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*Stavros DRAKOULARAKOS*

## Turkey, the Middle East and the EU integration process through the prism of ontological security theory

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**Dr. Stavros Drakoularakos** (Ph.D. Political Science and History) is a Post-Doctoral Researcher at the Department of Political Science and International Relations of the University of the Peloponnese, as well as the Editor-in-Chief at the Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East and Islamic Studies (CEMMIS). His body of work focuses on Turkish-Israeli relations, religious pluralism related issues in MENA countries and Middle Eastern foreign policy. This research is co-financed by Greece and the European Union (European Social Fund- ESF) through the Operational Program “Human Resources Development, Education and Lifelong Learning” in the context of the project “Reinforcement of Postdoctoral Researchers—2nd Cycle” (MIS-5033021), implemented by the State Scholarships Foundation (IKY).

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**Executive summary**

This paper aims to bridge the gap between the pausing of the Turkish European integration process and the gradual inflection of Ankara's foreign policy to the Middle Eastern region through the prism of ontological security theory. The objectives are threefold: first, to present and illustrate ontological security theory as applied to state entities; second, to examine the Turkish European integration process through the tenets of the Kemalist foundational identity narrative; and third, to focus on the build-up and identity redefinition in the 2000s and 2010s in order to better comprehend the emphasis shift from the European Union to the Middle East.

## **Introduction**

Turkey is frequently described as a natural or metaphorical bridge between East and West (Greaves, 2007: 1-2). This statement originates in Turkey's Ottoman heritage as well as in the country's inclination – following the establishment of the modern Turkish state in 1920-1923 and particularly after the end of the second World War – to promote relations with European countries and the United States. While Ottomans and Europeans often found themselves at odds during the nineteenth century, the developments following the first World War presented the opportunity to turn a new leaf with regards to their relations. With the new secular Turkey keen to develop closer ties with European countries and the West, the country's national identity and its foundational narrative were reshaped in order to provide distance from the Ottoman past. This initiative eventually culminated in the 1963 Association Agreement which would pave the way for Turkey's start of the integration process in October 2005. However, the years that followed saw Turkey slowly shy away from the process in favor of its Middle Eastern foreign policy despite the fact that integration was the outcome that it strove for during the previous five decades. Within this framework, ontological security theory provides the tools with which to examine how states develop their identity and attempt to preserve their foundational narrative. By the same token, the factors behind changes to a foundational narrative can be highlighted in order to account for state survival priorities and policy shifts.

This paper proceeds as follows. The first section presents the tenets of ontological security theory as applied to state entities. The second section examines the Turkish European integration process through the lens of the Kemalist Turkish foundational narrative. The third and final section focuses on the Turkish identity restructuring in effect following Erdoğan's rise to power in correlation with the shifted focus from the European integration process to the development of Turkey's standing in the Middle East.

### **The tenets of ontological security theory**

Ontological security theory (OST) was first developed in the fields of psychology and sociology through the works of Laing and Giddens and focused on the individual and his environment (Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi, 2020: 1-2). OST was later transposed to international relations and the state level by Kinnvall and Mitzen in an effort to analyze relationship between state and society, as well as state relations. According to OST, individuals and states have a sense of self that they strive to define through the formation of an identity. Hence, ontological

security is described as a situation where an individual or a state entity feels secure, calm, and confident within its environment and with regards to its future prospects. In other words, the foundational narrative of the state provides the necessary equilibrium for the society's citizens to go about their everyday life. This foundational narrative stems from shared values, tradition, language, and history. On the other hand, ontological insecurity originates from a disturbance in this sense of security and results in the formation of existential anxiety and angst. The disturbance is often referred to as a dislocatory event which challenges the state's identity and the foundational narrative, leading to a need for corrective measures in order to reestablish ontological security. The formation of existential anxiety implies that the state has failed at its reason for being. Since the state is considered as the provider and caretaker of society and its values, a return to ontological security is deemed crucial for its survival (Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2020: 248; Browning and Joenniemi, 2017: 2; Pratt, 2017: 1-2).

