

# Re-Imagining the Ottoman Past in Turkish Politics: Past and Present

ALİ ERKEN\*

**ABSTRACT** *The article analyses the use of Ottoman past as a central theme in Turkish politics since the 1960s. It discusses how the revivalist discourse treats the question of westernization and shapes the perception of young activists towards the Ottomans. As confrontational themes with the West surfaced more frequently, the search for a new “order” became more tangible. Furthermore, the negative outlook of the Republican historiography towards the Ottoman heritage was dismissed, especially among young and educated followers of the MHP and MSP-RP. This orientation gained more widespread acceptance among the mass during the AK Party years as a result of the government’s revisionist foreign policy and increasing frequency of the references to the Ottoman history in the party leadership’s discourse.*

**T**he article presents an analysis of the popularization of the ‘Ottoman Past’ as a central theme in Turkish politics. It starts with a brief discussion of the treatment of Ottoman history in Republican historiography, and the challenging views to it in the 1940s and 1950s. It continues with an analysis of the re-appraisal of Ottoman history in the 1960s and 1970s in intellectual circles and investigates how it was articulated in the political discourse of the two ideologically driven parties, namely the CKMP (*Cumhuriyet Köylü Millet Partisi*-Republican Peasant Nation Party)-MHP (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*- Nationalist Movement Party) and the MNP (*Milli Nizam Partisi*-National Order Party)-MSP (*Milli Selamet Partisi*-National Salvation Party). The study contends that the appropriation of revivalist discourse in politics that drew inspiration from the Ottoman past had a strong impact on the formation of the perception of youngsters and university students of the time on the question of “order” and westernization. The final section compares this political orientation with the post-1980 nationalist discourse and looks at the role of pro-Ottomanist discourse behind the rise of the RP. It links this discussion with the use of Ottoman history as a framework for the AK Party’s foreign policy. The

\* Marmara University, Institute of Middle East Studies

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article, thus, aims to make a contribution to the understanding of current debates revolving around the rise of “neo-Ottomanism” in Turkish politics.

## Republican Historiography and Ottoman Heritage: A Brief Overlook

The agents of political nationalism in the 1920s and 1930s were the Republican elite, who favored a top-down model of social change and imposed their secular vision of nationalism through various means. The early Republican elite was determined to build a Turkish national identity independent of any religious connotation, and Islam was gradually eliminated from the Kemalist nation-building program. It could be said that the pace of westernization surpassed the pace of nationalism from 1923 to 1930; recourse to the westernization project, which had its early roots in the *Tanzimat* reforms of the mid-19th

century, ignited the *Kulturkampf* of the previous century. This time, however, westernization reforms came with a much greater force and on a larger scale. Reform laws were swiftly passed and forcefully implemented in various segments of society during the first decade of the new republic.

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It is a fact that the educated elites and political leadership in Turkey closely watched the intellectual-political currents in Europe at the time and often expressed this inspiration in their political behavior.<sup>1</sup> The ruling elite sought to benefit from academic studies to build a new Turkish national culture. The Faculty of Language History and Geography (*Dil Tarih Coğrafya Fakültesi*-DTCF) in Ankara University, for example, was established in 1935 to encourage research in language, history, and material

culture.<sup>2</sup> The ruling elite was willing to ascribe certain qualities to the Turkish nation with the help of evidence found in scientific research on Turkish history. Accordingly, the first Turkish History Congress was convened in Ankara in 1932 in the presence of Mustafa Kemal. Over two hundred participants took their seats, as fifteen researchers presented their papers on various aspects of Turkish history.<sup>3</sup> Most of the researchers suggested that the early ancestors of the Turkish nation had flourished in Central Asia thousands of years ago.<sup>4</sup> Charting the history of the Turkish people, most of the presentations dwelt on pre-Islamic Turkish history, and the Ottoman era was reduced to a minor stage of the Turks' long venture in history for tens of thousands of years.<sup>5</sup> As a culmination of these studies in the early 1930s the “Turkish History Thesis” was presented to Mustafa Kemal and this perspective of historiography has been propagated through the media as well as school textbooks ever since.

Republican historiography fostered the ruling elite's view that they should take pride in the Ottoman experience. There was a consensus among the historians and Republican elite that the Ottomans had misinterpreted the role of religion in society, stood against scientific discoveries, and let non-Turkish people hold positions in the state administration.<sup>6</sup> The Turkish History Thesis also argued that the migration of the Turks from Central Asia to Europe and Anatolia contributed to the progress of world civilization.<sup>7</sup> In school textbooks, this praise of the pre-Islamic heritage was emphasized, whereas Ottoman history was dismissed and the Ottoman rulers received paltry coverage.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, independent of the state apparatus, the ideology of nationalism found a voice among civil circles again in the early 1930s with the writings of Nihal Atsız, a young scholar at İstanbul University from Turkist circles, who held extreme racist views.<sup>9</sup> Atsız published the *Atsız Mecmua* in 1931 and *Orhun* in 1933. In these publications and in his later works Atsız criticized the CHP, especially over its view of history and rejection of Pan-Turkism.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, he denigrated the school textbook prepared by the Turkish Historical Society under the title *Türk Tarihi* (Turkish History), and condemned its mocking interpretation of Ottoman history, claiming that the Ottoman family was “the greatest family in the whole of Turkish history.”<sup>11</sup>

