ankara in 1975. A few years later, in 1983, the legislative branch of the Turkish Cypriot government unilaterally declared independence from the Republic of Cyprus, adopting the name "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus"; the act was considered a breach of international law by the UN Security Council, and the TRNC is officially recognized as an independent Country only by Ankara. In the following years, attempts by the UN to solve the dispute and reunify the islands produced little effects. A major setback in negotiations was caused by the Republic of Cyprus's accession to negotiations for membership in the European Community, in 1990, three years after Turkey's application. Diplomatic relations between the European Union and Turkey were additionally damaged when the ECJ (European Court of Justice) restricted imports of goods from the TRNC. Turkey and the Republic of Cyprus risked open military confrontation between 1997 and 1998, when the latter purchased two Russian S-300 air-defense missile systems, considered by Ankara as a threat to its national integrity and to the political status of Northern Cyprus. The crisis escalated into the Cyprus Missile Crisis, which was solved when the weapons were ceded by Cyprus to Greece in exchange for alternative armaments. A major attempt

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<sup>26</sup> Oberling, P. (1982), *The Road to Bellapais: The Turkish Cypriot Exodus to Northern Cyprus*. Social Science Monographs, 185

to peacefully solve the dispute came with the UN Plan for Settlement, also known as the Annan Plan (from the name of UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan). The plan proposed the political unification of the island in the form of a federation between the Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot constituent states. The two states would have been granted a legislative assembly each, and with a bicameral assembly at the federal level, in which seats would have been assigned proportionally to the two communities in the lower house and an equal number of seats for the two ethnic groups in the upper house. The plan remained controversial, in particular with respect to property rights concerning former Greek settlements in Northern Cyprus; it also provided for the progressive demilitarization of the island, while keeping in place the 1960 Treaty of Guarantee. The plan was later subject to referendum on April 24, 2004, where, despite endorsement by the European Union, the United States and the United Nations, it was rejected by over 75% Greek Cypriot voters, while being approved by almost 65% of Turkish Cypriot voters. In the same year, the Republic of Cyprus became a member of the European Union; the EU does not recognize the legitimacy of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, however, acknowledging the de facto division of the island, Protocol 10 of the Accession Treaty suspended the application of *acquis communautaire* on the territory of the TRNC as long as the two political entities are not unified.<sup>27</sup>

Evaluating the Turkish involvement into the Cypriot Conflict, two considerations need to be made. The first element to note is how intercommunal violence and internalized discrimination menaced the survival of both communities, but they mainly affected the Turkish Cypriot population. The original constitutional plan for the island, as laid out by the London and Zurich Agreements of 1959, alongside the two additional treaties of 1960, did not solve the ethnic cleavages and the political turmoil affecting the island, nor did they manage to prevent the successive bloodshed of 1963/1964. The presence and the power of far-right paramilitary organizations on the island, such as EOKA, was not properly addressed by such international arrangements; and following the independence of the island, the frustration of Greek Cypriots against the constitutional protections of the Turkish Cypriot minority often resulted in acts of violent hostility, ranging from institutional racism (such as the disarmament of the Turkish police and gendarmerie) to attempts at ethnic cleansing, with the Bloody Christmas events in Nicosia seeing the murder of hundreds of members of the Turkish community in their homes.<sup>28</sup> Within this context of diffused intercommunal political violence, the coup d'état carried out by the Greek colonels on the island in 1974 jeopardized even more the survival of the Turkish Cypriot minority; indeed, after deposing Makarios, the Greek nationalist forces carried out attacks on the Turkish Cypriot villages and enclaves; this form of ethnic violence, alongside the imminent possibility of enosis, provided legal grounds under article 3 of the Treaty of Guarantee for the first Turkish military intervention on the island, since the actions of the Greek military junta de facto altered the state of affairs established by the

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<sup>27</sup> Kyris, G. (2020), *The European Union in Northern Cyprus: Conceptualizing the Avoidance of Contested States*. *Geopolitics*, 25:2, 346-361

<sup>28</sup> Crawshaw, N. (1964), *Cyprus: Collapse of the Zurich Agreement*. *The World Today* Vol. 20, No. 8, 338-347. Royal Institute of International Affairs.



1960 constitution.<sup>29</sup> If this first intervention contributed to avoid an escalation of intercommunal violence, which could have potentially evolved into genocide, the second military operation following the collapse of the Greek colonels however jeopardized attempts at finding a unitary solution. The failure of the Annan Plan, due to its rejection by the Greek Cypriot population, shows how intercommunal hatred still persists among the island population, with the risk of the perpetuation of a system of institutionalized racism against the Turkish minority, if the two Countries were to be united under the legal system of the Republic of Cyprus. Secondly, any viable solution must entail cooperation, rather than mutual condemnation, between the European Union and the Republic of Turkey, and must be aimed at the respect and the protection of both populations and their cultural heritage. In this sense, the creation of a federal State on the model of the Annan Plan could still represent the most adequate means to ensuring peaceful coexistence, and the potential future integration of the Republic of Turkey within the European Union could dramatically improve relations between the two communities on the island; indeed, if Turkey were to be recognized as a member of the EU, it would prove the possibility of harmony among different cultures and religions, undermining Huntington's theory of a clash of civilizations, so long as common values, such as secularism, respect of human rights and of personal freedoms, and the active condemnation of any form of ethnic and cultural discrimination are endorsed.

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<sup>29</sup> Fisher, R.J. (2001), *Cyprus: The Failure of Mediation and the Escalation of an Identity-Based Conflict to an Adversarial Impasse*. Journal of Peace Research, vol.38, no. 3, 307-326

## ***1.4 The Return to Imperialism: The Neo-Ottoman Shift***

The birth of the Republic and the ideological revolution led by Mustafa Ataturk, aimed at the reform and the abolishment of the remaining Ottoman institutions – including the conduct of the foreign policy – alienated Turkey from its former Middle Eastern possession, as the Country began a diplomatic struggle to be recognized as a European power and align itself – diplomatically, strategically and culturally – with the liberal West. The treaties signed with neighboring France, Soviet Union and United Kingdom in the interwar period, alongside the formal renounce to much of its former possessions settled by Arab populations via the National Pact (*Misak-ı Milli*), launched an enormous geopolitical message both domestically and internationally: the Republic of Turkey had no intention of returning to its Ottoman past, including the territorial conquest of its neighboring non-Turkish former provinces. The abolition of the Caliphate, as well as the secularization of Turkish society and institutions, signified the end of Istanbul's role as the imperial seat of the Muslim world. Expansionist imperialism – which for centuries had dominated the geopolitical goals of the Ottoman Empire, aiming at the unification of the Islamic world and trying to breach through the gates of Christian Europe, in a continuous conflict embedded with religious propaganda and holy war rhetoric from both sides - was substituted by the creation of a liberal/civic nationalism, the foundation of a new ethnic dimension deeply interconnected with laicism, in sharp opposition to the political and juridical role of Islam under the Ottoman Caliphate. This form of liberal nationalism, somewhat resembling the civic nationalism which had been developed by 19<sup>th</sup> century's political thinker Mazzini, was the ideological instrument through which Ataturk managed to unify the Country liberating it from foreign occupation under the Treaty of Sevres, while at the same time laying the foundations of a new political entity – the Republic of Turkey – which had to be created in opposition, rather than in continuation, to the previous experience of the Ottoman Empire. From a foreign policy perspective, the substitution of Ottoman multiculturalism with a mono-ethnic Nation State and the renounce to Istanbul's role as the political center of Islam translated into a protectionist rather than aggressive approach to international relations, pushing the newly-born Republic towards seeking stronger geopolitical ties, as well as recognition, with the Western European powers, upholding the rule of law in the international sphere (and therefore not falling into the revisionist sphere in the interwar period, unlike Italy or Germany), and distancing itself from the Arab world and the Middle East. Despite attempts and policies of cooperation with its eastern and southern neighbors did exist – such as the Saadabad Pact of 1937 – the end of the Empire coincided with Turkey's designation of Europe as its new home, rather than the Muslim world. The cultural policies adopted by Kemal after he came to power – and in particular the secularization of society and institutions, the adoption of the Latin alphabet, and the epuration of the Turkish language from Persian and

Arabic influences – were perceived by its Arab neighbors as an “original sin”, cutting the common Islamic and linguistic bonds which had tied the Turks to the Middle East for centuries.<sup>30</sup>

The Republic international alignment with the West - and in particular its affiliation with the USA - was reflected in its support to the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194 of 1948, and its participation to the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine (UNCCP), being the only Muslim-majority Country in the UN voting in favor of a final settlement to the 1947-1949 Palestine war which envisaged the coexistence of both Arabs and Israelis. The diplomatic schisma between Turkey and the Arab world became even more evident when the Country officially recognized Israel, de facto in 1949 and de jure in 1950; this diplomatic move, which saw Turkey uphold the geopolitical interests of western Countries in the Middle East, generated much resentment among the Arab governments.<sup>31</sup>

This approach to the Middle Eastern arena, characterized by a general cooperation with the Western powers and with Israel, in sharp opposition to the radical Islamists and Arab socialists and nationalists, characterized Turkish foreign policy through much of the XX century; Turkey distanced itself from the region, allying itself with Israel (which it regarded as the only other democracy in the area, and whose military and political alliance was of the utmost political importance as both Countries were depicted as enemies and Western puppets by the Arab governments), and directing much of its diplomatic effort and foreign policy strategies to reinforcing its cooperation with the USA and Western Europe, with the ultimate goal of being recognized as a European Country. However, this core tenet in Turkish international relations, which can be seen as the external manifestation of Atatürk’s secularist legacy, came under increasing revision when a shift happened in the domestic political landscape of the Country: the rise of a new political leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, whose policies jeopardized the survival some of the key constitutional and institutional principles of Kemalism. When he first came to power in 2003, Prime Minister Erdoğan did not cause any significant change in the conduct of the foreign policy of Turkey; indeed, his first years of government were characterized by groundbreaking improvements in the process of Turkish membership to the European Union, with the possibility for the Country to officially become an EU members State being de jure recognized in 2004. Nevertheless, despite an initial positive endorsement of Erdoğan’s reforms by the European Union, relations between the Turkish leader and the bloc grew progressively cold in the following years, as Turkey underwent a democratic backslide. Following the alleged coup attempt of July 15, 2016, Erdoğan declared a state of emergency which suspended many democratic liberties and led to the arrest of prominent figures of the opposition, including journalists, professors, and army officials. The impact of the events of 2016 on the democratic status of Turkey, as well as the American refusal to extradite Muhammed Fethullah Gülen, accused by Turkey to be the political

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<sup>30</sup> Bengio, O.; Gencer, Ö. (2001), *Old Grievances, New Fears: Arab Perceptions of Turkey and Its Alignment with Israel*. Middle Eastern Studies, 37(2), 50-92

<sup>31</sup> Bishku, M. B. (1992), *Turkey and its Middle Eastern Neighbours since 1945*. Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, Vol.15, No. 3, 60-61

and spiritual agitator whose actions inspired the coup attempt, have been major causes of frictions between the West and Turkey. As Erdoğan concentrated more powers within his hands via constitutional revisions and referenda, the internal changes within Turkish politics were also reflected in its relations with foreign countries and the international system. The conduct of Turkish foreign policy, which had for decades been based upon the Kemalist doctrine and an attempt to have good, or at least neutral, relations with neighboring countries, underwent a dramatic shift as neo-Ottomanism, a political and cultural doctrine revising the Ottoman legacy and pointing at the imperial past as a symbol of national pride and strength, started to be directly and indirectly promoted by the government. Despite not openly rejecting Atatürk's figure and his legacy, the new political elite centered around Erdoğan gradually rehabilitated some elements of Ottomanism which had been fought by Mustafa Kemal. Secularism has not been abandoned constitutionally, but it has gradually been eroded by the government endorsement of religious leaders and the promotion of Islamic values and symbols in the public sphere. Changing the narrative of the Ottoman past – from a symbol of decay and failure, enemy of the Turkish State, to its depiction as an element of national pride, celebrated as a moment in which the Turks ruled over most of the Mediterranean region and the Middle East – brings significant changes in how Turkey perceives itself, its geostrategic objectives and its neighbors; indeed, while under the Kemalist paradigm and its creation of a civic nationalism based on the celebration of the secular, republican and westernized Turks the Country's foreign policy adopted a more defensive connotation, protective of international law, leaning towards Europe and not particularly concerned with its Middle Eastern neighbors, the new doctrine entails the adoption of a more aggressive foreign policy, nostalgic of an imperial and Islamic past in which Istanbul ruled over three continents, opposed to the European powers whose presence and interests in the MENA region resembles neocolonialism and the historical trauma of the crusades. By openly embracing and rehabilitating its Ottoman past, Erdoğan attempted, perhaps managed, to create a new Turkey, no longer a European power among the European powers, but rather the imperial leader of the Umma, a Country abandoning liberalism in international relations to pursue hegemony over its former provinces. The Republic's foreign policy, conducted and designed under the influence and advice of Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey since 2014, has jeopardized the friendly and peaceful relations the Country used to have with neighboring powers; the aggressive and revisionist approach has drawn condemnation by most EU governments, generating diplomatic incidents with a number of European governments, from the Netherlands to France and more recently Italy; Turkey's attempt to become a hegemon in the Muslim world has created friction with other Countries aiming at the same position, namely Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. Within this general context, its support to Gaza and its condemnation of Israeli occupation of Eastern Jerusalem has frozen relations with one of its previously closer partners militarily and politically in the Middle East – Israel. Turkish increased military presence in the Mediterranean has led to security concerns in Cyprus, Greece, and Egypt. Relations with the historical partners at NATO were also strained by Erdoğan's ambiguous position towards Russia, which Turkey openly opposed in different scenarios, from Syria to the Caucasus and Libya, but from whom it also bought missile defense systems leading to sanctions from the United States.

It is not yet certain whether Erdoganism represents a parenthesis in the foreign policy conduct of Turkey and its long-term strategic interests, or whether this new paradigm, deeply embedded with neo-Ottoman rhetoric and dreams of hegemony over the Eastern Mediterranean, is destined to substitute the Kemalist ideological legacy which for almost a century had directed the diplomatic goals of the Republic, pursuing cooperation with the West and integration within the liberal order. With a shattered economy and ravaged by the Covid-19 pandemic, Turkey's political landscape appears extremely polarized on the evaluation of the figure of Erdogan and on what he stands for, also at the international level. Strong political defeats in the 2019 Turkish local elections, which costed the AKP control over the strategically vital political and financial centers of the Country, Ankara and Istanbul, for the first time in over a decade, may signify the failure of Erdogan's attempt at directing the public opinion towards external wars and threats in order to avoid coverage of the economic disruption at home. But any victory of the Kemalist opposition will need to deal with the toll of almost two decades of democratic backslide and will need to reassert the system of alliances disrupted by the diplomatic crises of the last years. But for now, neo-Ottomanism and its imperialistic dreams are still directing the foreign action of Turkey.

## Chapter 2

### *2.1 Turkey and the Sea: the Mavi Vatan and its Geopolitical Implications*



Map of Turkish maritime claims in the Black, Aegean, and Mediterranean Seas under the “*mavi vatan*” doctrine; Institute for Political and International Studies, 2020.