Moreover, the state's reaction can usually be found either in securitization measures aiming at maintaining the status quo or in the redefinition and repurposing of state identity. In both cases, the objective is to ensure state continuity and state survival since a state's legitimacy originates from its foundational narrative. As such, the shared collective sense of identity and the mnemonic identity of the population are utilized in order to unite society – or at least its majority – and to offer a cause to rally for. In order to bring forward a sense of identity-continuity, narrative tropes are promoted, usually readily available from the state's recent history. These narrative tropes are formed from past antagonisms, religion, culture, or nationalism and are used by the state in order to imbue a sense of unity and continuity. The aftereffect of these tropes is that an us versus them predicament is formed with regards to the non-included in the identity narrative. Since these tropes are already preestablished in a state's history, their effect is immediate, triggering expected reactions from society. However, identity restructuring can also be used in order to repurpose a state's foundational narrative and to alter its domestic and foreign priorities. Following this train of thought, while the foundational narrative of Kemalist Turkey since the 1920s called for a closer relationship with the western world and for a distancing from the Ottoman past, the new Turkish foundational narrative of the late 2000s dictated a slow shift to renewed ties with the Middle Eastern periphery and to a renegotiation of the Turkish and European Union (EU) power equilibrium (Adisonmez and Onursal, 2020: 294-295; Budryte et al., 2020: 6-7; Mitzen, 2006: 346; Subotić, 2016: 613-620).

## **The road to the Turkish European integration process**

The foundational narrative which eventually led to the Turkish bid for membership in the European Economic Community can be placed in the early decades following the establishment of the modern Turkish state in 1920. The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire could be viewed as a dislocatory event which shook the foundational institutions in its society. The reaction to the dislocatory event is found in the creation of the modern Turkish state and the distancing with the Ottoman past and its cultural and religious heritage. The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire was considered a failure by the state in its priorities as a provider and caretaker of ontological security. In essence, the foundational narrative shifted in order to integrate the seismic changes in Turkish society and to incorporate the regional developments following the first World War. Although Turkey would be considered as a successor to the Ottoman Empire, the state and its society would follow a new normative map to the establishment of ontological security which would include – through the development of close relations with the West– defined stable and profitable future prospects. In other words, the existential anxiety which spread in the nineteenth and early twentieth century during the Russian-Ottoman wars and the first World War would be course-corrected through the redefinition of Turkish identity. During the twentieth century, the Turkish state narrative would be based on its linkage with the western world and securitization against domestic threats, such as the Kurdish issue. Turkey was promoted as a western secular country, one which distanced itself from its Ottoman past, rooted in state-religion separation, and willing to cultivate relations with western countries to the detriment of its ties with the Middle Eastern periphery. The most prominent instance of this narrative is the conversion of the Hagia Sophia mosque into a museum in 1934. This initiative exemplified the aim for a narrative shift in the country, promoting a society not only reserved to Muslim citizens, but open to secular values and in tune with developments in the western world. The Hagia Sophia museum stood as a symbol of the Kemalist Turkish foundational narrative, as well as a break with the Ottoman past, potentially ushering the country into a new era both in domestic and foreign policy (Zarakol, 2010: 12-17; New York Times, 2020; Grigoriadis, 2011: 175-177; Adisonmez and Onursal, 2020: 297).