Atsız and a group of Turkist intellectuals continued to promote a different understanding of history than that of Republicans in the 1940s and 1950. Converging with the Turkists in their criticism of Republican historiography was a group of intellectuals who did articulate a different view of nationalism, namely conservative nationalism, in the 1940s. Nurettin Topçu, who was the publisher of the *Hareket* (Movement) journal since 1939, defended the idea that nationalism should draw on shared cultural values that were immersed in tradition and cultural practices maintained by the Anatolian people.<sup>12</sup> Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, a leading poet and thinker in religious and nationalist circles, launched his *Büyük Doğu* (Great East) in 1943, which promoted the restoration of the Ottoman heritage and religious institutions against the Republican reforms.<sup>13</sup> Lastly, Osman Yüksel Serdengeçti, who was a journalist, launched the *Serdengeçti* journal, in which he published various articles praising the Ottoman Sultans and statecraft throughout the late 1940s and 1950s.<sup>14</sup> In spite of their prolific intellectual contribution to the debate, neither conservative nationalists nor Turkists were able to extend their reach to the majority of Turkish society. Their appeal was mainly confined to educated groups who had access to their publications or speeches, a relatively small number in a country with only 35 percent literacy.<sup>15</sup>

The post-1946 democratization marked an important step in the popularization of conservative nationalist views across the country. Gavin Brocket's study demonstrates that the liberalization of the press and the spread of provincial newspapers contributed to the diversification of views of nationalism at the

## The post-1946 democratization marked an important step in the popularization of conservative nationalist views across the country

grass-root level and Islam occupied a very central place in this formation of popular national identity.<sup>16</sup> Small-scale nationalist societies promoting Turkist or conservative nationalist views, founded during the late 1940s, joined forces under the Federation of Union of Nationalists (*Milliyetçiler Birliği Federasyonu*), which upheld the idea of nationalism rooted in the “belief in God, fatherland, history, language, tradition, and morality,” in 1951.<sup>17</sup> These developments in the late 1940s and 1950s were indicative of the rising appeal to the Ottoman legacy within the political and intellectual circles, challenging the Republican view of its Turkish-Islamic past.

### Longing for Ottoman Legacy: Intellectuals and Politicians

In the aftermath of the 27 May Coup, the NUC (National Union Committee-*Milli Birlik Komitesi*), composed of 38 members, was formed, but shortly after its formation a deep split among the Committee members led to the expulsion of fourteen Committee members, who were sent to exile. After their return to the country some members of the fourteen, led by Colonel Alparslan Türkeş, joined the CKMP in 1965. (A party that had been founded by Osman Bolükbaşı in the previous decade) and took over its control in the same year. Though in the early years they seemed to be in line with the Republican Kemalist values and secular nationalism, the party’s 1969 congress, where the party changed its name to the MHP, marked a shift in its ideology, bringing a new evaluation of culture and history.<sup>18</sup> The CKMP-MHP leadership focused their attention on recruiting youngsters, especially in the universities, in the face of growing socialist movement in the country.

As the MHP moved into a new phase, some of the conservative nationalist ideologues forged stronger ties with the party youth and the leadership. The *Aydınlar Klübü* (Intellectuals’ Club), founded in 1962 in İstanbul, was one of the first organizations where leading ideologues of conservative nationalist thinking in Turkey held weekly seminars on a wide range of topics.<sup>19</sup> Less formal than the *Aydınlar Klübü*, the *Marmara Kiraathanesi* (Marmara Coffeehouse) was located in Beyazıt near the University of İstanbul. It became an attractive location for those who moved in rightist circles, including those in the *Aydınlar Klübü*, providing a comfortable setting for young university students and conservative nationalist intellectuals to meet around the same table.<sup>20</sup> These thinkers had an interest in the arts and humanities in general. Most of them were imbued with a religious sensitivity to varying degrees, but did not have expertise in Islamic sciences. Among them there were scholars



A man dressed as Chief of the Mehteran Band, an old Ottoman military band, stands in front of the Turkish monument.