The Republic of Turkey borders the Black Sea to the north and the Mediterranean Sea to the south and the west. According to data collected by the CIA World Factbook, it has a coastline of 7200 km, the 17<sup>th</sup> longest in the world, and is the third Mediterranean Country by coastline length, after Greece and Italy. Situated between two of the most important bodies of water in the world, and controlling the straits between them, Turkey has long relied on the sea for economic and defence purposes. This peculiar relationship of the Anatolian peninsula with the sea has allowed empires to extend their rule over much of the Mediterranean Basin, turning Byzantium, and later Constantinople, into the capital of powerful thalassocracies with overseas dependencies scattered across three continents. From the Byzantine Empire to the Ottoman Empire, Anatolia’s “natural” geopolitical role was to serve as the centre of imperial polities which exploited its position between the two seas in order to gain dominance over much of the Balkans and the Levant, as well as North Africa,

controlling vital trade routes between Europe and Asia. The recent revival of neo-Ottoman foreign policy could not ignore the geostrategic importance that the sea had meant to the Empire; by the age of Suleyman the Magnificent, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottoman fleet was heavily present from the western Mediterranean to the northern Black Sea, and it was active as far as the Eastern Indian Ocean. The Ottomans had turned the Black Sea and the Red Sea into internal lakes and had marched up to the Caspian Sea; in the Mediterranean Sea, they ruled over three-quarters of the shores, from Algeria to the Levant, and controlled most of the Balkan coast of the Adriatic.<sup>32</sup> Influence over the seas allowed the Ottomans to benefit heavily from trade, to control vast provinces distant from the Anatolian homeland and to protect their territory. The acknowledgement of the enormous geostrategic and economic potential advantages connected to the sea has recently led to the formulation of a new approach to foreign policy which has become increasingly dominant in the Turkish military and political elites; this new policy, which is deeply interconnected with the recent neo-Ottoman turn in the Republic's approach to geopolitical and international matters, has come to be known under the name of "*mavi vatan*", meaning "blue homeland"; the formulation and adherence to this doctrine signals a dramatic shift in the theoretical and political framework within which Turkish military and government officials operate: it is a staunch contradiction to the previous, liberal-Kemalist, pro-Western tenets which had aligned Turkey's foreign policy with the geopolitical interests of European, and, most importantly, American diplomacies in the region; on the contrary, it entails the shift from a civic nationalism towards an aggressive imperialistic presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, isolating the Country from its previous allies and on the international stage. The formulation and publicization of this doctrine are strongly connected to the figure of Admiral Cem Gürdeniz, one of the most visible and influent retired members of the military. Gürdeniz's view of Turkish foreign policy is embedded with a strong hostility towards the West and Washington, defined by him as the Atlantic Front, which he believes hinder and stop Turkey from becoming a global power, by protecting Greek interests in the Aegean Sea and preventing Turkey from exploiting the natural resources (especially fossil fuels and gas) found in its blue homeland.<sup>33</sup> The *mavi vatan* doctrine is a key pillar within the neo-Ottoman paradigm; indeed, its revisionist and revanchist claims on the sea are largely based upon the assumption that the Treaty of Sevres unlawfully deprived Turkey of its continental shelf rights, and imply a return to former areas which were previously possessed by the Ottoman Empire but had been lost during the transition towards the Republican government. The rationale laying behind this strategy, in the eyes of its supporters, is that by taking back control over its maritime "homeland", the Turkish government would be able to project its strength over the broader Northern African and Levantine regions, giving back to Anatolia its "natural role" as the outpost for expanding hegemonic power over the southern shores of the Mediterranean. Alongside military and political hegemony in a volatile – but strategically vital – region (which, in light of its

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<sup>32</sup> Kunt, M.; Woodhead, C. (1995), *Suleyman the Magnificent and His Age: The Ottoman Empire in the Early Modern World*. London; New York: Routledge.

<sup>33</sup> Gingeras, R. (2020), *The Heated Politics Behind Turkey's New Maritime Strategy*. Texas National Security Review. War On the Rocks.

former status as a Ottoman province, is regarded by some members of the neo-Ottoman, ultra-nationalistic political movements as a rightfully Turkish possession), there are also key economic factors determining this new focus on the Eastern Mediterranean; in recent years, large deposits of gas and oil have been found in those waters, drawing the attention of regional powers such as Israel, Egypt, France and Italy, each hoping to benefit from the exploitation of the energy resources discovered in the region. The Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea are also crossed by some of the most important trade routes in the whole planet, at the crossroads of Europe, Africa, and Asia, and bordered by some of the richest regions in terms of fossil fuels, such as the Middle East, the Caucasus and Russia. Control over those waters carries incredible benefits economically and energetically, allowing Countries to exploit vital resources for domestic demand and international export. The pursuit of this new paradigm in the foreign policy of Turkey and its relationship with the sea has led to increasing investments in the navy and in the maritime industry and technologies; in the last years, the government financed the creation of two drilling ships (the Kanuni and the Fatih), as well as three seismographic ships, the Barbaros, the Oruch Reis and the Yavouzas. This was followed by an extensive display of naval and military strength by the Turkish government in February and March 2019, when Turkey deployed an enormous number of ships and fighter jets in the Mediterranean, in the Aegean and in the Black Seas during operation “*Mavi Vatan*”, testing its warfighting capabilities in all its neighbouring seas for the first time since the establishment of the Republic.<sup>34</sup> Under the Blue Homeland doctrine, Turkey aims at becoming a key actor in the competition over energy diplomacy, while at the same time expanding its spheres of influence and its geopolitical hegemony towards the MENA region and further south. Clearly, these new strategic goals signal a stark contrast with the previous liberal paradigm which had based much of the Country’s foreign policy upon reliance on a system of alliances and treaties with Western democracies; shifting to a currently-dominant realist approach to international relations among its military and institutional policymakers, Turkey finds itself isolated on the international stage, with many of its NATO allies – primarily Greece – perceiving Ankara as a security threat rather than a military ally. Turkey’s increased military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean has further jeopardized the relations of Ankara with Brussels; indeed, the *mavi vatan* doctrine is considered by Athens and Nicosia as a violation of their sovereignty, and both Countries have repeatedly asked the EU institutions to adopt harsher measures against Turkey if Ankara proceeds in carrying out its plans in the region, including calls for imposing trade tariffs and halting arms exports. The major issue regards the maritime border between Ankara and Nicosia. The Republic of Cyprus claims sovereignty over the entirety of the island, whilst Turkey considers the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus as an independent Country; therefore, the Turkish and Cypriot governments legally disagree over the status of the waters separating the island from the Anatolian mainland, with Ankara considering itself the protector of ethnic Turks in the northern half of the island (and thus believing it is entitled to defend their interests in the

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<sup>34</sup> Kasapoglu, C. (2019), “*The Blue Homeland*”: *Turkey’s Largest Naval Drill*. Istanbul: Anadolu Agency.



territorial sea of the TRNC). Those waters have recently generated huge international interest following the discovery of gas deposits and other natural resources, aggravating the tensions between the two Countries, with Nicosia lamenting the impossibility of carrying out gas discovery activities in what it regards as its exclusive economic zone due to Turkish military presence. With several Countries trying to exploit the rich soils in the Eastern Mediterranean, diplomatic incidents and military tensions have also escalated with other European Countries with whom Ankara had maintained friendly relations before the recent change in its international policy, such as Italy and France. In 2018, the Turkish navy blockaded a ship hired by the Italian company ENI to conduct gas drills off the Cypriot coast. ENI claimed its well was located within Cyprus Exclusive Economic Zone, but Ankara rejected the claim, considering those waters as its own offshore maritime zone. Another major diplomatic incident was triggered in August 2020 when, following Turkey's decision to send the seismographic ship Oruç Reis and some warships in a disputed area to explore offshore oil and gas reserves, France deployed naval vessels in the region to support Greece and Cyprus.<sup>35</sup> The French move to increase military presence in the eastern Mediterranean in support for EU members Greece and Cyprus was met with rage and hostility by the Turkish government, and was considered by President Erdoğan as an act of neo-colonialism and imperialism aimed at further complicating Turkey's relations with its eastern Mediterranean neighbours. The tensions between Turkey and the European Union over the hydrocarbon exploitation and gas drilling off the Cypriot coasts led to the Union imposing sanctions on Turkish officials and companies directly involved in the planning and carrying out of the explorations in December 2020<sup>36</sup>; despite remaining largely symbolic, this diplomatic move was a further step towards the freezing of relations between former partners and allies, drawing condemnation from the Turkish government and pushing the Country deeper in its diplomatic isolation. Despite having found a fragile partner in the al-Sarraj government in Libya, Turkey's claims under the *mavi vatan* doctrine were opposed and criticised by virtually any other actor in the region; it created a deep rift between the Republic and the European Union, and particularly France, Greece and Cyprus; it further complicated Turkey's relations with Middle Eastern Countries, primarily Egypt (openly backed by the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia due to their opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood, which Turkey is accused of supporting), but also Israel and to some extent Jordan; and it could potentially hinder Turkish decades-long cooperation with the United States under the new Biden administration. The pursuit of the *mavi vatan* doctrine and of unilateral operations in the areas falling within the geostrategic and cultural boundaries of the Blue Homeland substituted the use of bilateral and multilateral actions as instruments to achieve the stability and security of the Anatolian mainland. The renewed relationship of Turkey with the sea – despite its implications in terms of cooperation with neighbouring powers and international credibility – has become one of the most important imperatives under the new foreign policy of

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<sup>35</sup> Mallet, V.; Peel, M.; Hope, K.; Yackley, A. J.; Chazan, G. (2020), *France Stokes Turkey Tensions by Sending Naval Vessels to Waters Off Cyprus*. Financial Times.

<sup>36</sup> Wintour, P. (2020), *EU Leaders Approve Sanctions on Turkish Officials Over Gas Drilling*. The Guardian.

President Erdoğan; it reflects and complements the wider process of realignment and reformulation of the long-term geostrategic objectives of Ankara under the emerging neo-Ottoman paradigm, since a strong naval and military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea, as well as the economic benefits resulting from the exploitation of offshore gas and oil deposits and trade routes, would be of pivotal importance for establishing and protecting Turkey's hegemony over the Greater Middle East; if Anatolia is to become once again the heart of the Muslim world, then dominance over the seas would help Ankara assert its strength over the Levant, Northern Africa and down into the Red Sea, as well as securing its borders from potentially hostile actions and interference from Western European powers; however, rather than increasing Turkey's international prestige and allowing it to reassert its dominance over the former Ottoman possession, the pursuit of the Blue Homeland doctrine has only contributed to isolating Turkey from its former allies, generating fears and hostility among its neighbours, and aggravated the economic crisis due to sanctions and instability.

## 2.2 Energy diplomacy: from the Caucasus to the Eastern Mediterranean



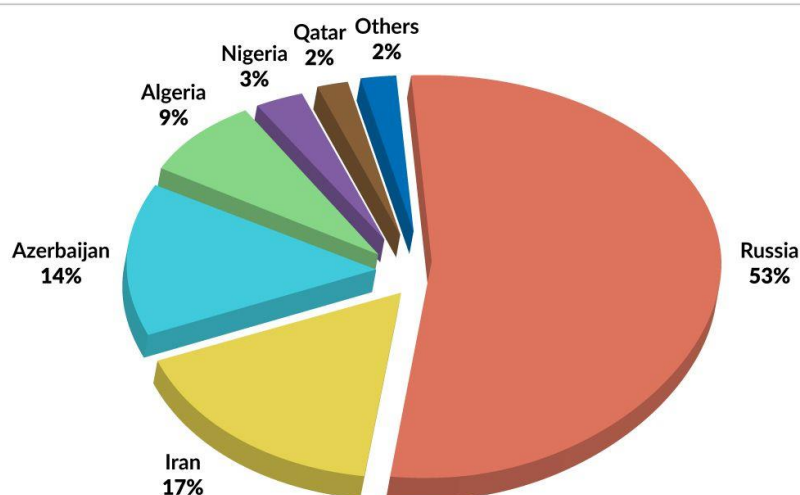
Energy routes passing through Turkish territory. Bne Intellinews, 2021

Due to its peculiar geographical position – surrounded by some of the richest regions in terms of natural resources assets, which account for over 70% of total worldwide gas and oil reserves – and its proximity to the European markets, Turkey is trying to establish itself as a natural energy bridge, connecting the oil and gas producing Countries of the Middle East and the Caucasus to the consumer markets in Western Europe, emerging as an alternative to Russia in the supply of energy to the EU<sup>37</sup>. In this context, the creation of new pipelines passing through the Turkish territory has been one of the main goals pursued by Ankara in its foreign policy and diplomatic efforts, understanding the economic benefits that such projects could bring to the Country's struggling economy and providing a powerful bargaining chip in Turkey's complicated relations with Russia and the EU. One of the most ambitious projects, successfully completed in 2020, was represented by TurkStream, a natural gas pipeline which from Russia crosses the Black Sea and reaches Turkey, and from there Bulgaria. The project falls under a wider program of construction of pipelines with the aim of turning Turkey into a gas hub between two continents: similar projects have been concluded or planned in the last

<sup>37</sup> Ozdemir, V.; Guliyev, I.A. (2016), *Energy Diplomacy of Turkey*. MGIMO Review of International Relations. 101-110

years, reflecting a new Turkish ambition in becoming a key actor in the global competition for gas and oil supply and control, and has in turn influenced the current offensive realist approach in the conduct of Ankara's foreign policy, explaining its recent military involvement in oil and gas rich regions such as the Caucasus or Libya; and even in the analysis of the *mavi vatan* and the maritime dispute with Cyprus and Greece, the discovery of gas and other energy resources in the waters of the Eastern Mediterranean are a key reason behind the recent shift in Turkish behavior and in the worsening of its relations with its neighbors. Since Erdoğan became the dominant figure in Turkish politics, energy diplomacy has been one of the main drives in the internal and international policies of the Country: in 2006, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) pipeline started supplying gas and oil from the Shah Deniz gas field and the Azeri-Chirag-Gunashli oil field (Azerbaijan) to Turkey, effectively opening an energy route from the Caspian Sea to Anatolia. The construction of these pipelines had a great geopolitical impact on the region, asserting the strategic importance of the South Caucasus in the global petroleum's politics and challenging the Russian and Iranian hegemony in the region by opening spaces of cooperation between Azerbaijan (and Georgia) and Turkey, in a region which had historically been regarded as the backyard of Moscow; by effectively securing a new route in the East-West energy corridor, the pipelines granted Turkey a new and bigger strategic importance and leverage, turning it into the energy bridge between the Southern Caucasus and the European Union and strengthening its influence over Azerbaijan and Georgia<sup>38</sup>; moreover, the construction of the BTC and BTE pipelines had a significant impact on Ankara's relationship with Armenia, allowing Turkey and Azerbaijan to isolate it from the project and making it relatively weaker in the wider geopolitical game of the Southern Caucasus.