The Turkish state, as the provider of security and stability viewed healthy relations with the West as a prerequisite to preserving its survival and preempting the repetition of the Ottoman past. Hence, Turkey's affair with the West began early on during the country's formative years and grew stronger during the second half of the twentieth century. As relations were not only limited to the United States and its defense mechanisms – such as NATO and the Baghdad Pact – ties with European countries were also favored, further adding to the western

characteristics of the Turkish political system. As a result, Turkish diplomats wore western attire, spoke French and English fluently, and were educated in western customs. Moreover, Turkey also viewed the encroachment within the US faction as a necessary relationship in order to prevent communist agendas from finding fertile ground in the country and from endangering the acquis of the state as established by Mustafa Kemal. Communism was viewed as potentially dangerous to the preservation of the foundational narrative and led to Turkey openly siding with the US during the decades following the second World War. At the apex of the Cold War, Turkey was regarded as one of the main allies of the United States, effectively blocking Soviet influence from expanding further. Later on, the economic benefits and strategic clout of the relationship further cemented Turkey's western predisposition (Yavuz, 2019: 8-12; Yilmaz and Bilgin, 2006: 41-43; Cagaptay, 2009).

The EU-Turkey relationship could be considered as a byproduct of the enhancement of the strategic ties with the western world and as further implementation of the Turkish identity narrative, both domestically and abroad. The relationship between Turkey and the EU initially began via the Association Agreement of 1963 which had as a primary objective the upgrading of economic relations and the future establishment of a customs union. Through the latter, and once the necessary guidelines had been fulfilled, the free movement of people, goods, services and capital would become reality, and the Turkish European integration process would be open for negotiation. For Turkey, this roadmap would reinforce ontological security and ensure the legitimacy of the state as a provider of a stable environment with clear and defined societal prospects. However, the process faced a number of complications such as the oil crises of the 1970s and the military coup d'état in Turkey in 1980 which put a brake on the Turkish momentum. Nevertheless, during the 1990s, Turkey moved forward with reestablishing its relations with the countries of the international community and especially with European member-states as well as the United States. While in 1995 the customs union was to be placed into effect and act as a steppingstone to the Turkish European bid, the Imia crisis which followed the next year strained Greek-Turkish relations and effectively torpedoed the next phase of the Turkish integration process (Birand, 1991: 27-39; Kazakos, 2002: 349-350; Rumelili, 2011: 235-249).

In 1997, the start of negotiations for the next ten member-states of the EU was announced, with Turkey missing from the list. Instead, Turkey was placed into a special category due to its failure to comply with the political and economic guidelines of the Association Agreement. The decision of the EU could be explained via two factors: first, the non-withdrawal of the Greek veto and Germany's refusal to commit for or against Turkey's European bid in fear of Turkish economic

migrants; and, second, the reversal of Turkish foreign policy in 1996-1997, after the rise to power of Foreign Minister Çiller and Prime Minister Erbakan. The new government in place had set its sights on the Middle East and was moving ahead with official visits to Muslim countries. As a result, the western aspects of Turkey – at least during these years – had lost part of their momentum (Bertrand, 2003: 204; Kazakos, 2002: 351-353; Robins, 2003: 140-145).

The EU decision not to include Turkey in the 1997 list had the opposite effect of what was probably expected. Turkey opted to freeze political dialogue with the EU and remove from the negotiating table the Cyprus matter and Greek-Turkish issues. While relations with the United States would remain a priority, the European integration process would falter in favor of Turkey's Middle Eastern policy. Nonetheless, in 1998, tempers seemed to slowly give way again to renewed attempts to restart dialogue (Foreign Ministry of Turkey, 1998; European Commission, 1998: 53-54). Following the Greek veto retraction and until 2005, the Turkish European process was coupled with harmonization attempts with EU guidelines concerning the economic, political and social areas. For instance, one of the most publicized decisions was the abolition of the death penalty in Turkey. Moreover, Turkey officially began negotiations for the EU accession process in 2005 (Turkmen, 2002: 636-637; Chidiroglou, 2005: 27; Tsakonas, 2002: 1-40).

In essence, throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s, the requirements for ontological security and state survival as established by Turkey's Kemalist foundational narrative dictated the state's focus on its European bid despite the domestic and international developments of the times. While Turkey's accession bid was challenged by a number of factors and was tested by conflicting priorities, the definition of the modern Turkish identity predisposed the state in promoting its European agenda which culminated in 2005. Nonetheless, the second half of the 2000s saw Turkey eventually shift gears and strive to expand its political and economic influence in the Middle East to the detriment of its relations with the EU (Yavuz, 2019: 17; Bozdağlıoğlu, 2008: 59-62).