AFP / Mustafa Özer

such as Osman Turan Erol Güngör and Ziya Nur Aksun, poets such as Necip Fazıl Kısakürek and Hilmi Oflaz, and columnists such as Ahmet Kabaklı and Osman Yüksel Serdengeçti. These people had a very deep interest in Turkish-Islamic history and offered a nationalistic interpretation of it.<sup>21</sup> Another central theme in their agenda was the westernization debate and the question of cultural transformation.<sup>22</sup> As they were critical of the Republican westernization reforms and the derisive attitude of the Republican bureaucratic elite towards the Ottoman heritage they had no love for the CHP.<sup>23</sup> Most of these thinkers were also critical of socialist ideology and anxious about the rising socialist wave in the country. From the mid 1960s onwards they put a lot of effort into refuting socialist literature and revolutionary ideologies.<sup>24</sup>

The connection between these intellectuals, young militants and the MHP leadership was somewhat complicated. Only a few of the young militants could forge personal contacts with these scholars, but the writings of such leading conservative-nationalist ideologues as Erol Güngör, Osman Turan, Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, Yüksel Serdengeçti, and Mümtaz Turhan were highly popular.<sup>25</sup> Many of these scholars were invited to write in nationalist publications and to give speeches in conferences held by young nationalist militants.<sup>26</sup> On the level of the party leadership, Alparslan Türkeş had maintained contact with a group of Turkists around Atsız, but he was less in touch with these conservative circles. Türkeş had been a soldier in the army, but what was worse, and more conspicuous, were his views on nationalism and religion as displayed during his NUC membership after the 27 May coup. At this juncture, the members of the ÜKD



(*Üniversiteliler Kültür Derneği*-University Culture Society), established in the early 1960s by a group of educated conservative nationalist thinkers, played an important role in mediating between the intellectuals and the party leadership.<sup>27</sup>

It seems that Dündar Taşer, a close friend of Türkeş from the NUC and the fourteen, worked harder than Türkeş to forge this connection and according to scholars and students of the time he formed a close circle of followers from in-

## Discourse praising the Ottoman past found strong resonance among nationalist youth

tellectuals and youngsters.<sup>28</sup> It is hard to trace Taşer's ideological evolution before 1960 based on available documents, but from his writings and speeches it can be surmised that he was far more articulate than Türkeş in historical analysis and sociological reasoning. In most of his speeches, Taşer addressed a wide range of historical issues, in particular the history of the Ottoman Empire, and was critical of republi-

can historiography. His audience was mostly composed of students, who heard stories about the "glories" of their ancestors.<sup>29</sup> In one of his speeches he said:

We are a nation that founded the greatest empires of the world and ruled every part of the world. The last link in this chain of empires was the Ottoman Empire of which we are the heirs.<sup>30</sup>

In an article he wrote on the death of Dündar Taşer in 1972, Erol Güngör said:

You can ask what point is there in investigating the past? There may even be some among you who say 'Let's leave the past and look at the condition we are in today; we are amongst the least successful states in the world.' Taşer would reply to you by saying: 'We have got into the condition we are in today because of our abandonment of our past. If you search seriously for answers to the questions I have asked, you will find a state [meaning the Ottomans] unequalled in world history. Without knowing and understanding this state, there is no way you can understand the Turkish nation or explain the hardships we face today'.<sup>31</sup>

Leading ideologues such as Dündar Taşer, Erol Güngör and Osman Yüksel Serdengeçti often complained that dismissing the Ottoman Empire was an injustice to Turkish nationalism and suggested that the Ottoman Empire was the greatest Turkish state in history.<sup>32</sup> It was maintained that the representation of the state in the works of Republican historians was insufficient, as it under-represented the Ottoman phase in the succession of Turkish states.<sup>33</sup> Besides, conservative nationalist view of historiography represented the rulers of the Ottoman Empire as believing that the interests of the state superseded the interests of the individual.<sup>34</sup> Dündar Taşer in many of his speeches spelled out the necessity of sacrificing oneself for the sake of the state; he introduced the term "*fena fi-d'devle*" (annihilation in the state),<sup>35</sup> and asked young nationalist

militants to apply this vision in their lives.<sup>36</sup> To ensure that the state survived, its citizens and bureaucrats should be “unquestionably loyal” to their state.<sup>37</sup>

The MHP leadership and the young nationalists were critical of the Republican nationalist topography as well, which showed no geopolitical interest in Turkish and Muslim populations living outside the boundaries of modern Turkey, and re-imagined it from the perspective of the Ottoman “golden age.”<sup>38</sup> Taşer, again, wrote in *Devlet*, nationalist newspaper, in 1969:

Why do not we give up our hope of returning to those places we had left? The crescent will return to those places once it arrived.<sup>39</sup>

He often complained to young nationalists that, as a result of westernization and a distorted history of the Ottomans taught to Turkish people, there was a lack of awareness among Turkish people of the fact that their forefathers had ruled three continents.<sup>40</sup>