**Turkish gas imports, 2016**



Turkey's total gas imports in 2016 equaled 46 billion cubic meters

Source: Dr. F. Umbach, Interfax Global Energy

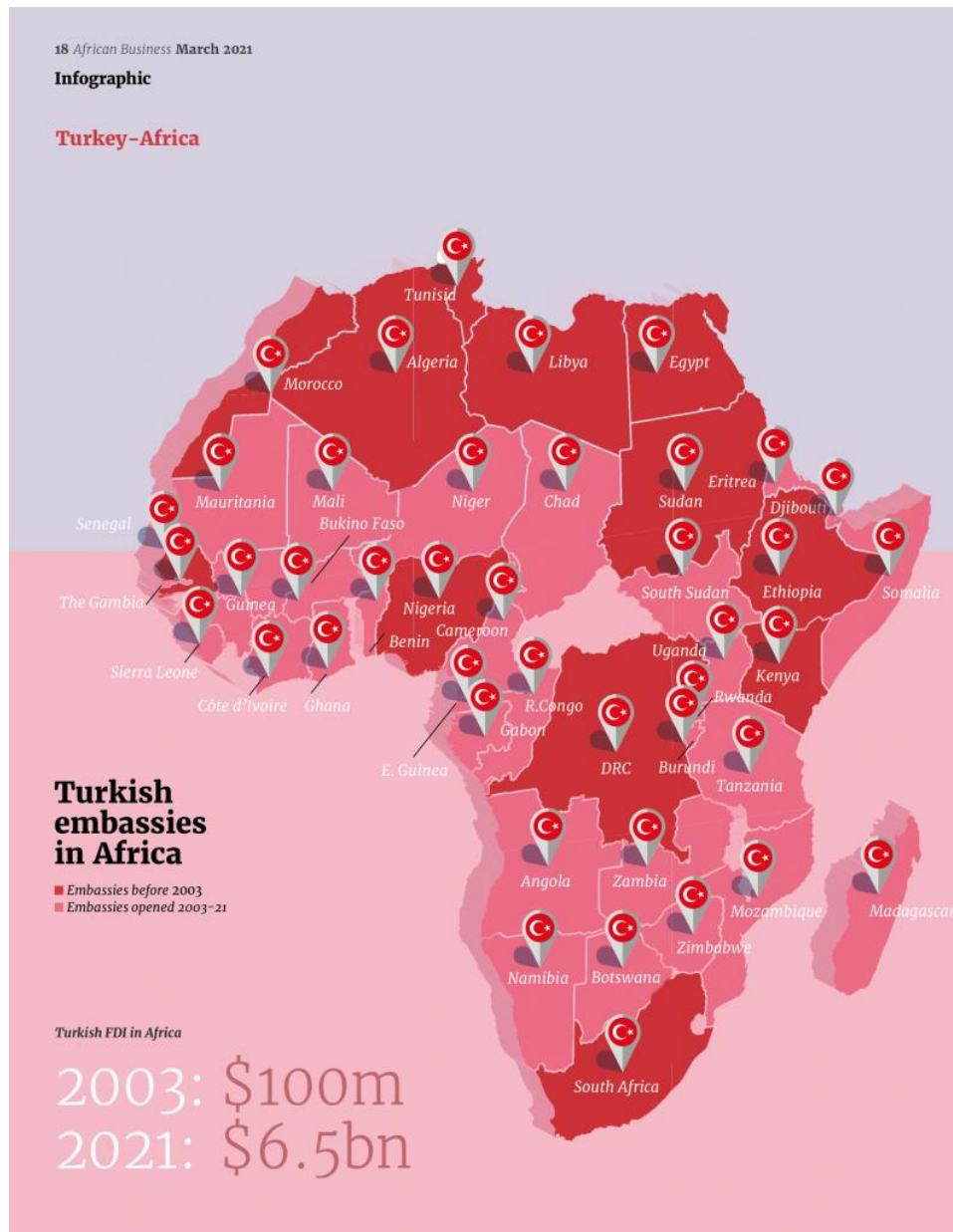
<sup>38</sup> Starr, F.S.; Cornell, S.E.; (2005), *The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline: Oil Window to the West*. Washington, D.C.; Uppsala: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program.

The emergence of Turkey as the main transit Country for gas supply to the European Union from the Southern Caucasus was met positively by Brussels, seeking to reduce its dependence on Russia for energy security. The pipeline diplomacy has therefore opened new spaces of cooperation between Ankara and the EU, but at the same time it also tied Turkey closer to Moscow; indeed, Turkey lacks gas reserves on its territory and heavily relies on Russian exports, which in 2016 accounted for over 50% of Turkey's total gas imports. This overdependence on Russian gas has been a major source of frustration for the Turkish government, seeking to diversify its energy sources and break the Russian monopoly on gas supply. The worsening of Turkey's relation with the European Union further complicated Ankara position towards Moscow, with the latter seeking to exploit this fracture, increasing its dominance over the Turkish energy market. This was highlighted by the 2014 memorandum of understanding signed by Putin and Erdoğan for the construction of the "Turkish Stream", a new pipeline crossing the Black Sea from Russia to Turkey, infuriating the European Commission which saw this move as undermining its energy ties with Ukraine. At the same time, the project threatened to further increase Turkey's dependence on Russian energy supplies. The project was abandoned in 2015, following the downing of a Russian Su-24 bomber accused of having violated Turkish airspace; the resulting diplomatic crisis was a reminder of Turkey and Russia's intrinsically opposed interests in the global scenario, rendering a formal alliance between the two Countries impossible under an energy perspective. In the fight for energy resources, Russia and Turkey cooperation appears unfeasible, for the two Countries have strongly diverging views and interests on vital matters like the Southern Caucasus, Syria, and Libya. Nevertheless, a rapprochement between Moscow and Ankara in 2016, following new tensions between Turkey and the EU, brought the project back on the table, under the new name of "TurkStream". The fear of becoming too dependent on Russia is however still high in Ankara, pushing the Country towards the search for new energy supplies. This translated into a renewed and stronger partnership between Ankara and Baku, since Azerbaijan has been the only supplier of natural gas to Turkey with whom the latter had no geopolitical clashes or price disputes in recent years. The need to secure the inflow of gas and oil from the Southern Caucasus has had two major geopolitical implications; firstly, it has maintained relations with Tbilisi stable, generating frictions with Russia which considers Georgia a threat to its national security interests. Georgia has thus invested much effort into the construction and the successful implementation of the pipelines connecting the Caspian Sea to Turkey, understanding their vital importance in guaranteeing its own national independence against Russian aggression; similarly, Turkey has strong interests in keeping Russia out of Georgia, not only because a direct border with Moscow may represent a new security threat on its Black Sea borders for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, but also because it would undermine Ankara's attempt at diversifying its energy imports. The second consequence regards the need to defend Baku's territorial integrity against Yerevan's claims, for a full-scale conflict in the region could result in major damages to the South Caucasus Pipeline and the BTC Pipeline; despite not having been directly involved in the military conflict yet, attacks on Azerbaijani energy infrastructures were simulated by the Armenian army in military exercises, leaving open the possibility of their destruction in case of total war. Ankara has therefore reinforced its commitments to the defense of

Baku and its pipelines, and when war broke out in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, Turkey swiftly provided military assistance to Azerbaijan against Armenia. The conflict was part of the wider geopolitical waltz between Russia and Turkey in a region where the two powers fight over hegemony; indeed, the strategic importance of the Southern Caucasus in connecting the Caspian gas and oil reserves to the European markets carry enormous economic and geopolitical advantages. Russia has been a strong opponent of the BTC and BTE pipelines, seeing them as threats to its dominance over energy supply to Europe and as instruments designed by the West to undermine its hegemony over the region by tying Georgia (and Azerbaijan) closer to NATO, and finds in Armenia an important military and economic ally allowing Moscow to maintain its presence in the region; Turkey needs the Caspian resources in order to diversify its energy imports; moreover, hegemony over the Southern Caucasus may help Ankara project its influence over the Central Asian Turkic Countries, opening a new field of competition with Moscow and securing new energy routes from Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. Turkey's direct involvement in the internal politics and conflicts of the Southern Caucasus is a direct expression of the new imperialistic foreign policy of the Country, combining the ideological framework of Neo-Ottoman politics with the economical drive for new energy sources and supplies, using gas and petroleum diplomacy as an instrument of economic independence and a bargaining chip against Russia and the European Union. Isolating Armenia, containing Russia's energy exports and securing its influence over Baku and Tbilisi would turn Turkey into an energy hub with monopoly over the shipping of gas and oil from the Caspian Sea to the EU.

Turkey's position as an energy bridge represents a pivotal asset in increasing the Country's power in the field of international relations. However, Turkey lacks its own energy deposits, meaning that its role is relegated to a transit Country rather than a producer. Outside the Caucasus, the search for new energy resources has driven Turkey towards new arenas in the global competition over energy assets. A clear example in this sense is the Eastern Mediterranean, a region where Turkey aims at becoming a hegemon under the *mavi vatan* doctrine and which presents great opportunities in terms of gas production. The Levantine Basin has become the center of international tensions following huge low-cost gas discoveries on the seabed, raising Turkish hopes of reducing its energy reliance on Russia and become itself a producer and an exporter of natural gas. However, Ankara appears to be even more isolated in the Eastern Mediterranean arena than it is in the Southern Caucasus, making Turkish hopes for monopoly over the Levantine resources' exploitation unlikely.

## 2.3 Turkey's Return to Africa: Causes and Implications



Change in the number of the Turkish embassies in Africa and the amount of Turkish foreign direct investment in the continent since Erdoğan's premiership in 2003. African Business, 2021.

The global competition over energy resources and dominance over new trade routes has amplified the central geostrategic importance of the African continent, opening new arenas of diplomatic cooperation and antagonism among foreign powers trying to exploit the extensive natural wealth assets of the region, including oil, gas, gold, diamonds, and tantalum. The global demand for new exporting markets and the renewed centrality of African economic resources have drawn a new “scramble for Africa”, through which new non-Western Countries have tried to break through the centuries-long hegemony of former colonial powers over the fragile African polities. In the new African arena, emerging and traditional extra-regional actors are

engaged in an economic and diplomatic competition to secure control over the natural resources of the continent. The last two decades have seen a gradual but exponential growth of Turkish involvement in various African scenarios, in the form of diplomatic agreements, military interventions, economic partnerships and humanitarian aid.<sup>39</sup> The perspective of becoming a central actor in the African arena would enable Ankara to cement its hegemonic position in the Eastern Mediterranean and from there take a leadership role in the broader Islamic world. Control over the African markets and trade agreements with regional developing economies may also help Turkey in its effort to diversify its energy inputs and gain greater autonomy from Russian supplies, by opening new routes from oil and gas-rich Algeria, Libya, and Nigeria.

The Ottoman Empire enjoyed close political and economic relationships with Africa; since the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Constantinople gradually annexed various Northern African provinces following military victories against the Egyptian Mamluks and Charles V; by 1566, upon the death of Suleyman the Magnificent, the Ottoman Empire had established its sovereignty over the whole African Mediterranean coast, with the sole exception of parts of Morocco and Tunis. In 1557, with the annexation of Massawa, the Ottomans also secured their control over the Red Sea coast, expanding into most of Eritrea and Djibouti. By the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottoman Empire exercised its supremacy over most of the major cities on the eastern coast of Africa, with dependencies and client states ranging from the Horn of Africa to southern Tanzania, controlling the trade routes from Eastern Africa to the Mediterranean Sea. However, the rise of the Western European colonial empires progressively led to the loss of all of the Ottoman possessions in Africa; eventually, following the Italo-Turkish War of 1911 and the resulting Italian occupation of the *Tripolitania Vilayet*, the Ottoman Empire formally lost its last African province. Following the dissolution of the empire and the birth of the republican government and institutions, Atatürk and his successors focused the foreign policy of Turkey on European (and to a lesser extent, Middle Eastern) geopolitical matters, reserving little to no attention to Africa. However, the neo-Ottoman revival in the political circles of Ankara following Erdoğan's rise to power caused a renewed geopolitical focus on the African continent. A first significant step was made in 2005, designed by the Turkish government as the "Year of Africa", when Turkey became an observing member of the African Union (gaining the status of strategic partner of the AU in 2008). Since then, Turkey has sharply expanded its involvement in African economic and political matters. In a first moment, Ankara mainly resorted to soft power instruments in order to cement its influence over regional actors; for instance, it increased the number of embassies in the continent from 12 in 2003 to 43 in 2021, and during his years in government – both as Prime Minister and President – Erdoğan has visited more African Countries than any other non-African leader.<sup>40</sup> Economic cooperation also played a great role in fostering Turkey's ambitions as a dominant actor in the African arena, with the volume of trade between Ankara and Africa witnessing a +372.7% increase in

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<sup>39</sup> Donelli, F. (2021), *Turkey in Africa: Turkey's Strategic Involvement in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

<sup>40</sup> Topran, K. (2021), *Turkey's Return to Africa and Its Implications*. Observer Research Foundation.



18 years, going from \$5.5bn in 2003 to over \$26bn in 2021, and Turkish companies invest and operate extensively in construction, infrastructure and energy projects throughout the continent. During the coronavirus pandemic, Ankara invested a lot in mask diplomacy, sending respirators, masks, and other medical equipment to Africa, and presenting itself as a true ally of the African peoples in contrast to Western Countries, accused by Erdoğan in the October 2020 Turkey-Africa Business Forum of leaving the continent's nations "to their fate in the face of the virus while Western developed countries were engaged in masks' wars".

So far, Ethiopia has been the sub-Saharan African nation which has received the highest percentage of Turkish investments in the region, and Turkey has become the second biggest foreign investor in the country after China. The partnership between Addis Ababa and Ankara has had enormous geopolitical implications; Ethiopia is indeed experiencing a steady demographic growth and a quick GDP increase and is set to become one of the most important regional players in Africa; thus, a close cooperation with the Addis Ababa government could prove extremely beneficial for Turkish interests in the continent and it could reinforce Ankara's credibility as a reliable economic and political ally for other African nations seeking to emancipate from the West and China. Moreover, the geographical position of Ethiopia, a gateway to the Horn of Africa and in close proximity to the central and eastern parts of the continent, could become the outpost for Turkish expansion in the region, allowing Ankara to regain a dominant role at the front door of the Red Sea – the most important maritime trade route connecting Asia to the West, through which estimates suggest that over 6.2 million barrels per day flowed in 2018. The critical importance of the Red Sea as an arena for global energy security has drawn the attention of many regional and non-regional players engaged in direct and indirect competition for control over its access points and its waters, through which over 10% of all global trade passes. The Horn of Africa has therefore become a new proxy battleground for Middle Eastern geopolitical rivalries, with Turkey, the UAE and Saudi Arabia increasing their military presence in the region. In its new quest for becoming once again the core of the Islamic world and of the broader MENA region, Turkey has found a strong opposition from a variety of other regional players, and in particular Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. Ankara has been accused by Cairo, Abu Dhabi, and Riyadh of militarily and economically supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, which has been designated by them as a terrorist organization. At the regional level, Turkish partnership with Ethiopia has also allowed Ankara to counter Egypt and its allies in sub-Saharan Africa; Turkey openly backed Addis Ababa in its standoff with Egypt over the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile, considered as an existential threat by Cairo whose freshwater consumption almost entirely relies on the Nile waters.<sup>41</sup> Despite the enormous importance given to its functional partnership with Ethiopia designed to increase its own influence in the region and counter Abu Dhabi and Cairo's Red Sea projects, another Country has been given an even more prioritising role under Turkey's African policy: Somalia. Previously divided between the British Somaliland Protectorate and Italian

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<sup>41</sup> Fabricius, P. (2021), *Making Turkey Great Again: Is Turkey's Expanding African Footprint Also a Proxy Battleground for Erdoğan's Middle East and European Rivalries?* Institute for Security Studies.