### **The gradual shift to the Middle East**

During the twenty-first century, the Turkish identity narrative was slowly redefined following the electoral success of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002. Emphasis was placed on the religious-conservative aspect of the population which was previously omitted in favor of secularism. To that effect, Turkish identity would be reconnected with the Ottoman past and its cultural heritage, side-stepping the institutional reforms previously spearheaded by Kemal.



The arguments which explain the rise of the AKP in the Turkish political scene are threefold: first, religious-conservatives came back to Turkish politics through the predominance of the AKP in public fora; second, the AKP represented the victory of the underdog or of those relegated to the fringes of society during the previous status quo; and third, the party embodied the reactionary movement of the Turkish population over the short-lived governments of the 1990s under the purview of Kemalist policymakers (Sahin, 2021: 6-7). With some exceptions, Kemalists drove foreign policy and had a hand in guiding the country's domestic policy, which effectively undermined previous elected governments in moving forward with their political agendas. In other words, the Turkish people were given the opportunity to reprimand the established political status quo by electing the AKP to power (Insel, 2007: 63-78; Anagnostopoulou, 2004: 84-103; Kizilyurek, 2006: 182-184).

Throughout the 1990s, the Turkish EU integration process had pushed the Kemalist policymakers to produce legislature for the democratization of the political and judiciary systems. These reforms ensured that electoral results would not be easily overshadowed as in previous decades. In addition, the developing relationship with the EU and Turkey's obligations towards its members had established a number of safety measures, the breaking of which could bring severe economic and diplomatic repercussions to the country. At the same time, the AKP rose to power by promoting Islam over nationalism as a unifying element, which was deemed as the *raison d'être* of the Kemalist parties. What is more, the identity narrative of the AKP would be shaped under the aegis of religion, in order to conform with the more conservative traits of the majority of the population. The objective would be to drive the narrative and to obtain as wide a consensus as possible. As a result, the 2002 elections led to most of the Islamist parties joining under the AKP in order to ensure their parliamentary representation. Moreover, the Erdoğan-led governments followed a trajectory which could be categorized into two periods. The first could be titled as the period of the EU integration process, of the economic rise of Turkey and of the Kurdish openings, while the second could be placed after 2007-2008, with the shift to the Middle East, the "Davutoğlu Doctrine" and the subsequent dissociation from the EU integration process (Öniş, 2016: 141-142; Müftüler Baç, 2005: 28-29).

The renewed focus on the Middle East came about in conjunction with the further redefinition of modern Turkish identity. As a result, the foundational narrative of Turkey of the 2000s would slowly reconnect with Ottoman times with an emphasis placed on their remembered achievements. In a way, this narrative effectively sidestepped the one following the 1920s, tethering instead the mnemonic identity of the Turkish people with the Ottoman Empire, juxtaposing the failures of the recent decades with the victories of the distant past. Although the "Davutoğlu Doctrine" was designed as the new roadmap for the relations of Turkey with its