This frequent employment of historical analogies was not only confined to the MHP circles. Necmettin Erbakan, a scholar at Istanbul Technical University, initiated a new political movement in 1969 and founded the MNP in 1970, then the MSP in 1973, and the party leadership was keen to display a strong connection between the Ottoman heritage and their political endeavor. The MNP-MSP generated a sense of belonging to the Islamic cause in politics, to which the MHP had been unable to attain. In its founding declaration, it was underlined that the MNP was founded on the spirit of the Turkish nation, which was chosen by God “to enjoin the right and forbid the wrong.”<sup>41</sup> The MNP-MSP successfully converted the prevailing anxieties of the religious electorate into the language of politics; Erbakan was more straightforward than Türkeş in expression what these people wished to hear:

What happens if we let people free on Friday so that they can go to the mosque freely? There could be great benefits if the Caliphate is restored, political benefits as well. I don't insist that it should come back, but if people want it to come back, it can.<sup>42</sup>

The MSP insistently advocated that Turkey was a unique battleground between the forces of Islam, the Christian West, Communism and Zionism.<sup>43</sup> The praise of their Ottoman ancestors in the MSP was no different than the pro-Ottomanist discourse of the MHP after 1969; in a speech he gave in the MSP congress Erbakan declared:

Anyone who doesn't feel our rearing up in Malazgirt, being a sword in the War of Kosovo, being a soldier to conquer İstanbul, being Fatih II to ride his horse to the sea, being Süleyman I to march his armies into Europe could not understand what the National Salvation Party is.<sup>44</sup>

This longing for the Ottoman past was a frequent theme in the writings of Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, who joined the MSP and exerted a profound influence on the party discourse; in 1956 he had written:

One day Fatih [meaning Sultan Mehmed II] will revive. Fatih symbolizes a community who completes its inner maturation and readiness to start a new conquest. If this nation would not die, Fatih would revive.<sup>45</sup>

The MHP and MSP dealt seriously with the question of cultural and political westernization. The MHP discourse brought to the fore the “degeneration in every aspect of life that had plagued Turkish society in the last two hundred years.”<sup>46</sup> This trend was spearheaded by some members of the MHP leadership, Dündar Taşer and Yüksel Serdengeçti in particular, who held a confrontationist view of the Ottoman-Turkish encounter with the West.<sup>47</sup> Serdengeçti, who frequently invoked historical antagonisms between the West and the Ottomans, in one of his election speeches said:

They couldn’t succeed in defeating us in the Gallipoli War, but now they have found other channels to overcome this resistance. We call it cultural imperialism. Committed and religious soldiers of the nationalist movement will stand against them and won’t allow anything that does not belong to us to enter these lands.<sup>48</sup>

They invented a story of Mary in İzmir and made it a sacred place of Christianity. Then Santa Claus appeared in Antalya. They want to change this glorious land into a former Roman, Byzantium country. One day they will say hey you barbaric Turks you came after us. Despite our all pressures, the AP could not open Hagia Sophia, the sacred place of conquest, to worship, yet they hosted the Pope [meaning his visit to Istanbul] with great reverence.<sup>49</sup>

Similarly, in many of his speeches Erbakan underlined that there were people acting as the agents of Byzantium and working against his party.<sup>50</sup> The MNP’s Founding Declaration underlined:

So far our nation has fought against the Western nations all together, not one by one, and defeated them every time: The Crusades, the conquest of İstanbul, the siege of Vienna. However, now our nation is left helpless against foreign cultures, communists and cosmopolitan minds.<sup>51</sup>

Not only Ottoman history but also Seljuk history received frequent coverage in the political climate of the 1970s.<sup>52</sup> It can be argued that the recourse to the Seljuks helped politicians sanctify Anatolia as the heartland of the post-Ottoman era, from where the Turkish nation “would emerge triumphant” again. The MHP and MSP leadership installed a stark East-West dichotomy, tracing the antagonism back to the Seljuks’ defense against the Crusades in



Anatolia, which was equated with their resistance to Western and Russian “imperialism.”<sup>53</sup> It was suggested that the Westerners had manufactured countless sinister plots to cripple the Turks since they were victorious in Anatolia. Accordingly, the 900th anniversary of the battle of Malazgirt in 1241 was enthusiastically celebrated among the MHP circles and Alparslan Türkeş was the only party leader who was present at the celebrations in Erzurum.<sup>54</sup> An *ülkü ocakları* statement read:

The forces of Alparslan that had destroyed the Crusaders in 1071 will destroy the traitors under the leadership of another Alparslan [meaning Alparslan Türkeş]<sup>55</sup>

In the words of Necmettin Erbakan this analogy was more striking:

O children of the most honorable nation of history; you won the war of Malazgirt in 1071 elections; and now you are in the conquest of Istanbul, putting the flag on top of the Walls of Istanbul. You were the carrier of the flag of Haq. We won the War of Malazgirt and the War of Kosovo not because of the strength of our army but because of the strength of our belief.<sup>56</sup>