Somaliland, the two territories merged in 1960 forming the independent Somali Republic. However, the northern part of the Country, roughly corresponding to the previously British-administered territory, rebelled against the Somali Democratic Republic in 1981, and the Country eventually collapsed into an ongoing civil conflict among various armed groups, terrorist organizations and a fragile central government. The resulting political instability and terrorist threat caused most foreign powers to close their diplomatic missions in the Country. In this power vacuum, Turkey found a huge opportunity to gain a foothold in the Horn of Africa and at the entry door of the Red Sea. Therefore, in 2011, while Somalia was hit by a severe drought and a catastrophic famine, Erdoğan became the first non-African leader to visit Mogadishu in more than 20 years. Henceforth, Turkish involvement in Somali internal affairs has grown steadily, with Ankara becoming one of the strongest partners of Mogadishu. The Turkish policy for Somalia has consisted of an interdimensional approach in which economic and humanitarian projects are deeply interconnected with security and foreign policy interests. Turkey has fostered the process of rebuilding of the Somali Republic, acting as a mediator between the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and its federal subjects, with the aim of establishing a sovereign, unitary State closely connected to Ankara for security and military matters. Turkish policy for Somalia has consisted of a multifaceted design combining soft powers instruments to economic and security partnerships; since the beginning of its involvement in Somalia in 2011, Ankara invested more than \$1bn in the Country, and helped Mogadishu pay off its debt to the International Monetary Fund. Turkish companies directed urban and infrastructure development projects in the country, and the Turkish government has sent humanitarian aid and invested in the building of schools and hospitals. Mogadishu hosts the largest overseas military base of Ankara, Camp TURKSOM, which is also used to train high rank members of the Somali Armed Forces, thus reinforcing Turkey's centrality in its role as a security and defence provider to the FGS. TURKSOM has the capacity of training 1,000 soldiers at a time and is expected to train over 10,000 members of the Somali armed forces. While *de jure* designed to fight Al Shabaab's forces in the Country and foster the process of national rebuilding in Somalia, Camp TURKSOM *de facto* has another, much bigger geopolitical role: it provides Ankara with a military outpost in the Horn of Africa, functioning as a vital base from which Turkey can expand its military influence over Eastern Africa and the Red Sea, countering Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirate's attempt at hegemony in the Horn of Africa.<sup>42</sup> Somalia could therefore act as a proxy for Turkish rivalries with the Riyadh-Abu Dhabi's entente, and given its proximity to the Bab-al-Mandeb Strait, a close partnership with Mogadishu could prove extremely beneficial in terms of energy security for Ankara. Turkey's involvement in Somalia is also manifested by its control over vital infrastructure in the Country: in March 2012, Turkish Airlines, the national flag carrier airline of Turkey, resumed flights to Somalia, becoming the first international carrier to do so in over 20 years; this move was complementary to the Turkish government's project to renovate the Aden Adde International Airport in Mogadishu. In 2020,

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<sup>42</sup> Abdulle, A.; Gurpinar, B. (2019), *Turkey's Engagement in Somalia: A Security Perspective*. Somali Studies: A Peer-Reviewed Academic Journal for Somali Studies. 4. 53-71

Somalia's federal autonomies revoked the concession to an Emirati company to run and rebuild Mogadishu's port and signed a new deal with a Turkish company. The move was announced following new tensions between Mogadishu and Abu Dhabi over investments made by Emirati companies in the construction of two harbours in the autonomous regions of Puntland and Somaliland, seen by the FGS as an attempt at undermining its own sovereignty over the separatist areas of the country. The new concession to a Turkish company reinforces Ankara's hold over vital infrastructures overlooking the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea. The security interests behind Turkey's involvement in the region, from Ethiopia to Somalia, underline the opening of a new arena of proxy competition between Turkey – and its closest Middle Eastern ally, Qatar – and the entente between Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Egypt, entangled in a fight for hegemony over Eastern Africa and the broader Islamic world. In this competition, control over the Bab-al-Mandeb Strait – and virtually the whole Red Sea basin – could potentially close the game, for the enormous amount of natural resources and the volume of international trade passing through those waters, as well as the vital geostrategic importance of the region due to its proximity to both the Arabian Peninsula and the African continent, could allow any dominant actor to project economic and political hegemony over most of Eastern Africa and the MENA.

The Turkish involvement in the African continent has stretched outside the Horn of Africa in recent years, as Ankara tried to expand its influence over new regions extremely rich in terms of energy resources or with central geostrategic locations for control over Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean. The increasing Turkish presence in Western Africa and the Sahel has opened new fields of proxy competition with France in a region historically considered by Paris as its own backyard. In recent years, Turkey has intensified its diplomatic and economic cooperation with Algiers, as the country seeks to diversify its international relations and obtain greater autonomy from France. From a strategic perspective, Algeria could function as a bridge between Turkey and the Maghreb, a region which Ankara deems vital in order to extend its sphere of influence over the Muslim Countries of the Sahel and gain a greater geopolitical role in the whole Mediterranean Basin. The Algerian market could also pave the way to a Turkish stronger economic partnership with the entire African continent, and in the last decade the volume of trade with Algiers has increased steadily, with Ankara becoming the fourth largest foreign direct investor in the Country in 2018, surpassing by a large margin France, according to data from the National Agency for Investment Development. The low cost and relative abundance of energy sources (particularly gas, fuel, and electricity) are also playing a great role in shaping the new Turkish approach to Algeria – and the entire Maghreb. Algiers is Turkey's fourth largest gas supplier, and recently the Turkish Petroleum Pipeline Corporation signed a deal with the Algerian state-owned company Sonatrach, which will guarantee the supply of over 5 billion cubic meters of natural gas per year to Ankara.<sup>43</sup> Beyond energy interests, Ankara is also trying to expand its military influence over the Maghreb and the Sahel; in December 2020, it signed a military agreement with the Tunisian government through which Ankara provided Tunis with

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<sup>43</sup> Ghanem, D. (2021), *Ankara's Maghreb Moment*. The Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center.

interest-free loans worth \$150 million to buy Turkish arms, as well as fostering cooperation between the two governments in the military industry; however, the ongoing Tunisian political crisis of 2021 and the dismissal of the Ennahda government (a regional ally of Ankara and Doha) by President Kais Saied (closer to the Riyadh-Abu Dhabi entente) is a sign that the proxy competition for control over the North African Country is still open. In the rest of the continent, Turkey has inaugurated 37 military offices, more than any other Country, and it signed military agreements with Chad in 2019 and Niger in 2020.

The new African policy of Ankara has so far been overall successful. Turkey has strongly increased its economic and military influence over the continent, creating strategic partnerships with a variety of regional players. The return to Africa after a century since the loss of Tripolitania falls under the wider neo-Ottoman turn of the Country in its foreign policy, for Africa is strategically central for power projection over the Islamic world and the Mediterranean Sea. The growing Turkish involvement in the African continent has had three main drives: firstly, in an increasingly multipolar international system with higher possibilities for new actors to emerge as big powers, control over Africa could offer any wanna-be hegemon vital assets in terms of economic capabilities, natural resources endowment and influence over key regions for international security and trade such as the Red Sea; secondly, as stated in the previous chapter, Ankara is yearning to diversify its energy inputs and emancipate from Russian supplies; thus, economic partnerships and warm diplomatic relations with oil and gas-rich nations, as well as financing infrastructure projects facilitating trade with the Turkish homeland, could alleviate Turkey's dependence on Russia for energy security; thirdly, dominance over the African arena has become the target of many of Ankara's European and Middle Eastern rivals, from France's strong presence over its former colonies to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's attempt at becoming hegemonic powers in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea, as well as Cairo's quest for dominance over the Maghreb, in turn allowing them to gain substantial advantages over Turkey in the wider global arena; therefore, countering their influence through proxy competition has become a top security priority for the Turkish government, strengthening its partnership with regional actors wary of the Gulf States' intentions, such as Somalia, or increasingly hostile to France's neo-colonialism, such as Niger and Algeria.

## ***2.4 Case Study: The Turkish Military Involvement in the Second Libyan Civil War***

The Turkish intervention within the context of the Second Libyan Civil War provides an interesting case study for examining how the new drives behind Erdoğan's aggressive expansionism have shaped the current foreign policy of Turkey under the theoretical umbrella of neo-Ottomanism; indeed, Ankara's military involvement in the North African Country was motivated by an intertwining of the elements analyzed in the previous paragraphs: the need for a stronger presence in the Eastern Mediterranean under the *Mavi Vatan* doctrine; the abundance of vast natural resources' assets in the Country and the search for new energy supplies outside of Russia; the will to expand its sphere of influence over the Maghreb and the wider African continent; a proxy competition with foreign powers hostile to Ankara's projects and already present in the Libyan arena.

Libya is a country on the Mediterranean coast of Africa, geopolitically located in the Maghreb; it borders Tunisia to the north-west, Algeria to the west, Egypt to the east, Niger to the southwest and Chad to the south. In 1551, the coastal part of Libya came under Ottoman control and became an Ottoman province administered by the *pasha* (governor) of Tripoli. The region remained a province of the Ottomans until 1911, when it was lost to the Italian Empire following the Italo-Turkish War. Nevertheless, a Turkish minority continued to live in the Country, particularly within the city of Misrata. In 1951, Libya became a sovereign Country under the monarchy of king Idris I; in 1969, however, following the al-Fateh Revolution and the abolishment of the monarchy, Muammar Muhammad Abu Minyar al-Gaddafi seized control of the Country and proclaimed the birth of the Libyan Arab Republic; after having consolidated his power, he adopted an extremely hostile foreign policy towards the Western World, as the Country became increasingly authoritarian. Gaddafi's hold on Libya lasted until 2011, when, as the Arab Springs shook neighboring Tunisia and Egypt, an anti-government revolution broke out in the country on February 17. Eventually, after more than 9 months of fighting – which also saw the direct military involvement of NATO forces – Gaddafi was captured and killed, therefore ending the First Libyan Civil War. However, the collapse of the regime resulted in political fragmentation and civil conflict among various tribal armed groups and militias; in 2012, the General National Congress was formed following the country's first elections after Gaddafi's fall with the aim of drafting a new constitution. The GNC was set to terminate its mandate in January 2014, but it refused to step down and in December 2013 unilaterally voted for an extension of its mandate of at least one year. This was met with protests and unease, and in February General Khalifa Haftar, the commander of the Libyan National Army, asked for the termination of the GNC's authority and the appointment of a president's council and new elections; when his demands were not met, he launched Operation Dignity in May and captured Tripoli. A month later, in June, new elections were held for the appointment of a new legislative assembly, the Libyan House of Representatives, but due to the low affluence the electoral results were considered illegitimate by

Islamist militias and the House of Representatives fled to Tobruk: this was the beginning of the Second Libyan Civil War, as the Country became split between two authorities claiming to be the legitimate representatives of the Libyan people: the GNC in Tripoli and the House of Representatives in Tobruk. Talks between the two factions in 2015 resulted in the signing of the Skhirat Agreement and the creation of a Government of National Accord (GNA), recognized as legitimate by the United Nations Security Council and the European Union, under the premiership of Fayeze al-Sarraj. However, despite the previous peace talks and accords, in 2016 the Libyan House of Representatives, still based in Tobruk, withdrew its recognition of the GNA as a legitimate body and proclaimed itself the true authority of Libya; after a few months, tensions between the two bodies broke out in open hostilities, with the Libyan National Army of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar pledging its loyalty to the Tobruk-based government and challenging the legitimacy of the Tripoli-based GNA. As Haftar's forces advanced westwards capturing key cities like Benghazi, his political role grew so strong that he became the *de facto* leader of the Tobruk government. In April 2019, Haftar launched Operation Flood of Dignity, a military plan to capture western Libya and Tripoli. After more than one year of fighting and a 14-month long siege of Tripoli, Haftar's Libyan National Army started retreating eastwards, and in June 2020 the forces of the Government of National Accord launched Operation Paths to Victory, which led to the successful conquest of LNA-held Sirte. Eventually, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of August 2020, the two opposing forces signed an immediate ceasefire, starting a new peace process for the Country.

Throughout its phases, the Second Libyan Civil War saw the direct involvement of a great number of international powers, each hoping to gain a share of the enormous energy deposits in the North African Country. The Second Libyan Civil War quickly evolved into a proxy battleground for opposing factions in the international arena, which provided military, economic or strategic support to the local actors which they considered fittest to serving their own interests. The Tobruk-based House of Representatives and Haftar's Libyan National Army received the diplomatic and military support of five main international powers – Egypt, France, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE – whose interests, albeit different, converged on the endorsement of General Haftar for building up a new Libyan State. As noted in the previous paragraphs, each of these actors is engaged in wider geopolitical clashes and proxy conflicts on the international stage with Turkey: France rivals Ankara in its dispute against Greece and Cyprus for control over the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as in the Maghreb and in Western Africa; Cairo, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi condemn the Turkish-Qatari support for the Muslim Brotherhood and oppose their plans for hegemony over the broader Islamic world; the delicate relationship with Russia has led to diverging interests and alliances in the Syrian Civil War and in the Caucasus; Ankara therefore feared that a victory of Haftar in the Second Libyan Civil War would have resulted in other – potentially hostile – foreign powers gaining political control over the new Libyan State, and in turn obtaining better energy deals and the potential for military bases on Libyan territory, as well as the emergence of a new rival of Turkish interests in the Islamic world and on the Eastern Mediterranean coast. Stopping Operation Flood of Dignity and preventing the capitulation of Tripoli therefore became a top security concern for the Turkish government, which resorted to the UN-backed Government of National Accord as its proxy in

the Libyan arena. Ankara provided munitions, drones, and armored vehicles to the Tripoli-based government throughout the conflict, and when Haftar started his Western Libya Campaign, Ankara sent its own army to militarily support the GNA against the Libyan National Army's offensive, and at the same time it recruited mercenaries from the Syrian National Army – one of Ankara's proxies in the Syrian civil war – to provide additional troops on the ground.



The suggested EEZ of Turkey and Libya pursuant to the Memorandum of Understanding between Turkey and the Libyan Government of National Accord on the delimitation of the maritime jurisdiction areas in the Mediterranean. International World Group, 2019.

The Turkish involvement in the Second Libyan Civil War was not only the direct product of Ankara's will to prevent rival powers from gaining a foothold on the North African Country; indeed, Libya's geographical position on the southern shore of the Eastern Mediterranean was recognized by the Erdoğan's government as a vital asset in the implementation of the *Mavi Vatan* doctrine; thus, in November 2019 Ankara signed a memorandum of understanding with the al-Sarraj's government regarding the delimitation of their maritime jurisdiction areas in the Mediterranean. The deal was vehemently opposed by Athens and Cairo, which responded by signing a new maritime deal in the eastern Mediterranean to counter the Memorandum of Understanding between Turkey and the GNA; it also drew condemnation by Cyprus, Israel, France, the European Union, and the Arab League – among others. However, in January 2021 the deal was declared null by the Libyan Al-Bayda Court of Appeals, after having been rejected by the Libyan House of Representatives. Nevertheless, the Turkish involvement in Libya and its political and economic ties with the former al-Sarraj

government allowed Ankara to increase its seismographic activities in the Eastern Mediterranean. However, the recent political developments in the Countries leave open the question of whether Libya will remain a Turkish proxy in the Maghreb and a preferential energy hub for the import of gas and oil or whether the replacement of al-Sarraj will also put an end to the Turkish military and political presence in the North African Country. Libya has been one of the hallmarks of the neo-Ottoman shift in the country's foreign policy and its attempt to dominate the Eastern Mediterranean and the broader Middle East, and it did bring some major victories for Ankara; stopping the siege of Tripoli and Haftar's campaign in Western Libya was a great political and security success for Erdoğan, preventing Libya from fully becoming a proxy in the hands of Egypt and the UAE.



# Chapter 3

## *3.1 Beyond Materialism: Culture, Identity and Self-Perception*

The neo-Ottoman shift in the foreign policy actions of the Republic of Turkey and its progressive erosion of the previous Kemalist principles was in part driven by material interests, as analyzed in the previous chapter. Certainly, the new global arena which emerged with the turn of the century and the perceived progression towards a multipolar international system made Ankara believe it could emerge as a regional hegemon in a new multipolar world. The search for regional hegemony put Turkey at odds with the previous liberal order, as it attempted to dictate its own rules and challenge the pre-established Western-led system. Security interests connected to energy resources, control over the seas for power projection and defense of the Anatolian mainland, proxy conflicts to counterbalance other regional powers seeking dominance over the MENA region and the Eastern Mediterranean, are all important factors which contributed to the abandonment of the foreign policy legacy of Kemalism – perceived by some in the political and military circles of Ankara as weakening the international position of the Country and as an imposition from foreign powers to prevent Turkey from emerging as a hegemon – and led to a revival of revanchist feelings towards neighboring regions which had been lost with the dissolution of the Empire and never claimed back by the republican institutions. The search for new opportunities for increasing its own power translated into a shift from a mainly defensive foreign policy focused on consolidating and protecting the Country's borders through bilateral and multilateral agreements (which had characterized the Kemalist paradigm) to an aggressive approach towards its neighbors and other regional powers and the deployment of unilateral actions and military interventions.