neighbors, it was commonly misinterpreted as an attempt to revitalize neo-Ottomanism. However, as Grigoriadis stresses, the term itself was a nineteenth century movement within the Ottoman Empire which aimed at uniting the different national and religious communities under one shared Ottoman identity. The movement was unsuccessful and was put to rest with the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of the modern Turkish state. As a result, the term neo-Ottomanism was borrowed for the purposes of the “Davutoğlu Doctrine” but was also stripped of its historical parentage. It would become a tool with a double meaning: first, it would remind Turkey’s people and its periphery of the heights of the Ottoman Empire; and, second, it would loosely delimit Turkish spheres of interest and influence. Hence, Turkey’s reach and strategic role would potentially extend from the Middle East to the Balkans and Eastern Asia (Grigoriadis, 2010: 4). Via this policy, Davutoğlu would promote a “zero problems policy with neighboring states” that would focus on bilateral relations and lead to a clean state regarding pending and unresolved issues, as well as enable Turkey to become a strategic player in the wider region. The long-term objective was to restart relations with Middle Eastern countries, free of historical differences. Hence, Turkey moved forward with attempts to reach Sudan, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, in addition to opening channels with Hamas and Hezbollah. It should be noted that Turkish-Israeli relations started to gradually be undermined in the late 2000s as a direct result of Turkey’s focus on the Palestinian issue which was hoped to be used as a unifying thread with the people of the Middle East. (Kouskouvelis, 2013: 54; Cagaptay, 2009; Murinson, 2006: 945-953; Grigoriadis, 2010: 6-7).

Lending additional credence to the concept of redefining the Turkish foundational narrative, US-Turkish relations suffered from Ankara’s refocused foreign policy priorities. A commonly used tool in a state’s arsenal for reshaping identity is to create the necessary conditions where a foreign state or a people are considered as the enemy, creating an us versus them discourse to the detriment of excluded minorities from the state narrative. When coupled with the historic memory of the Turkish people regarding the West during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the immediate effect was to bring the majority of the population to side with or tolerate domestic and foreign policies, ensuring the state survival priorities of the AKP government. The first instance of this narrative could be found in 2003, when the Turkish parliament refused entry to US forces during the 2003 Iraq war, effectively downgrading their alliance and, at the same time, rebuilding the image of Turkey as a leading country in the Middle East. Additionally, in contrast with the tenets of the Turkish diplomatic corps of the twentieth century, which promoted a western-like Turkish image, the twenty-first century diplomat was expected to speak Arabic fluently, sport a moustache, dress appropriately and be in tune with the historic and Islamic religious customs of the Middle Eastern

region. The latter further accentuated the priority shift in Turkish foreign policy that would eventually lead to the pausing of the Turkish EU integration process and to the search for a new working relationship between the EU and Turkey (Morton and Barkey Henri, 2009; Geropoulos, 2016; Cagaptay, 2009).

While the new Turkish identity narrative was relatively successful domestically, considering Erdoğan's continuous electoral successes and his dominion over Turkish politics, it was less effective with regards to foreign policy interests and aspirations. The first few years following the events of the 2011 Arab uprisings saw Turkey in need of revisiting its Middle Eastern foreign policy, especially concerning the states directly affected. Although the "zero problems policy" had failed to find an audience in the long-term and that bilateral relations with Middle Eastern countries had started to show signs of fatigue, Turkish foreign policy backed the democratization demands of the Arab Spring in order to further present the country as a model to emulate and to show the path through which Political Islam could rise to power through democratic processes. Hence, Turkey immediately proclaimed its support and recognition of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Ennahda movement in Tunisia (Zalewski, 2013; Kader, 2013).

Nonetheless, the 2013 military coup against the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Libyan and Syrian civil wars complicated Turkey's stance regarding the Arab uprisings. On the one hand, Turkey had previously maintained good relations with the Gaddafi regime and opted not to condemn it openly after the Arab Spring reached Libya. This resulted in part of the Middle Eastern population being disheartened with the early Turkish neutrality. Moreover, the new al-Sisi government in Egypt was at odds with Turkey due to its support of the Muslim Brotherhood and to providing safe haven to its ideologues. On the other hand, Turkey's ongoing entanglement in the Syrian civil war and the country's diplomatic back and forth between Russia, the United States and the Syrian opposition partially damaged its reputation as a country capable of bringing parties together to the negotiation table. In addition, Turkey's attempts in order to deal a blow to the PKK and the Rojava Kurds by occupying their neighboring territories brought back memories of Ottoman expansionism. What is more, the issues regarding the Syrian refugee situation damaged the idea of Turkey as an open and welcoming country (Aras, 2019; Yekeler, 2020; Aydintasbas, 2020).