Another central theme articulated by the MHP and the MNP-MSP was “the idea of order.” The MHP leadership asserted that “the idea of order” was central to the mission of the Turkish nation in history and that Turkish citizens should consider themselves as the messengers of the mission once accomplished by their ancestors.<sup>57</sup> According to this view, the subjects of the Ottoman Sultan had faced fair treatment in every aspect of life, and the Ottoman rulers had managed to apply this rule in all parts of the Empire as far as the lands of North Africa and of Europe.<sup>58</sup> As noted, Dündar Taşer complained about the lack of awareness among Turkish people of this historical experience, which would help them fix the “wrong order” in Turkey.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, Erbakan used the word “*Nizam*” (order) as the denominator of his party, *Milli Nizam Partisi* (National Order Party), implying its commitment to restore the “order.”<sup>60</sup> The founding declaration of the MNP stated:

Our nation, as the greatest nation of history, saw itself responsible for bringing order to the world.<sup>61</sup>



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The MHP and MSP leaderships attributed a special importance to the recruitment of young activists and militants from the universities and high-schools. The MHP leadership supervised the foundation of *ülkü ocakları* in the late 1960s and the MSP leadership initiated the foundation of *akıncılar* in the mid 1970s in order to train and recruit young activists. It was telling that in these trainings young militants were encouraged to act as an *akıncı*<sup>62</sup> or *alperen* (Sufi Warrior),<sup>63</sup> which implied the need to revive to the Turkish-Islamic heritage to win the struggle against socialists on the field. Of course, this discourse had a mobilizing dimension. The party leadership called upon young militants and activists to take on leadership roles to reverse political decline and “cultural degeneration,” following in the footsteps of eminent people, politicians or men of religion, from the past such as Sultan Alparslan, Osman Gazi, Sultan Mehmed II, Yunus Emre and Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi.<sup>64</sup>

It seems that this discourse praising the Ottoman past found strong resonance among nationalist youth as well. In particular, from 1977 onwards the *ülkü ocakları* started to assert that they would fight for the restoration of *nizam-ı alem*.<sup>65</sup> This ideal had been rediscovered by conservative nationalist scholars and the MHP ideologues, taken from the depths of Ottoman history to be dusted off and was now gaining increasing prominence. For the *ülkü ocakları* leaders, this “order” should be based on the Islamic faith. In the first issue of *Nizam-ı Alem*,<sup>66</sup> the official paper of the *ülkü ocakları* leadership after 1979, it was underlined:

According to us, the fundamental issue is the issue of belief. The order to be established by these people will be the order of Haqq (Right). All ideas and relations established by those who don't make their decisions according to God's commands are invalid. The *nizam-ı alem* has been shaken, and this journal starts its journey as a weapon of those who want to restore this *nizam-ı alem* and do not give consent to *küfr* (unbelief).<sup>67</sup>

This mission of “global order” was linked to a specific Islamic doctrine: young militants were confident that following their conversion the Turks had rapidly adopted one of Islam's fundamental teachings, the duty of *ilay-i Kelimetullah* (Exalting the Word of God).<sup>68</sup> The *ülkü ocakları* leadership claimed to be reviving this ideal and did not hesitate to display this vision as the ultimate goal of Turkish nationalism. It was insisted that their struggle against the socialists was no more than a single stage on the way to its realization. In *Birliğe Çağrı* (The Call for Unity), a journal published by the *ülkü ocakları* leadership, it was asserted:

The mission of *ülkü* youth is to establish the order of Allah on the world and to ensure that the Turkish nation would be its architect. This mission would last to the apocalypse.<sup>69</sup>

Whether Alparslan Türkeş, Necmettin Erbakan and Dündar Taşer were readers of Ottoman historical literature was less important than how they manipulated the ideas articulated in it for political mobilization. Türkeş, for instance, strongly urged nationalist militants to be present at “Ertuğrul Gazi Festivals,” where the birth of the Ottoman Empire was celebrated.<sup>70</sup> Likewise, Necmettin Erbakan was intent on attending the “Fetih Celebrations” held by his party organization.<sup>71</sup> The re-opening of Hagia Sophia was another popular theme in the MSP discourse; Erbakan frequently stated that they would allow people to worshipping at the Hagia Sophia.<sup>72</sup> It is also worth noting that Alparslan Türkeş consented to young nationalists’ praying at Hagia Sophia without legal permission in 1976.<sup>73</sup>

### From the Ottoman Past towards Turkey’s Future

The 12 September regime showed no tolerance towards the nationalist organizations of the 1970s. Thousands of nationalist politicians, activists, and thinkers were imprisoned. Resuming his political activities in 1985, it seems that Türkeş was less willing to stick with the conservative nationalist discourse. The MHP’s conservative-religious wing struggled to comply with his shifting position towards a more favorable treatment of secular nationalism, which resulted in parting their ways with him.<sup>74</sup> The new MHP<sup>75</sup> leadership’s agenda did not involve any serious challenge to the socio-cultural Westernization, which had occupied the party elites since 1969 Congress.<sup>76</sup> It was, thus, no surprise that the longing for the Ottoman past found less coverage in the post-1980 nationalist political discourse.