However, material elements alone, despite providing fundamental insights, fail at explaining the deeper roots of the groundbreaking changes which turned Turkey from one of the most important allies of the West in the Middle East – alongside Israel – into an increasingly hostile actor accusing its NATO allies of neo-colonial practices and challenging the international order. Indeed, another important element needs to be added to the analysis of how and why Turkey looked back at its imperial past and turned it from an example of political failure and national shame into a symbol of pride and greatness to emulate in its current foreign policy objectives: the role of non-material factors, such as culture, language, and self-perception.

When the Ottoman Empire collapsed and Turkey transitioned towards a republican government, Kemal Atatürk understood that the process of nation-building in the newly born polity could not be complete unless major cultural changes occurred in the population. One of the most important characteristics of the former imperial society was its multiculturalism: the Ottoman Empire lacked a common Turkish feeling of belonging, and the term “Turk” itself was seldomly used by the general populace and it even carried a negative connotation. Indeed, a wealthy Ottoman citizen until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century would have based his/her

identity on two key concepts: being a Muslim (unless s/he belonged to a religious minority) and being an Ottoman, but not a Turk. The latter term would have more often been associated with the poorest, uneducated peasants of Anatolia.<sup>44</sup> The Turkish language itself lacked a strong personal identity: it had been highly contaminated with Arabic and Persian influences until the point of losing its original character. The Ottoman alphabet was written using a variant of the Arabic script, and many literary works and poems were written in Persian. The multicultural nature of the Ottoman Empire was deemed by Kemal Atatürk and the new ruling elite as one of the main causes of the political and military defeat, and the transition towards a unitary, mono-ethnic nation state was seen as the only way to preserve and defend the sovereignty of the Republic. The creation of a sense of belonging to the recently unified nation was encouraged and achieved through reforms in education, changing the narrative on the Ottoman Empire and associating it with a past of decay and authoritarianism, “rewriting” the history to glorify the Turkish past against the Ottoman one, “purifying” the language by a reduction of the number of words of foreign origin and abolishing the Ottoman alphabet, as well as the renunciation of Pan-Islamism, Turanism, and Pan-Ottomanism in foreign policy.<sup>45</sup> In this sense, the standardization of the system of education and the purification of the language were functional to creating and strengthening a homogenous community which had formerly lived within a multicultural empire. And since for centuries the Ottoman Empire had functioned as the political center of the *Ummah*, aiming at reuniting all the Muslim world under Constantinople’s rule, the Republic of Turkey chose to reject the pursuit of political Islam and instead opted for a strict enforcement of laicism, modelled on the French system. From an international relations point of view the abandonment of the multicultural nature of the Ottoman Empire and of the role of Istanbul as the center of the Islamic world implied a renounce on the former Muslim provinces of the Middle East; the constitutional protection of secularism against political Islam, the adoption of the Latin alphabet, the westernization of costumes and institutions all contributed to creating a geopolitical rift between Anatolia and the broader MENA region, instead pushing the Republic towards cooperation with Europe and the West.

As the Ottomans had perceived their culture as being fundamentally opposed to the European powers – a sense of holy duty to defend and spread Islam against the Christian threat, which in turn led to direct conflict and proxy wars with Western powers such as the Venetian Republic in the Mediterranean Sea and the Kingdom of Portugal in the Indian Ocean for cultural and religious hegemony – the modern Republic of Turkey re-imagined itself as a modern, Western civilization, rejecting its cultural ties with the Arab and Persian worlds (as testified by the epuration of the Turkish language and alphabet from Arabic influences and the constitutional protection of *laïcité*) and instead looking at Europe as its cultural family. With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, whose geopolitical identity and actions had been a direct result of its self-identification

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<sup>44</sup> Kushner, D. (1997), *Self-Perception and Identity in Contemporary Turkey*. Journal of Contemporary History. SAGE Publications.

<sup>45</sup> Dewdney C. J.; Yapp M. E.; Tompkinson G. (1998), *Kemalist policies*. Encyclopedia Britannica.

with a distinct, Islamic civilization, Turkey thus sought to become part of the Western civilization. In his study on how civilizations clash based on religious and cultural grounds, the American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington described Countries which attempt to reposition themselves into a new civilization as “torn Countries” and pointed at republican Turkey as one of the most prominent examples of a torn Country. According to this thesis, in order to systematically redefine its own social and cultural norms and shift to another civilization, a torn Country must succeed in three tasks. Firstly, its economic and political elites must be willing to support this process; in the case of Turkey, the process of westernization of norms and institutions came from above, and the political and economic elites revolving around the figure of Kemal Atatürk, as well as his successors, generally approved his cultural reforms, with the wealthiest parts of Turkish society, especially the urban bourgeoisie, adopting a Western lifestyle. The second requirement is the non-opposition of the general population, which must be willing to undergo this cultural change. In the Turkish case, this process was only partially completed; if some parts of the Country, and in particular the Aegean region, the Istanbul area, and Eastern Thrace, as well as urban dwellers in Ankara and Istanbul, generally supported Kemalism and its cultural reforms, other regions, like central Anatolia, proved to be more resistant to change and less prone to secularism and westernization. The third requirement does not directly depend on the Country’s government: indeed, it regards the elites of the civilization which the torn Country is seeking to join, who must be willing to welcome it.<sup>46</sup> It is this last part which needs a deeper analysis, and which may provide major insights into how Turkey went from a Kemalist approach to international relations to neo-Ottomanism and aggressive expansionism. Despite the fact that Turkey managed to become a member of NATO and other important supranational and international organizations associated with the Western world and Europe, its membership to perhaps the most important regional institution fostering and reinforcing the cultural integration of the European continent, i.e., the European Union, was systematically objected by the political elites of Brussels and some of its Members States, generating great controversies on whether Turkey could be considered a member of the European family or not and frustrating the Turkish population. Even if Ankara managed to fulfill the Copenhagen criteria with respects to human rights and the rule of law, the issue of Turkish membership was still perceived as not being certain; the geographic argument was cited by some policymakers in Brussels and in the EU, but since the admission of Cyprus, geographically situated in Western Asia, Turkey pointed out that rather than a geographical factor, what was preventing further integration was the religious affiliation of its population, since no European Union’s member state so far has a Muslim-majority society. The ambiguity of the European Union towards the issue of Turkish membership contributed to further polarizing a Country already torn between the will to become a full member of the Western civilization and its Islamic legacy. The idea that Brussels’s rejection derived from the European Union being a “Christian club” was seen as an inherently discriminatory element towards Turkey on religious grounds,

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<sup>46</sup> Huntington, S.P. (1996), *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Simon & Schuster.

leading many to believe that the European Union would have never accepted Ankara among its Member States even if the Country were to respect all the legal requirements for membership, and therefore pushing greater parts of the general public towards seeking closer geopolitical and cultural ties with other Muslim-majority nations. Allowing Turkey to join the European Union could weaken this argument and convince the most hesitant parts of the population to take part in the Westernization process; however, the feeling of constant refusal and the perceived discrimination contributed to increasing the hostile feelings towards the West which in turn electorally translated into a wider support for Erdoğan's reforms and Islamization process.

The feeling of being rejected by the Western civilization and somehow be considered the lesser led to a reinforcement of nationalism, which however differed from the civic nationalism which had been formulated under Atatürk; it created a "us-versus-them" narrative and a revival of negative feelings towards Western powers, as well as a rejection of secularism and a rediscovery of political Islam. This cultural shift in turn favored a change in the historical representation of the Ottoman Empire, previously seen as a negative element in the history of the Turkish people and now perceived as an example of national greatness. With the Erdoğan's government reinforcing and fostering this cultural re-alignment, the foreign policy of the Country also underwent major changes, for if Europe was no longer perceived as a friendly ally and a peer, Turkey turned its eyes to the Middle East and Northern Africa, seeking new grounds of cooperation on religious and cultural grounds with regional actors like Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood. The frustration for not being accepted as a European nation in turn led to the ambition at rivaling Western European Countries, and primarily France, and becoming a regional hegemon in the Islamic world. The new self-identification of Turkey as a "Afro-Eurasian" State, as publicly declared by Erdoğan, has opened the grounds for a stronger Turkish presence in regions previously ignored by the Kemalist attempt to turn Turkey into a fully Western Country; the very term "Afro-Eurasian" is a clear statement of accepting the Ottoman legacy and upholding its inheritance, also in the foreign policy of the Country. Thus, the cultural shift towards a public rehabilitation of Ottomanism, in large part generated by the frustration of being refused by the European Union's elites, determined a return to former provinces considered as being historically part of the Turkish homeland, such as Syria, Libya, and Somalia. The focus on multilateralism and a defensive approach to international relations turned into revanchism, as the pro-Ottoman feeling was fueled by social and cultural reforms aiming at re-aligning the self-perception of the Turkish public, removing the negative attitudes towards Ottoman symbols, and fostering the self-identification of the nation with the historical heirs of the Ottoman past.

These cultural shifts in turn increased the perception of Turkey as the rightful hegemon in the Middle East since this role had previously been in the hands of the Ottomans for over five centuries. The resentment towards the West and the belief that European and North American powers were acting in a neo-colonial way with respect to emerging Countries in the MENA and sub-Saharan Africa also increased the competition with former allies like France and Israel, seen by Ankara as occupiers and oppressors of the Muslim people. In the formulation of its African policy, Ankara put a lot on emphasis on the common historical and cultural grounds connecting Anatolia to the continent and presented itself as a peer and an ally to the African nations, promising

to offer a third way to exist the Western European neo-colonial practices as well as the Chinese predatory investments.

The cultural rift with Europe and the clash with some of the core values defining the Western civilization also reopened a fault line with neighboring Christian nations like Greece and Cyprus, with tensions reaching levels not seen in decades. The hostilities with Athens and Nicosia were also reflected at the cultural level within the Republic of Turkey, with a major issue regarding the status of Hagia Sophia. Built in the 6<sup>th</sup> century as the largest Christian church in the Byzantine Empire and a symbol of the Greek Orthodox Church, it was converted into a mosque when in 1453 the Ottomans, led by Mehmed II, conquered the city. Its conversion into a mosque had a strong cultural and psychological effect, affirming the superiority of Islam and the primacy of the Ottomans. Due to the enormous symbolic value carried by Hagia Sophia, in 1935 Atatürk converted it into a museum, where prayers were strictly forbidden, and which functioned as the emblem of secularism in the Republic. In 2020, however, the building was converted once again into a mosque, sparking outrage in the European Union, and led Greece and Cyprus to ask Brussels to adopt sanctions against the Turkish government. The Ecumenic Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople warned that the conversion of the museum into a mosque would have created a definitive fracture between the Western World and Turkey, and similar remarks were made by the French foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian and the Greek former foreign minister Dora Bakoyannis. The United States of America also voiced their dissent. The move, in line with the cultural neo-Ottoman revival, was another sign of the emergence of a deeper fault line between the Western civilization and Turkey. However, the reason why this shift acted in the first place is largely a consequence of the constant rejection felt by Turkey from the European Union's policymakers. The integration of Ankara into the cultural sphere of Western Europe, had the Copenhagen criteria been met, could have possibly prevented a shift towards neo-Ottomanism, keeping Kemalism as the dominant paradigm within the internal and international policies of the Country. Culture is not static, but rather dynamic, it evolves and with it the norms, behaviors, and policies of a Country, influencing the international choices of actors in the global arena. As the turn to neo-Ottomanism and aggressive expansionism was influenced by a self-perception as a Muslim and Ottoman civilization, a return to a Western-like cultural identification may once again push Turkey towards its European side, reinforcing its alliance with the European powers.

### ***3.2 From Secularism to Neo-Ottomanism: The Role of Religion***

One of the most prominent cultural reforms carried out by Kemal Atatürk during his years in government was the adoption of secularism as one of the main political and social pillars whose protection was embodied in the constitution. Secularism was deemed as a key objective to achieve in the process of creating the new, post-Ottoman ethnonational identity on which the Republic would have been founded. The central role reserved to Quranic teachings in the socio-political sphere of action of the Ottoman Empire was reflected in the foreign policy strategies and ambitions of the Sublime Porte, which considered itself as tasked with the holy duty of spreading and defending Islam. In the face of the growing European colonial expansion over vast Muslim-majority regions, the concept of *ittihad-i Islam* (“unity/union of Islam”) raised to prominence among Ottoman policymakers, urging a closer integration of the *Ummah* under the religious and political leadership of Constantinople.<sup>47</sup> The Ottomans’ attempts to unify all Muslim lands under their control, however, largely preceded the 19<sup>th</sup> century; indeed, the Ottomans had claimed the title of caliphs as early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century, when sultan Murad I refused to recognize the legitimacy of the Abbasid caliphate proclaimed by the Mamluk rulers in Cairo and assumed the title for himself, moving the political and spiritual center of the Islamic world to Edirne. Following the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453, the seat was moved to the new capital. However, it was only following the victory against the Mamluk Sultanate and its incorporation within the political boundaries of the Ottoman Empire in 1571 that the Sublime Porte successfully succeeded in unifying most of the Muslim world under its rule. The establishment of the Ottoman Caliphate had strong cultural and geopolitical implications, since the title of caliph legitimized the Ottoman sultans as the religious and political successors of Prophet Mohammad and *de jure* made them the leaders of the *ummat al-Islam*, the collective community of the Islamic people. With the conquest of the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina under Selim I, the Ottomans managed to unify the most important Muslim lands under their control. The title of caliphs implied the Ottomans’ obligation to protect Muslim populations around the world against nonbelievers’ armies, therefore dragging Constantinople in a series of major proxy conflicts and direct military confrontations against the Christian European powers in a race for religious and cultural dominance. Major theaters included the Mediterranean Basin, where the Ottoman fleet fought for hegemony against the coalition of Catholic powers of Southern Europe reunited under the Holy League (eventually managing to capture Cyprus from the Venetians and reconquer Tunis); the Balkan Peninsula, where Ottoman troops faced the Catholic Habsburg monarchy and their other Christian allies; the Indian Ocean, where the Ottomans and the Portuguese confronted each other and resorted to the use of proxy actors often bound by religious motifs, such as the Portuguese-ally, Christian-majority Ethiopian Empire or the Muslim Sultanate of Aceh, supported by the Ottomans in its fight against the Portuguese Empire stronghold in Malacca. The title of caliphs was also

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<sup>47</sup> Baskan, B. (2019), *Turkey’s Pan-Islamist Foreign Policy*. The Cairo Review of Global Affairs.

used as a powerful diplomatic tool by the Ottoman sultans, allowing the Sublime Porte to portray itself as the protector of the Muslim populations living under Saint Petersburg's rule and retain moral authority over the Muslim-majority territories, such as Crimea, which had been annexed by the Russian Empire following the Russo-Turkish War of 1768-74.<sup>48</sup>

The geopolitical and historical causes which had led to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and its defeat in World War I were largely identified by Kemal Atatürk as the inefficiency of the imperial institutions and its pursuit of Islamism in the social and legal life of the Country. His effort to unify the Turkish homeland and establish a modern republican government required a series of radical cultural, religious, political, and institutional reforms aimed at abolishing the remaining Ottoman legacy in the Republic. The Turkish elite in those years was convinced that the development of Western European societies into modern States had been the direct result of the progressive marginalization and exclusion of religious elements from the public life of the Country.<sup>49</sup> Following the assumption that the traditional Islamic institutions and the pursuit of pan-Islamism represented a threat to the national sovereignty and the independence of the Republic of Turkey, and that the boundaries of the Turkish homeland had to be defined not on religious grounds, but on the Anatolian peninsula geographical limits, Atatürk's reforms were directed at dismantling the classical Islamic leadership.<sup>50</sup> The last Caliph, Crown Prince Abdulmejid II, assumed his role on November 24, 1922, but he was a merely ceremonial figure, having been stripped of any significant temporal powers, and Atatürk himself declared that the Caliphate was nothing more than a historic relic. After less than two years, on March 3, 1924, the caliphate was *de jure* abolished by the National Assembly. The move strained relations with the rest of the Islamic world, drawing condemnation – among others – by the Rector of Cairo's al-Azhar University. The abolition of the Caliphate coincided with the abandonment of any resolution to keep on pursuing the realization of the *ittihad-i Islam* as a foreign policy objective; instead, pan-Islamism came to be seen as a dangerous and anti-Turkish policy, and under the influence of Kemalism Turkey re-imagined itself as a Western, secular Nation, moving away from its previous role as the temporal center of the Islamic world and creating a cultural, political and social rift with its former Middle Eastern, Arab possessions. As Kemal's Turkey gave up any intention of becoming the leader of the *Ummah*, it entered a period of isolationism in which much of the foreign policy of the Country centered around the defense of the homeland – stressing a protective approach over revanchism and expansionism – and the recognition of its status as a European power. In many issues, Turkey sided against the rest of the Islamic world and supported the West, most notably with its recognition of the State of Israel in 1949.