The priorities of state survival and continuity dictated a restructuring of Turkey's foundational narrative. With the Arab uprisings serving as a dislocatory event in terms of foreign policy guidelines and the image that Turkey cultivated both domestically and abroad, a refocusing of Turkish identity was considered essential. Further emphasis would be placed on state continuity, ensuring dominion over Turkish domestic politics. The latter was highlighted by the state's reaction and

securitization measures in the years following the 2013 Gezi park protests and the 2016 failed military coup. While attempting to minimize the produced existential anxiety of these events, the state reaction had the adverse effect of sidelining the progress achieved via the European integration process. It is of note that the stay of the AKP in power was partly ensured under the Turkish integration aspirations. As a result, the then recent Turkish history of military coups would not be repeated in order to restore the Kemalist foundational narrative. However, it would be safe to highlight that during the late 2000s and early 2010s, this European safeguard would no longer be deemed necessary due to the various political, judiciary and military power struggles from which Erdoğan emerged largely strengthened. Hence, it would be considered safe for the AKP governments to move away from following up on the European integration process and to focus instead on developing the new Turkish foundational narrative. Nonetheless, the most prominent exception to this rule would certainly be the above mentioned 2013 demonstrations and the 2016 failed coup (Sahin, 2021: 16-20; Yavuz, 2019: 19-20; Adisonmez and Onursal, 2020: 304).

On the foreign policy arena, the pausing of the Turkish European integration process served as a means to an end in order to stress Turkey's bid to present itself as a regional power rather than as a democratic model country, as well as to scrutinize the US and European efforts in dealing with the Syrian civil war and its aftereffects. At the same time, Turkey attempted to shine a light both domestically and in the Middle Eastern region to western interventionism and inertia in order to deflect from issues stemming from policy shortcomings. Following this train of thought, the Middle East was viewed as being Turkey's prime area of interests that would not be downplayed in favor of uncertain promises of future gains by the EU. The new Turkish foundational narrative would call for a new relationship with the EU based on shifting power dynamics via the Syrian refugee crisis and the containment of radical actors. As a direct result, the EU integration process would be viewed as a defunct Turkish prospect. Instead, the pursued talks would place Turkey and the EU on equal standing with the Turkish state opting for a relationship based on a stronger negotiating platform as an aspiring regional power (Pierini, 2019; Bozdağlıoğlu, 2008: 71; Eliacık, 2021; Kirişçi, 2009).

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I examined the correlation between Turkey's shift to the Middle East with the state's distancing from the European integration process through the framework of ontological security theory. In doing this, I first presented OST and analyzed its tenets. Second, I provided a juxtaposition of the new Turkish

foundational narrative as established by Kemal after the 1920s with the growth of Turkish-European relations during the twentieth century. And, lastly, I articulated the shift to the Middle East to the detriment of the European integration process as an integral aspect to Erdoğan's Turkish foundational narrative and state survival priorities.

The foundational narrative of Kemal's Turkey was based on the country's new secular political system, its national identity and its western inclination. As a result, relations with European countries were sought out, while at the same time, Turkish Middle Eastern policy was minimized. Turkey's relations with European countries developed first with the 1963 Association Agreement and culminated with the start of the European integration process in 2005. Turkish priorities during the twentieth century were firmly guided by the acquis of state identity as established by Kemal and were followed through by the subsequent Kemalist-led governments.

In contrast, during the 2000s, Erdoğan's AKP rose to power and gradually reshaped the Turkish foundational narrative, focusing instead on religion, traditions, the linkage with the Ottoman past and the wider Middle Eastern region. As the AKP maintained electoral power through the aegis of the European integration process, it eventually outgrew the traditional Kemalist status quo and moved forward with further redefining Turkish state identity. The latter would then be dictated according to the priorities of state survival that would effectively undermine relations with the EU and emphasize Turkey's independence from foreign actors and its standing as an aspiring regional power.

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