The party continued to use the Ottoman flag as the party emblem and most of the party members, especially the pre-1980 generation, were still sensitive to the Ottoman heritage. Nevertheless, Türkeş did no longer give exhilarating speeches calling his young audience the “grandchildren” of Ottoman Sultans.<sup>77</sup> The *ülkü ocakları*’s diminishing popularity throughout the 1980s and 1990s, compared to its significant position at the centre of ideological struggle between 1968 and 1980, was partly a result of this changing attitude. It can be said that the experience of the 12 September Regime and the fall of the Soviets in 1989 led Türkeş to change his political priorities; he and the party leadership were no longer felt the need to employ themes from Ottoman history to motivate young audiences. This approach became more tangible after his death in 1996; the MHP leadership in the 2000s only rarely dealt with the question of Westernization and they no longer presented Ottoman history as an inspiration for the MHP’s political vision.

**This rhetoric served as a significant tool in drawing domestic support behind the construction of its foreign policy on the Middle East and in the Balkans**

It is worth noting that most of the former *ülkü ocakları* leaders and conservative nationalist ideologues, such as Ahmet Arvasi and Galip Erdem, joined their forces in the BBP (Grand Unity Party), founded in 1993, under the leadership of Muhsin Yazıcıoğlu. Reminiscent of the *ülkü ocakları*'s orientation in the late 1970s, the BBP named its youth branch *nizam-ı alem ocakları*. Yazıcıoğlu's speech in 1992 displayed this continuation more clearly:

Our nation, which had been leading the world in science and victorious in the battlefield, faced losses and frustration in the last three centuries. From millions of kilometers we were restrained into the Anatolian valley. Our historical enemies who are against our presence in Anatolia always manipulate the differences amongst our people to destroy us.<sup>78</sup>

The party leadership recurrently emphasized the centrality of Ottoman heritage in its political discourse. In a speech in 2008, Yazıcıoğlu noted:

The BBP presents a civilization project; what we have in our minds is the Ottoman World State, the Seljuk tradition and Turkish-Islamic civilization...The EU needs us, but we do not need them. We are grandchildren of the Ottomans. We should take care of the Ottoman heritage working hard to revive this civilization...The EU does not forget the Ottomans (the inferiority complex they felt towards the Ottomans).<sup>79</sup>

Nevertheless, the BBP could only appeal to a tiny minority among the nationalists and failed to expand its youth organization. This failure, as a result, reduced the limits of its audience in the 2000s.

The *Milli Görüş* movement, by contrast, ascended in popularity in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Erbakan kept challenging the secular establishment; he pledged to restore the “just order” (*adil düzen*) and was no less hostile in criticizing the West than he had been in the 1970s. On the eve of 1994 local elections, for example, there was a firm commitment among the *Milli Görüş* followers, especially young activists clustered around the *MGV* (*Milli Gençlik Vakfı*-National Youth Foundation, the RP's youth organization) that they would re-conquer Istanbul from the hands of “Westernists.” On the day of the Sultanahmet meeting in Istanbul before the elections *Milli Gazete*, the RP's unofficial newspaper, put it as follows: “Erbakan is coming to conquer İstanbul,”<sup>80</sup> The editorial article of the same day wrote these striking comments:

The new Sehremini [meaning the officer equivalent to the city major in the Ottoman Empire] will be announced soon. This ascension which will start from Sultanahmet is the final struggle of Byzantium.<sup>81</sup>

In the same meeting Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the RP's candidate for Istanbul, clearly explained this vision:

You and us, standing in front of sad Hagia Sophia, just opposite of Sultanahmet, will accomplish the second conquest of Istanbul...27 March will be a day for closing an era, and opening a new era.<sup>82</sup>

Necmettin Erbakan's speech reflected the same conviction:

Conquering Istanbul a second time, we are giving a start for the holy march... You are the grandchildren of Sultan Fatih... You will shout the gloriousness of Sultanahmet to the whole world.<sup>83</sup>

Following the election of Tayyip Erdoğan as the mayor, similar comments were expressed by the party leadership. On the anniversary of Istanbul's conquest, Erdoğan said: "This city of goodness (*belde-i Tayyibe*) [a former name of Istanbul in the Ottoman times] will regain its spirit" and Erbakan celebrated his party's achievement: "After 541 years İstanbul was spiritually re-conquered."<sup>84</sup>

The 28 February military intervention did not only result in the closure of the RP, but also a dramatic division within the *Milli Görüş* movement. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and some other leading RP members such as Abdullah Gül and Bülent Arınç led the foundation of the AK Party (Justice and Development Party) in 2001. The party leadership adopted a revisionist political orientation over some of the central issues such as the republican Westernization and secular statecraft and in the early years they avoided invoking the Ottoman past as a means to mobilize the masses.<sup>85</sup> This silence, however, did not last long. The AK Party won the 2002