The rise to power of Erdoğan in 2002 has led to a progressive erosion of the Kemalist principles established by the Turkish constitution, and especially of secularism. Erdoğan's AKP has been a staunch opponent of the

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<sup>48</sup> Finkel, C. (2005), *Osman's Dream: The Story of the Ottoman Empire, 1300-1923*. New York: Basic Books.

<sup>49</sup> Hanioglu, S. (2011), *Atatürk: An Intellectual Biography*. Princeton University Press.

<sup>50</sup> Ab Rahman, A. (2015), *Modernization of Turkey Under Kamal Atatürk*. Asian Social Science; Vol. 11, No. 4

Turkish model of *laïcité*, arguing for a stronger role of Islam in the institutional and public life of the Country. The change of the historical narrative on the Ottoman Empire and the rejection of some secular policies – such as the prohibition of wearing Islamic headscarves in public buildings like universities and government offices – have caused a resurgence of Islamism in the political life of the Country, which has in turn influenced the foreign policy actions of Ankara. Under Erdoğan, Turkey aimed once again at becoming the center of the Islamic world, fueling a civilization clash with its previous Western and Christian allies, and challenging the cultural and religious hegemony of regional powers like Saudi Arabia and Egypt over the Sunni world. Since Erdoğan's rise to power, the economic and diplomatic involvement of Ankara in the broader MENA region has sharply increased, as trade with other Muslim nations skyrocketed from \$8.4 billion to \$69 billion in 16 years. In the interim, Ankara organized and hosted international conferences with leading Muslim thinkers and religious leaders, worked for the renovation of Ottoman cultural heritages (such as the old city and the port of Suakin in Sudan), as well as offering economic and humanitarian aid to Muslim populations around the world. Erdoğan managed to place AKP loyalists in charge of the *Diyanet*, the Directorate of Religious Affairs, a state institution created by Kemal Atatürk in 1924 with the aim of controlling and limiting the influence of Islam on the Republic of Turkey; following the Islamist turn in the political and institutional arena in 2010-2011, the AKP appointed conservative figures (firstly Mehmet Görmez and then Ali Erbaş) as presidents of the *Diyanet*, *de facto* changing its original purpose and turning it into an instrument for the promotion of Sunni Islam. In the same years, the Turkish government strongly increased the budget of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, providing more funds to it than to most ministries. Alongside an increase in its size and economic assets, the *Diyanet* gained a more prominent role in the political and social life of the Country, as it started issuing an exponential number of *fatwas* (non-binding legal opinions) on demand, which, although not having any legal weight, posed a great challenge to the constitutional principle of *laïcité*.<sup>51</sup> The Directorate of Religious Affairs has become a powerful foreign policy instrument, as it is responsible for the control of the sermons issued by Turkish imams in foreign Countries, thus functioning as a tool for influencing and monitoring the Turkish diaspora abroad, employing imams trained in Turkey and loyal to the AKP's political agenda in the mosques under its control, and tasking them with collecting information on movements considered dangerous by Erdoğan's government such as the People's Democratic Party (HDP) or the Gülen movement.<sup>52</sup> Turkish nationalism, which traditionally under Kemalism was characterized by its secularism and its emphasis on constitutional patriotism, was revised under the AKP's rule and combined with pan-Islamist, neo-Ottoman elements, rebranding religion as an important instrument for Turkish foreign policy, as Ankara engaged in an active promotion of Islam – for instance by financing and sponsoring the creation of

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<sup>51</sup> Cornell, S. (2015), *The Rise of Diyanet: The Politicization of Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs*. The Turkey Analyst, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Joint Center.

<sup>52</sup> Maziad, M.; Sotiriadis, J. (2020), *Turkey's Dangerous New Exports: Pan-Islamist, neo-Ottoman Visions and Regional Instability*. Middle East Institute.



new mosques around the world, from sub-Saharan Africa to South America – and claimed that, being the historical successor of the Ottoman Empire, it had the natural right to assume once again a leadership role in the Islamic world as the defender of Muslim populations across the globe (and therefore explaining its new hostile policy against its former-ally Israel, now pictured as a neo-colonial aggressor of the Palestinian people), bending elements of pan-Ottomanism with pan-Arab and pan-Turkish sentiment.<sup>53</sup>

A far more controversial issue regarded Turkey's stance and influence on the Arab Springs, which has led to further tensions with the Saudis and their leadership over the Sunni world. Support for the uprisings in 2010-2011 was voiced by prominent Islamist political figures in Turkey, including Erdoğan and the then-Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoğlu. The latter, speaking at the Al-Jazeera Forum in Doha, claimed that the Arab Spring was normalizing the history of the Middle East after the “unnatural” experiences of colonialism and the Cold War, by giving power back to the true representatives of the peoples and of the Islamists in the region. Turkey tried to foster its political agenda in the region by providing support to the Muslim Brotherhood, with which it shared the idea that a restoration of the era of Islamic rule was the basis for the protection of the *Ummah*. Following the toppling of Mubarak and the Muslim Brotherhood's victory in the popular elections, Islamist politician Mohamed Morsi won the Egyptian presidency in June 2012. Ankara established friendly relations and provided support to Morsi's reforms during his presidency, but after the 2013 coup and the rise to power of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the Muslim Brotherhood was declared illegal in Egypt, straining relations between Cairo and Ankara. The ideological and religious links between Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood nevertheless continued to persist, with Ankara providing economic and diplomatic support to local branches of the organization against secular Arab nationalistic forces, including Ennahda in Tunisia and Hamas in Gaza. The rediscovery of Islam in the public and political sphere and the diplomatic effort to gain recognition as the leader of oppressed Muslims around the world has also fueled frictions with traditional Turkish allies such as France. As the two Countries started a geopolitical competition for hegemony over the Sahel and the Maghreb, Ankara resorted to religion as an instrument to strengthen its claims over the region, arguing that the shared Islamic identity with the Western and Northern African Countries made them natural partners and allies, whereas French interference represented an attempt at neo-colonialism and oppression from the outside. As the diplomatic crisis between Paris and Ankara worsened in 2020, Erdoğan accused Macron of “wanting to relaunch the Crusades”, citing French involvement in the Eastern Mediterranean and Western Africa as well as the issue of satirical cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad in the Western European Country. The remarks came after the French President had described Islam as a religion in crisis and had called for stricter governmental control over mosques and their foreign funds – a large amount of which were directly linked to the *Diyanet* – following the assassination of French teacher Samuel Paty in an act of Islamic terrorism. Macron's words sparked outrage throughout the Muslim world, calling for boycotts of French products, and Erdoğan seized the opportunity to present himself as the leader of the Islamic community against the West

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<sup>53</sup> Tol, G. (2019), *Turkey's Bid for Religious Leadership; How the AKP Uses Islamic Soft Power*. Foreign Affairs.

and its values. As Turkey portrayed itself as an “Afro-Eurasian State” and re-imagined itself as a center of the Islamic civilization, its relationships with Western Europe suffered major setbacks; in a speech delivered to supporters in the city of Sakarya in 2017, Erdoğan referred to the escalation in tensions with the neighboring European Union as the beginning of a battle “between the cross and the half moon”.<sup>54</sup> The cultural drift away from the European civilization and towards Islamism represents a clear contraposition to the Kemalist paradigm which had made closer cultural and political ties with the West a key strategic objective, and it seriously undermines the central role of secularism in the foreign policy sphere of the Republic.

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<sup>54</sup> *Erdoğan Accuses EU of “Crusade” Against Islam*. Deutsche Welle, 2017. <https://p.dw.com/p/2ZM6Y>

### ***3.3 Case Study: Secularism and Pan-Islamism in the Evolution of Turkey's Diplomatic Relations with Israel***

The diplomatic relations between the Republic of Turkey and the State of Israel officially started in 1949, when Ankara recognized Israel as a sovereign Country. Historically, the region comprising today's Israel and Palestine had been administered by the Ottoman Empire as a part of its Syrian province, following Selim I's conquest of the Levant in 1516. The higher tolerance granted by the Ottoman authorities to Jews turned it into a safe haven for Jewish people escaping pogroms and persecutions from Christian Europe – attracting a large percentage of those expelled from the Kingdom of Spain following the Alhambra Decree of 1492. However, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the climate of tolerance towards Ottoman Jewish communities started to deteriorate, and with the outbreak of World War I Jews were accused of being collaborators of the British and Russian Empires, leading to higher hostility and intolerance and resulting in acts of violence such as the Tel Aviv and Jaffa deportations of 1917. The Ottomans retained control over the area until 1917, when, following the defeat and partition of the Ottoman Empire, the British Empire took control of the region under the Mandate for Palestine. The Balfour Declaration, issued during the war, committed the British government to the creation of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine – at the time predominantly inhabited by Arabs. For this reason, the local Arab populations vehemently opposed London's rule, often clashing with British authorities with strikes and armed insurrections. Following World War II and the tragedy of the Holocaust, the need for the establishment of a safe, national home for Jewish populations gained the support of most Western Countries. In the meantime, the British were entangled in a series of open military confrontations against Jewish guerrillas – opposing London's limits on Jewish immigration to Palestine – and local Arab protestors, which considered the limits as not being enough effective in preventing a mass immigration of European Jews. Jewish representatives demanded the partition of the region into an Israeli State and an Arab State, quoting the British promises under the Balfour Declaration and London's commitment to creating a Jewish country in the area; on the other hand, Arab representatives opposed any plan for partition and the creation of a separate Jewish political entity. As tensions escalated, in 1947 the United Kingdom decided to submit the issue to the United Nations, whose General Assembly appointed a UN Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) to draft a Report addressing the situation and proposing a solution. The Report, which was presented on September 3, 1947, proposed the substitution of British Mandatory Palestine with three separate political entities: an independent Jewish State, an independent Arab-Palestinian State, and the city of Jerusalem to be administered by an International Trusteeship System. In the same month, the British decided to evacuate Mandatory Palestine, considering it politically and economically impossible to maintain. On November 29, 1947, the Partition Plan for Palestine was approved by the UN General Assembly as Resolution 181 (II). The Plan received a total of 33 votes in favor, 13 against, and 10 abstained. Turkey sided with the other Muslim-majority nations, alongside India, Greece, and Cuba, in rejecting the Partition proposal. However, Turkey's negative

vote was not merely the result of religious considerations, but rather some analysts in Ankara feared that a Jewish State could have potentially fallen in the Soviet sphere of influence, raising Turkish fears of Moscow's expansionism in the region.<sup>55</sup>

In 1948, the joint armies of four Arab Countries – Transjordan, Syria, Egypt, and Iraq – with the support of contingents from Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and the Kingdom of Yemen, attacked the newborn State of Israel. The conflict resulted in the exodus of 750,000 Palestinian Arabs from the region, and the drawing of new borders, with the State of Israel conquering 78% of the former British Mandatory Palestine's territory – increasing its original size by one-third.

The United Nations Resolution 181 (II) and the Arab-Israeli War of 1948 compacted much of the Islamic world against the State of Israel. Most Muslim-majority nations refused to establish diplomatic relations with the Jewish State and called for a boycott of Israeli products in order to undermine Israel's economic and military strength. Nevertheless, Turkey and Iran, despite having voted against the Partition Plan at the UN General Assembly in 1947, established diplomatic relations with Israel in 1949 and 1950, respectively. The move drew condemnation by the Arab Countries, signaling a wider cultural and political rift between Turkey and the Muslim world, as the former geopolitically aligned itself with the secular West. Turkey's relations with the Arab and Muslim states further deteriorated when Ankara went beyond the simple recognition of the Jewish State, appointing a minister plenipotentiary to Israel in 1950, and two years later the Countries exchanged ambassadors. In opposition to the general boycott of Israeli goods and products adopted by the Arab League, Ankara and Tel Aviv signed a trade agreement, opened air routes, and worked together in the fields of scientific and cultural development.<sup>56</sup> With the emergence of the Cold War, both Countries developed strong ties with the Western world and operated as bulwarks of the capitalist "First World" against the threat of pan-Arab socialism overtaking the region. Despite that, relations between Ankara and Tel Aviv were mainly carried out in secret during most of the Cold War period, as Turkish governments avoided publicly addressing the matter. Nevertheless, cooperation was strong, especially under Israel's foreign policy doctrine of the "Alliance of the Periphery": the plan advocated for the development of diplomatic and military cooperation with non-Arab Countries in the region to counter the common dangers posed by pan-Arabism and socialism and envisaged a stronger strategic alliance with the Imperial State of Iran, the Republic of Turkey, the Ethiopian Empire and the Kurdish populations of Iraq and Syria. In 1958, Turkey's prime minister Menderes and Israel's prime minister Ben-Gurion held a secret meeting in which they discussed cooperation in the fields of military support and exchange of intelligence information. The cooperation with Israel, although remaining tacit, was viewed by Turkey not only as a way to undermine Soviet expansionism in the region and the threats of pan-Islamism and pan-Arabism, but also as a diplomatic tool to improve its image in the Western Countries

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<sup>55</sup> Robins, P. (2003), *Suits and Uniforms: Turkish Foreign Policy Since the Cold War*. London: C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd.

<sup>56</sup> Liel, A. (2001), *Turkey in the Middle East – Oil, Islam, and Politics*. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

and strengthen its cultural and political ties with Europe. Warm ties with Tel Aviv, an ally of the European powers in the region, were not an unhelpful bargaining chip in Turkey's quest for membership to the European Economic Community.<sup>57</sup>

Turkey's stance on Israel remained a controversial subject both in the internal politics of the country and in its relations to the Muslim world. As analyzed in the first chapter, however, the years of the Kemalist paradigm lacked a significant geopolitical attention towards Middle Eastern matters, as much of the foreign policy efforts of Ankara were directed at gaining recognition as a Western Country and containing the Soviet bloc and Moscow's revisionist attitudes towards the Montreux Convention. Ankara's relationship with Tel Aviv became more problematic following the Six-Day-War of 1967, a conflict fought between Israel and an alliance of Arab States comprising Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Iraq, and Lebanon, and which had led to Israel's occupation of the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights and, most controversially, the West Bank including East Jerusalem. The move drew the international condemnation of a number of actors, especially Muslim-majority Countries and members of the Communist bloc, but also Turkey protested the occupation of the seized territories and request the withdrawal of Israeli troops from those regions; however, when members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference convened in Rabat, Turkey voted against a resolution asking members to sever all diplomatic ties with Israel. The decades between the 1970s and the 1990s saw a Turkish general disinterest towards the issue, as Ankara focused its foreign policy actions towards continental Europe and tried not to be dragged into the Arab-Israeli conflict, maintain a policy of neutrality and ambivalence in its relationship to Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization. The Turkish bid to gain membership to the European Economic Community and the Kemalist legacy led Ankara to maintaining a policy of non-involvement in the Middle Eastern Arena, keeping as an objective the mere containment of Soviet expansionism in the region.