**During the AK Party era, Ottoman history served as a model for the country's new geo-political vision rather than as a source of political mobilization**

elections with a great majority in the parliament and the party elite started to show that they would make use of the Ottoman heritage in carving out a new vision for the country's foreign policy.<sup>86</sup> This positioning was easily embraced by those AK Party members from the *Milli Görüş* background and orchestrated by Ahmed Davutoğlu, the chief advisor to the foreign minister and then foreign minister of Turkey since 2009. Accordingly, he advocated for a radical transformation in Turkish foreign policy, capitalizing on the historical-cultural heritage of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>87</sup>

It can be noted that the AK Party elite became more comfortable in using pro-Ottomanist language, especially after the 2007 elections. This rhetoric served as a significant tool in drawing domestic support behind the construction of its foreign policy on the Middle East and in the Balkans. Following the escalation of tension with Israel over the Marmara Flotilla and the Siege of Gaza, Prime Minister R.Tayyip Erdoğan stated in 2011:

We speak as the grandchildren of the Ottomans, who host you when you were exiled from Spain.<sup>88</sup>

In a conference held by the *Türk ocakları* in 2011, Ahmet Davutoglu reiterated that Turkey would keep a close eye on the lands previously ruled by the Ottomans:

It is not a coincidence, on the centennial anniversary of the Tripolitanian War, Turkey is again at the centre of the Libya issue, helping its Libyan brothers. We see Libya's problems as our problems... We carry the legacy of a wide geography; at every corner our martyrs are buried. Next year will be the centennial anniversary of the Balkan Wars. 2014 is the centennial anniversary of the WW I, in other words the emergence of these borders between Turkey and Syria, Iraq and the Caucasians which has no geographical, cultural, and demographical foundation.

Just as a state [meaning the Ottoman Empire], the political centre of an ancient civilization was torn apart in twelve years from the Tripolitanian War in 1911 to 1923, and foundational elements of this state were psychologically and historically divided apart to be replaced by a new Republic founded in 1923 as a nation state and the leftovers of this heritage took on the mission of "order" conveying the World certain values, now we need to unify the elements of this broken and fragmented nation again. The question is how do we unify this geography? How do we build a new generation, who can shape the flow of history marching towards the future with a great hope from these divided histories? Therefore, "Towards the Great Turkey" is the right title [meaning the title of conference]."<sup>89</sup>

Erdogan's recent comment in 2012 was a confirmation of this geo-political vision:

Presiding over the heritage of our ancestors, the Ottoman State that ruled the World for 600 years, we would revive the Ottoman consciousness again.<sup>90</sup>

The political strategy of the AK Party, unlike the MHP and the MSP-RP, has not drawn on the mobilizing power of ideologically motivated circles and young activists. It has been the first time in Turkish politics that a party representing the "Turkish masses" reached the helm of government and promoted such a pro-Ottoman discourse. The AK Party has not pledged to emulate the Ottoman structure in the realm of law and statecraft, yet this recognition of its Ottoman heritage at the governmental level brought about a mass popularization of Ottoman history and cultural symbols in Turkey. In addition, through cultural exchanges, the flow of students and trade numbers between Turkey and those countries within the former Ottoman hinterland increased dramatically.

All in all, it can be stated that the political discourse adapted by the MHP and MSP leadership during the late 1960s and 1970s was largely shaped by frequent



invocations of the historical analogies from the Ottoman, and partly from the Seljuk, past. Considering the fact that both parties had a strong appeal among the young population and students of the time, we can argue that this political language undermined the negative outlook among the educated echelons of society towards the Ottomans and offered a challenging vision to the Republican socio-political engineering. Whereas the MHP shifted its attitude after the 1980 towards the use of history in politics, the RP displayed continuity in its pre-1980 strategy and vision, combining pro-Ottoman discourse with its criticism towards Westernization and secular statecraft. During the AK Party era, Ottoman history served as a model for the country's new geo-political vision rather than as a source of political mobilization. This new orientation helped Turkey take advantage of its human and financial sources in the region more effectively. ■