Despite the first contacts between Ankara and Tel Aviv had started within the wider context of the Cold War under the common necessity to stop Soviet expansionism in the region, to prevent a pan-Arab socialist union, and from the common understanding of being intrinsically culturally different from their other neighbors, the true flourishing of the Turkish-Israeli relations only began in the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Certainly, the positive developments of the Oslo Accords played a significant role in the rapprochement of the two Countries, rendering cooperation more justifiable in front of the Turkish public opinion. In 1992, the diplomatic relations between Israel and Turkey were raised once again to Ambassadorial level; more importantly, in 1996 the two Countries signed a Strategic Agreement, under which Turkey purchased Israeli military equipment and the two newfound allies began a military and strategic partnership to counter the common Syrian threat. Moreover, the shared vision of Israel and Turkey which regarded themselves as the two only liberal democracies in the region during those years reinforced the narrative of a shared identity and

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<sup>57</sup> Volk, T. (2013), *Turkey's Historical Involvement in Middle Eastern Alliances: Saadabad Pact, Baghdad Pact, and Phantom Pact*. L'Europe en Formation, Vol. 367, no.1, pp. 11-30.

culture as the only nations in the broader Middle East whose internal and external policies were not dictated by political Islam, but were rather the result of their rejection and open hostility to being considered as parts of the Muslim Middle East, pledging their loyalties to the American-led West.<sup>58</sup> The multiplication of common threats in the region with the turn of the millennium under the form of hostile governments and terrorist organizations further contributed to fostering the cooperation between Ankara and Tel Aviv, which in July 2001 carried out a joint military exercise – alongside the USA – called “Anatolian Eagle”, in which the air forces units of the three Countries, as well as their air defense systems, were deployed in central Anatolia to test the capabilities of the three actors and their responsiveness to a potential regional conflagration.<sup>59</sup>

The positive climate of cooperation between Ankara and Tel Aviv, bounded together by common security interests but also by a shared feeling of belonging to the Western world and by the self-perception of being the only liberal democratic nations in the broader Middle East, was undermined by the election of Erdoğan and his AKP in the early 2000s and by the paradigm shift in the dominant ideology of the Country, as secular Kemalism was slowly replaced by Neo-Ottomanism and Islamism. During his early years in government, however, Erdoğan continued to maintain friendly relations with the State of Israel, in the same way he kept cooperation warm with the European Union. Erdoğan visited Israel in 2005, reassuring Tel Aviv of Turkey’s opposition to anti-Semitism and to Iran’s nuclear program, as well as proposing to strengthen military and economic ties between the two Countries. Erdoğan also offered to turn Turkey into a mediator in the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians. As Turkey set to play a greater role in the Middle Eastern political arena under the leadership of Erdoğan, Israel hoped to use its relationship with Ankara to increase security in the region. However, the failure of the Oslo Peace Process and the escalation of violence in the 2008-2009 Gaza War led to the biggest fracture between Ankara and Tel Aviv since 1949. As Erdoğan repeatedly denounced Israeli actions in the Gaza War (for instance during the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, where he accused in front of the whole audience Peres of being directly responsible for the killing of civilians), another great blow to cooperation with Israel was given by the official visit to Turkey of Khaled Mashal, at the time leader of the Palestinian organization Hamas. Hamas, officially known as the Islamic Resistance Movement (*Ḥarakat al-Muqāwamah al-’Islāmiyyah*), firstly developed in 1987 – shortly after the beginning of the First Intifada – as a local branch of the Egyptian-based Muslim Brotherhood, with the aim of ending the Israeli occupation of the entire former Mandatory Palestine’s territory and establishing an Islamic state in the region. Hamas engaged in military confrontation against Israel multiple times, targeting both military and civilian objectives. Within the occupied Palestinian territories, it also strongly opposed the Palestinian Liberation Organization affiliated party, Fatah, considered by Hamas as being too moderate and ineffective, as well as too secular. As Erdoğan’s Islamist attitudes brought Ankara closer to the Muslim

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<sup>58</sup> Walker, J. (2006), *Turkey and Israel’s Relationship in the Middle East*. Mediterranean Quarterly, Vol. 17, no.4, pp. 60-90. Project MUSE.

<sup>59</sup> Kibaroglu, M. (2002), *Turkey and Israel Strategize*. Middle East Quarterly, pp.61-65

Brotherhood, which became a proxy for Turkey's security and ideological interests across the broader Islamic world, Ankara developed strong ties also with Hamas. In 2007, the ideological divisions between Hamas and Fatah led to a fracture in the institutional and political unity of the Palestinian territories, with the former *de facto* taking over the Gaza Strip in June 2007 and removing Fatah officials. Upon taking control of the Strip, Hamas enforced a stronger Islamist attitude in its government of the society if compared to that of the Fatah-controlled West Bank. Following the aftermath of the Gaza War between Fatah and Hamas and the latter taking over the Gaza Strip, in 2007 Israel and Egypt imposed a land, air, and sea blockade on the area. The blockade isolated the civilians living in the Gaza Strip from the outside world, making the crossing of any border illegal as well as posing heavy restrictions on the import or export of most goods, drawing condemnation from a number of international actors and NGOs. In 2010, the Free Gaza Movement, alongside the Turkish Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief organized the Gaza Freedom Flotilla, attempting to break the Egyptian-Israeli blockade of the Strip and provide construction materials as well as humanitarian aid. Israel responded by launching the Gaza Flotilla Raid, a military operation in which the Israeli army boarded the ships while they were still in international waters and, following the resistance of some volunteers on the passenger ship *MV Mavi Marmara*, they opened fire, killing nine activists of Turkish nationality. After the incident, relations between Israel and Turkey reached the lowest point in decades. Turkey openly accused Israel of state terrorism and recalled its ambassador from Tel Aviv. Turkey also cancelled planned joint military exercises with Israel in Anatolia. When the UN stated that the blockade of Gaza was lawful under international law but that excessive force had been used by the Israeli forces in boarding the ships, Ankara expelled the Israeli ambassador.<sup>60</sup> The resentment for the loss of Turkish lives, alongside a renewed Islamist foreign policy, pushed Turkey closer to Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran. The change of the narrative on Turkey's self-perception and the rehabilitation of Islamism in the policy-making of Ankara severed the common cultural bonds which had tied it to Tel Aviv; the perception of being an outsider in the predominantly-Arab and Islamist Middle East, which had created a mainly defensive approach towards its southern and eastern neighbors, pushing Turkey to seek higher cooperation with the West – of which it wanted to become an integral part – was substituted by a more aggressive presence in the MENA region, which had been highly neglected in the years of the Kemalist paradigm and seen only in an anti-Soviet perspective. The new Turkish quest for leadership over the Islamic world under the ideological umbrella of neo-Ottomanism could not be reconciled with the Country's previous friendly relations with Israel, formerly considered a partner with a shared Western identity and then turned into a colonial entity used by the imperialist West for oppressing the Muslim world. In March 2013, Erdoğan delivered a speech at the United Nations meeting in Vienna calling Zionism a crime against humanity. Despite attempts at reconciliation were made in 2013, after Netanyahu called Erdoğan and apologized for the events of the Gaza Flotilla Raid, the situation precipitated once again when the Muslim Brotherhood and Morsi's government, close allies of

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<sup>60</sup> Arsu, S.; Kershner, I.; Cowell, P. (2011), *Turkey Expels Israeli Envoy in Dispute Over Raid*. The New York Times.

Turkey in the region, were overthrown in Egypt, and Ankara accused Tel Aviv of being responsible for the coup. Turkey's protection of the Muslim Brotherhood and of its pan-Islamist ambitions was deemed a security threat by the Israeli government, due to the group's former support for Hezbollah's military actions against Israel in 2006 and its anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic positions.

A major element of frictions between Ankara and Tel Aviv has been the status of Jerusalem. The city plays a pivotal role in both the Muslim and Jewish traditions. For Hebraism, it represents the first capital of the Kingdom of Israel following its conquest by King David and the place where King Solomon commissioned the building of the First Temple. For Sunni Islam, Jerusalem is the third holiest city, following Mecca and Medina, as the place where Muhammad ascended to heaven. Nowadays, it contains some sites of key cultural and religious importance for both Muslims and Jews, such as Temple Mount, the al-Aqsa Mosque, and the Dome of the Rock. For these reasons, both Israel and Palestine claim it as their own rightful capital, despite both claims have been disputed under international law. As Islamism gained prominence in the public and political debate within Turkey, the defense of Jerusalem, which for centuries had been maintained and administered by the Ottoman Empire, was once again perceived as a holy duty by the neo-Ottoman elements in the Country. Relations with Israel suffered another great setback when the USA recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, altering the decades-long status quo and angering Muslims around the world. Turkey, in its bid for leadership of the Islamic world, seized the opportunity and acted as the representative of the Ummah, as Erdoğan vehemently condemned Trump's move and, speaking at a conference with other leaders of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), called Israel a terrorist and genocidal state.<sup>61</sup>

The emergence of neo-Ottomanism and of pan-Islamism as the main drives behind Turkey's foreign policy has fueled an ideological narrative presenting the Muslim world under attack by foreign powers, with Turkey hoping to take once again the leadership of the Islamic world against Western aggressors. In turn, this has contributed to opening new conflicting arenas between Turkey and the West (and its allies) and within the Sunni world with those actors fearing a new wave of Turkish expansionism in the region. This put Turkey at odds with Israel, seen as a bulwark of Western colonialism in the region, resulting in Israel's closer cooperation with France, Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, and other actors wary of neo-Ottomanism in the Eastern Mediterranean. Erdoğan's claim that Muslims in Europe were being treated like Jews under Nazi occupation in World War II received wide condemnation in Israel. Turkey's close diplomatic relations with Hamas have further contributed to the rift between the former allies, signaling a strong change in Turkey's relationship to its southern neighbors, as the previous secular policy of neutrality towards the issue which had led to friendlier relations with Israel than any other Muslim nation dramatically changed with the rehabilitation of neo-Ottomanism and the new pan-Islamist plans of Ankara, creating a strong ideological, religious, identity, and cultural conflict with the State of Israel and the West.

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<sup>61</sup> Edroos, F. (2018), *Erdoğan Calls on Muslim Countries to Unite and Confront Israel*. Al Jazeera.



# Conclusion

The present thesis has sought to explain the deep-root causes underlying the paradigm shift in the Turkish foreign policy under Erdoğan's rule and the decline of the central role of the Kemalist principles in the institutional life of the Country. The rise of neo-Ottomanism and its deep consequences on the internal and external policies of the Republic of Turkey was the result of a complex interplay of different factors, both material and non-material, which deeply contrasted with the fundamental tenets of Kemalism. Looking at only one side of the picture fails at grasping the aggregate cultural, geopolitical, social, and economic causes which favored the return of political Islamism and the shift in the self-perception of the Turkish political elites and general populace away from the Western civilization. External factors, such as the structure of the international system and the global power dynamics certainly had a major impact on the geopolitical considerations of Turkey: during the years of government of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Ankara was faced by a multipolar European system in which the rise of fascist expansionist governments with revisionist attitudes – such as Bulgaria and Italy in the Balkan and Mediterranean contexts – threatened the post-war order which had been created by the winning liberal democracies of Western Europe; as a recently established Country which had liberated itself from foreign occupation, Turkey was preoccupied with the protection of its newfound sovereignty and for this reason chose to uphold international law and to focus on securing its borders – both in Europe and in the Middle East – with a series of international agreements and alliances, understanding that the pursuit of revanchist, neo-Ottoman policies would have worsened its relations with foreign powers and in turn threatened the very existence of the Turkish State. The end of the Second World War and the beginning of the Cold War period created a positive environment for Kemalist principles to flourish, since the major security threat to Turkish sovereignty at the time was represented by Moscow's revanchist attitudes towards the Black Sea regions of Turkey, its revisionist views towards the Montreux Convention and the status of the Turkish Straits, and its expansionist policies in the Middle East. The fear of Soviet aggression further contributed to pushing Turkey closer to Western Europe as Mustafa Kemal Atatürk had hoped, both in terms of culture, institutions, and military cooperation. Turkey understood that its best interest in the event of a possible Soviet aggression was a close integration with the West, and for this reason it strongly tried to become part of the process of European and Atlantic integration which had started in those years, managing to join NATO and the Council of Europe, and applying for membership to the European Economic Community. Similarly, the emergence of pan-Arab socialism in the Middle East and the union between the Arab Republic of Egypt with the Syrian Republic under the United Arab Republic further complicated the relations between Turkey and the former Ottoman regions to its South, additionally alienating Ankara from the Arab world and pushing it closer to Western Europe and the State of Israel. However, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, followed by the 9/11 events and the doubts over the durability and feasibility of a unipolar system under Washington's leadership opened the possibility for emerging Countries to seek greater regional hegemony in

an international system which was thought to become more multipolar. With the crumbling of the Soviet Union eliminating any direct land border between Ankara and Moscow and the vast natural resources found across the Middle East, Erdoğan's government believed that exclusive reliance on the West was limiting the full possibilities of Turkey in terms of economic and geopolitical power, and that a hegemonic role in the Eastern Mediterranean and in the Islamic world would have turned Anatolia once again into the center of a global power, just like during the Ottoman times. This security and strategical considerations were in stark contrast with the pro-Western, defensive-oriented geopolitical prescriptions of Kemalism, making its abandonment and the adoption of neo-Ottomanism a more rational choice under Turkey's new bid for expansion and power-projection in the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern arena. In order to increase and stabilize its presence in the MENA region, Turkey needed to tackle some issues which were holding it back from regional hegemony; firstly, Ankara had functioned through most of its republican era as a predominantly tellurocratic Country, focusing on the defense of its land borders but failing to establish a strong presence over the seas (for instance, the capital city of the Country, the center of the political and institutional life of the Republic, had been moved from Istanbul, a maritime city, to Ankara, situated on the mountains of central Anatolia, by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk). However, the geographical characteristics of Turkey – surrounded by three bodies of water, the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea, and the Mediterranean Sea – offered huge possibilities in terms of power projection on neighboring regions and economic gains due to the sea routes crossing those waters. Therefore, the formulation of a new maritime policy, the "*Mavi Vatan*", was the rational return to the sea of a Country which historically had used control over the oceans for controlling vast empires, as the examples of the Byzantine and Ottoman empires show. Another trouble which needed to be overcome was Turkey's lack of natural resources in its territory and its reliance on Russia, a problematic neighbor, for gas and oil supplies, which posed a great constraint on Ankara's energy security and in turn the full realization of its power potential. Therefore, a greater military and political involvement in energy-rich arenas, such as the Caucasus, Libya, Africa, and the Eastern Mediterranean was the rational attempt to diversify its energy supplies in order to break free of Russian monopoly. And finally, the defeat of hostile powers – France, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Russia, the United Arab Emirates – which had made similar geopolitical considerations and were struggling to establish their hegemony over the same regions Turkey was trying to dominate pushed Ankara to find local allies and act through regional proxies in order to prevent its enemies from gaining ground in open scenarios of vital security importance for Turkey's interests, thus fueling proxy competitions in several regions of the world for local dominance. However, the aim of the present research has been to demonstrate that the above realist considerations and the sole focus on rational, material elements like economics and security do not offer a complete picture of the real motives behind Turkey's aggressive turn and its newfound interest in Middle Eastern politics. Indeed, the role of culture, ideas and the perception of identities has a great impact on values, institutions and, in turn, the foreign policy of Countries. In this sense, the peculiarity of the Turkish case offers interesting considerations: created from the ashes of a multicultural polity in which identities were shaped by religion and opposition to the West, the Republic of Turkey during its first years had

to legitimate a new feeling of belonging which contrasted with the Ottoman experience as a “caliphate” with a universalistic purpose (the spread and defense of Islam worldwide) and in order to do so the political elites of the time, centered around the figure of Atatürk, looked at the process of nation-building in Western Countries, i.e., monoethnic realities with a strong separation between the religious sphere and the State. The pan-Islamist nature of the Ottoman State could not be reconciled with the new peculiarities of the Turkish Republic, and it was understood that the pursuit of a new unification of the *Ummah* would have been a liability for the Turkish State, threatening its very existence. The creation of a new cultural identity, founded on the exaltation of “Turkishness”, was accompanied by a self-perception as a member of the European community, and the wish to be perceived and accepted as such by other Western European Countries. As a new State with still unclear cultural affiliations – partly Balkan, partly Central Asian, partly Mediterranean, partly European, and partly Middle Eastern – Turkey found full membership to the European civilization an answer to its original search for a new identity, since the previous ties with the Middle East had been severed by the Arab rebellion in World War I, the abolition of the caliphate and of the Ottoman alphabet, and by the secularization of state institutions. The enthusiasm felt by Turkey by the process of European integration in the post-war period was however undermined by the ambiguity of European statesmen and policymakers on the issue of Turkish membership to the European Union. As the Republic of Cyprus, geographically located in Asia, gained membership to the EU in 2004, Turkey felt that its own rejection was no longer a merely geographical sophism, but the result of the European Union’s Christian exclusivity. The constant feeling of rejection and the perceived religious motives behind it frustrated the Turkish general public, alienating it from the process of European integration and from its values, including liberal democracy and secularism. The foreign policy consequences of this process were the cooling of relations between Ankara and the bloc, as well as the re-imagination of Turkey as a member of the Islamic community. Indeed, the view of Europe as a “Christian club” led Turkey to look eastwards and southward, abandoning the Kemalist tenet of indifference towards the Middle East as long as it did not compromise the security of the Republic, and re-habilitating the legacy of the Ottoman past. The mistakes of Europe generated the social and cultural ground on which neo-Ottomanism was allowed to flourish; certainly, the question of Turkish membership to the European Union required special attention and time, as well as the adoption of internal policies aimed at ensuring the full respect of human rights within the Country in line with Brussels’s standards. But the European Union needed to clearly state that, once Turkey had fulfilled all legal requirements in terms of human rights, the question of Ankara’s membership to the bloc would have been solved; instead, the constant doubts on the Muslim features of the Republic and the argument that geographically it was not entirely European (this latter claim falsified by Cyprus’s accession to the EU) alienated a percentage of the Turkish electorate which would have otherwise remained loyal to Western values. Turkey’s rediscovery of its Ottoman legacy and its re-imagination as the heir of the Sublime Porte in turn gave space to feeling of revanchism and revisionism towards the Treaty of Lausanne, as the Country aimed at gaining once again religious, cultural, economic, and political hegemony over its former possessions.

In the end, the importance of either perspective cannot be underestimated, as the change in the Turkish foreign policy under Erdoğan's leadership was the result of a combination of all the elements described so far. Neglecting the importance that exogenous factors like the structure of the international system played in determining Turkey's decision to turn its back on the West and seek greater autonomy and power in the broader Middle East, Africa, and the Eastern Mediterranean would omit the importance of material interests and rational calculations at the basis of the Country's new big for greater power. Similarly, failing to grasp the ideological and cultural motives underlying the issue of Turkey's quest for integration within the European Union and the frustration generated by Brussels's ambiguity would provide an incomplete explanation on why Turkey recurred to neo-Ottoman and pan-Islamist projects clashing with former allies and worrying traditional powers in the Sunni world.

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## *Abstract*

Dalla salita al potere di Recep Tayyip Erdoğan nel 2003 le istituzioni e i pilastri costituzionali della Repubblica di Turchia hanno subito un graduale processo di trasformazione che ha eroso i precedenti principi fondanti che erano stati stabiliti all'inizio dell'era repubblicana da Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. In particolar modo, il modello di laicismo turco e l'alleanza strutturale di Ankara con il mondo occidentale, che per decenni avevano delineato la politica estera del Paese e determinato la sua partecipazione in organismi internazionali dal forte carattere atlantista ed europeista, quali la NATO, sono stati sostituiti da un crescente islamismo nella vita politica della Repubblica di Turchia, causando un cambiamento nel sistema di alleanze e obiettivi nella politica estera di Ankara. Questo passaggio è stato accompagnato da una progressiva rivalutazione e riabilitazione del passato ottomano del Paese, precedentemente visto dalle forze politiche kemaliste come un esempio di arretratezza e decadenza, nonché come un anacronismo storico, ed adesso rivisitato come modello da emulare nelle dinamiche geopolitiche del XXI secolo e testimonianza della grandezza storica del popolo turco.

Lo scopo di tale ricerca è quello di individuare i principali motivi che hanno spinto alla nascita di un nuovo paradigma geopolitico – il neo-ottomanesimo – profondamente in contrasto col precedente sistema kemalista nelle origini e negli obiettivi. A tale scopo, la nascita del neo-ottomanesimo e le sue conseguenze nelle relazioni internazionali di Ankara verranno analizzati attraverso le lenti di due macro-approcci teorici – il realismo e il costruttivismo – col fine di determinare quali elementi abbiano maggiormente contribuito alla realizzazione dei recenti sviluppi geopolitici nella politica estera turca.

Il primo capitolo fornisce un quadro storico nel quale vengono delineati gli elementi caratterizzanti gli obiettivi di politica estera del kemalismo: l'allineamento geopolitico e culturale col mondo occidentale, col fine ultimo del riconoscimento internazionale della Repubblica di Turchia come parte integrante del sistema politico europeo; una scarsa attenzione alle dinamiche politiche del Medio Oriente e del mondo islamico, col solo obiettivo regionale di proteggere i propri confini e limitare l'espansionismo sovietico nell'area, ma evitando un coinvolgimento militare diretto delle truppe turche e preferendo l'utilizzo di mezzi diplomatici e alleanze internazionali; l'opposizione a forze revisioniste nello scenario euro-mediterraneo (Italia fascista, Unione delle Repubbliche Socialiste Sovietiche) che possano compromettere la stabilità del sistema di accordi internazionali stipulati dopo il primo conflitto mondiale. Nello specifico, il primo paragrafo è focalizzato sul periodo in cui Mustafa Kemal Atatürk era in vita, guidando in prima persona la vita politico-istituzionale del Paese, dalla nascita della Repubblica di Turchia nel 1923 fino allo scoppio della Seconda Guerra Mondiale, avvenuto qualche mese dopo la sua morte. Durante i suoi anni al governo, Atatürk concentra gli sforzi diplomatici del Paese sulla preservazione dei confini turchi delineati in seguito al Trattato di Losanna e dello status quo euromediterraneo. Col fine di garantire la sicurezza e l'integrità del territorio della neonata repubblica, firma una serie di trattati internazionali e di accordi diplomatici con le potenze confinanti,

ritenendo una buona cooperazione con le altre potenze una garanzia per la sopravvivenza della Turchia. Atatürk demarca la politica estera della Repubblica di Turchia con una forte impronta isolazionista, specialmente negli affari mediorientali, prediligendo le trattative diplomatiche all'uso della forza, sotto il motto di "pace a casa, pace nel mondo". Qualunque istanza di revanchismo imperiale o di panislamismo viene duramente soppressa. Nel secondo paragrafo viene analizzato il corso delle relazioni internazionali turche nel secondo dopoguerra, alla luce degli sviluppi internazionali della Guerra Fredda. In quegli anni, l'approccio kemalista continua a dettare gran parte della politica estera e interna del Paese nonostante la morte di Atatürk; in linea con i principi cardine della politica estera kemalista, Ankara continua a focalizzare i propri sforzi diplomatici sulla propria partecipazione nel processo di integrazione continentale ed atlantico, da un lato per contenere il crescente espansionismo sovietico in Medio Oriente e le pressioni di Mosca sullo status degli Stretti Turchi, dall'altro per proseguire l'opera di modernizzazione e occidentalizzazione del Paese che era stata intrapresa con l'abolizione delle istituzioni politiche e religiose dell'Impero Ottomano. Importanti traguardi in quegli anni includono la partecipazione al Consiglio d'Europa (1949) e alla NATO (1952). Tuttavia, l'entrata della Turchia all'interno del più importante organo nel processo di integrazione continentale – l'Unione Europea – rimane oggetto di controversie sin dalla candidatura di Ankara nel 1987. Nonostante ciò, il Paese continua a rappresentare un importante alleato occidentale nello scenario euromediterraneo, isolandosi dai tumulti geopolitici mediorientali e continuando ad adottare un approccio puramente difensivo e diplomatico nelle relazioni internazionali; anche all'interno del principale conflitto in cui Ankara viene direttamente coinvolta, il precipitare della situazione cipriota, l'intervento turco non è motivato da un imperialismo nostalgico dell'esperienza ottomana, ma dal fallimento delle trattative diplomatiche e dal rischio di un genocidio sull'isola. Il capitolo si conclude con un'introduzione alla nascita del paradigma neo-ottomano in seguito all'elezione di Erdoğan, con l'abbandono di un approccio prevalentemente difensivo e isolazionista e il ritorno militare della Turchia in diversi scenari dai quali il kemalismo l'aveva alienata, quali il Medio Oriente, l'Africa e il mondo islamico in generale.

Il secondo capitolo analizza la nascita del nuovo approccio turco alle relazioni interazionali guardando agli aspetti materiali, alle motivazioni esogene che si celano dietro a tale cambiamento, quali le dinamiche di potere all'interno del sistema internazionale, gli interessi economici ed energetici, la ricerca di un'egemonia politico-militare nel mondo islamico e nel mediterraneo orientale giustificata alla luce del passato imperiale, lo scontro per procura con altre potenze regionali ostili ai progetti turchi. Viene argomentato che, col crollo del bipolarismo sovietico-statunitense e i dubbi circa la tenuta dell'egemonia globale di Washington, la Turchia e altri attori regionali abbiano avvertito la possibilità di aumentare la propria influenza globale affrancandosi dai diktat occidentali. A tale scopo, Ankara comprende che il controllo sul Medio Oriente passa dal dominio sui mari, un aspetto sottostimato durante l'epoca repubblicana ma la cui importanza era fortemente riconosciuta in epoca ottomana, quando Costantinopoli rivaleggiava con Venezia per l'egemonia sul Mediterraneo. Il primo paragrafo del secondo capitolo prende dunque in esame la nuova politica turca in relazione ai propri confini marittimi, un approccio teoretico rinominato in Turchia "*mavi vatan*", che vuole un

maggior coinvolgimento del Paese nei mari confinanti e un aumento della potenza militare e marittima turca, col fine di proiettare la propria forza nel Medio Oriente e Nord Africa e di sfruttare gli enormi giacimenti energetici presenti a largo delle coste cipriote. Il secondo paragrafo esamina invece gli aspetti puramente energetici che si celano dietro lo spettro ideologico del neo-ottomanesimo, argomentando che molti degli scenari di conflitto in cui Ankara è direttamente coinvolta si giochino in regioni estremamente ricche in termini di risorse energetiche, quali il Caucaso o la Libia. Una delle debolezze ataviche del Paese è infatti l'assenza di giacimenti petroliferi e di gas naturale all'interno dei propri confini nazionali, rendendo Ankara quasi interamente dipendente da Mosca per la propria sicurezza energetica. Un'egemonia locale in regioni politicamente instabili ma ricche di risorse energetiche permetterebbe al Paese di affrancarsi dal monopolio russo sui propri mercati energetici, garantendo ad Ankara un maggiore spazio di manovra contro Mosca. Il terzo paragrafo prende in esame la nuova politica africana della Turchia, che vuole un maggior coinvolgimento politico, militare ed economico all'interno del continente. Tale cambio di rotta rispetto al passato – la politica estera kemalista, quasi esclusivamente incentrata sull'Europa, in larga parte ignorava la geopolitica africana – viene giustificato alla luce delle enormi possibilità energetiche, economiche e militari del continente, il quale tuttavia all'inizio del XXI secolo manca di un vero egemone regionale africano e rimane pertanto uno dei più importanti scenari di conflitto per procura tra vecchie e nuove potenze emergenti, molte delle quali (Francia, Arabia Saudita, Emirati Arabi Uniti) rappresentano un pericolo per gli interessi geopolitici di Ankara e vanno pertanto contrastate nella loro lotta per il dominio sui mercati e i governi africani. Un esempio di come il neo-ottomanesimo rappresenti un insieme di scelte razionali alla luce di interessi materiali esogeni e mutevoli è il coinvolgimento turco nella Seconda Guerra Civile Libica, utilizzato come caso studio poiché determinato dall'intreccio delle motivazioni sopraelencate – ricerca di nuove fonti energetiche, dominio sui mari, scontro per procura, ricerca di egemonia regionale in Africa e nel Medio Oriente.

Il terzo capitolo argomenta che, nonostante i fattori esogeni e gli interessi materiali descritti nel precedente capitolo forniscano una buona spiegazione sul perché il kemalismo sia stato sostituito dal neo-ottomanesimo nella politica estera turca, essi rappresentino un'analisi puramente parziale dell'intero processo, poiché la riabilitazione del passato imperiale e il ritorno dell'Islam politico non possono essere semplicemente concepiti come scelte razionali e meccaniche frutto di interessi meramente economici e geopolitici. Difatti, il terzo capitolo aggiunge un nuovo punto di vista alla ricerca, analizzando come elementi endogeni non-materiali quali la cultura, i valori, l'identità, la religione o la percezione di sé stessi abbiano profondamente influito sul cambiamento nelle relazioni di Ankara col resto del mondo. Col crollo dell'identità ottomana, multiculturale per definizione e basata su confini religiosi più che etnici e geografici, Kemal Atatürk comprese che la creazione di una nuova identità nazionale anti-ottomana e fortemente laica era fondamentale per la sopravvivenza della neonata repubblica. Per realizzarla, l'élite politico-economica del Paese decise di basarsi sul modello europeo dello stato-nazione, mono-etnico e con una separazione tra la sfera pubblico-istituzionale e quella religiosa. La modernizzazione del Paese coincise con l'abbandono dell'Islam politico e la percezione

della Turchia come Paese europeo, culturalmente allineato con le democrazie liberali dell'Europa occidentale. Una volta ottenuto tale obiettivo internamente, Ankara focalizzò i propri sforzi diplomatici affinché anche il resto del mondo occidentale la accettasse come parte integrante del popolo europeo. Tuttavia, la continua ambiguità delle istituzioni europee sul problema della partecipazione turca all'UE ha contribuito ad alienare il popolo turco dai valori fondanti della civiltà occidentale, fomentando la credenza che il rifiuto di Bruxelles fosse dovuto a motivi puramente religiosi e razzisti e spingendo la Turchia a cercare una nuova identità culturale post-kemalista, non più occidentale ma islamica sul modello dell'Impero Ottomano. Viene fornito come caso studio il rapporto mutevole della Repubblica di Turchia con lo Stato di Israele, emblematico all'interno delle dinamiche geopolitiche mediorientali, caratterizzato da momenti di cooperazione basata su un comune senso di diversità nei confronti dei propri vicini arabi e sui comuni legami culturali con l'Occidente, ma recentemente da un forte allentamento tra i due Paesi per motivi religiosi e culturali.

L'analisi dimostra che il cambiamento di rotta nella politica estera turca – dal kemalismo al neo-ottomanesimo – non possa essere ridotto alla sola influenza di fattori materiali o elementi non-materiali, poiché entrambi gli approcci forniscono una spiegazione parziale che necessita dell'altro al fine di essere completa.