## Endnotes

1. Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 463-503; Ahmet Çigdem, "Batılılaşma, Modernite ve Modernizasyon" in *Modern Türkiye'de Siyasi Düşünce (MTSD)* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2002), Vol. III, pp. 72-79, 82-84.
2. Büşra Ersanlı, *İktidar ve Tarih: Türkiye'de Resmi Tarih Tezinin Oluşumu: 1929-1937* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2009), pp. 156-157.
3. Ersanlı, *İktidar ve Tarih*, pp. 119-124.
4. Soner Çağaptay, *Islam, Secularism and Nationalism in Modern Turkey: Who is a Turk?* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 52-54; Büşra Ersanlı, *İktidar ve Tarih*, pp. 103, 122-127.
5. Ersanlı, *İktidar ve Tarih*, pp. 119-124; Hugh Poulton, *Top hat, Grey Wolf, and Crescent: Turkish Nationalism and the Turkish Republic* (London: Hurst, 1997), pp. 107-108. On the other hand, some participants including Fuad Koprulu, a professor of history at Istanbul University, suggested a more systematic analysis of the Ottoman History.
6. Esat Bozkurt, *Atatürk İhtilali* (İstanbul: Altın Kitaplar, 1967); Afet İnan, *Tarih Uzerine İnceleme ve Makaleler* (Ankara: Akin Matbaası, 1960), pp. 118-128.
7. Etienne Copeaux, *Tarih Ders Kitaplarında Türk Tarih Tezinden Türk İslam Sentezine* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2006), pp. 37-45.
8. Ersanlı, *İktidar ve Tarih*, pp. 106-113, 128; "Medeni Bilgiler ve Mustafa Kemal Atatürk'ün El Yazıları" (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1969), pp. 32-36. To reinforce this perspective with further evidence, Afet İnan, the "court historian" patronized by the ruling elite, was encouraged by Mustafa Kemal to advance her research on the history of the Turks before Islam. Arı İnan, *Prof. Afet İnan* (İstanbul: Remzi, 2005), pp. 97-99.
9. İlker Aytürk, "The Racist Critics of Atatürk and Kemalism from the 1930s to the 1960s", *Journal of Contemporary History*, 46:308 (2011), pp. 314-316; also see Altan Deliorman, *Tanıdığım Atsız* (İstanbul: Orkun, 2000).
10. Aytürk, "The Racist Critics of Atatürk", pp. 316, 327-328, 331-33; *Orhun* was closed down in 1934; Jacob Landau, *Pan-Turkism in Turkey: A Study in Irredentism* (London: Hurst 1981), p. 86.
11. Nihal Atsız, *Tanrıdağı* 10-11 (July 1942); he lambasted a poem which described Abdulhamit II, who was according to Atsız a genius, as a vampire. Nihal Atsız, *Türk Tarihinde Meseleler* (İstanbul 1997), pp. 81, 77. Also for his praise of Abdulhamid see Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, "Abdulhamid Han - Gök Sultan", *Ocak Dergisi*, 11, Mayıs 1956.
12. Nurettin Topçu, *Milliyetçiliğimizin Esasları* (İstanbul: Dergah, 1978), pp. 6-9.

13. See *Büyük Doğu* 9 November 1945, 16 November 1945, 23 November 1945. Also see Necip Fazık Kısakürek, *Ulu Hakan Abdulhamid Han* (İstanbul: Ötüken, 1975).
14. On the first page of his journal he sometimes used the slogan: “Allah-Millet-Vatan Yolunda”.
15. See *TÜİK: İstatistik Göstergeler: 1923-2010* (Ankara, Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu, 2010).
16. Brockett also contends that the Turkish-Islamic synthesis was a reflection of a reality that became apparent between 1945 and 1954; Gavin D Brockett, *How Happy to Call Oneself a Turk: Provincial Newspapers and the Negotiation of a Muslim National Identity* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2011), p. 204, 222-223.
17. Landau, *Pan-Turkism in Turkey*, p. 130. Its first congress was held in the same year and the confederation changed its name to the Society of Turkish Nationalists (*TMD-Türk Milliyetçileri Derneği*). *Türk Milliyetçiler Derneği Tüzüğü* (Ankara: Sebat, 1951); In addition to all these, Remzi Arık, who had trained Nurettin Topçu when they had studied in Paris and advocated that the essence of Turkish nationalism lay in religion, art and tradition, which found their spirits in Anatolia, had founded the Turkish Peasant Party in 1951. Remzi Arık, *İdeal ve İdeoloji* (İstanbul: Hareket Yayınları, 1967), p. 100-115.
18. In the same congress the party adopted three crescents, which had been used in the Ottoman flag, as the party emblem.
19. Yüksel Taşkın, *Milliyetçi Muhafazakar Entelijansiya: Anti Komünizmden Küreselleşme Karşıtlığına* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2007), p. 245.
20. Mehmed Niyazi, *Dahiler ve Deliler* (İstanbul: Ötüken, 2001), pp. 12-32; Osman Çakır, *Nevzat Kösoğlu ile Hatıralar Yahut Bir Vatan Kurtarma Hikayesi* (İstanbul: Ötüken, 2008), pp. 97-101.
21. Kösoğlu, *Hatıralar*, pp. 97-101; Ahmet İyioğlu, Interview by the author.
22. The question of westernization was dealt with in a scholarly fashion in the works of Prof. Mümtaz Turhan and Prof. Ziyaeddin Fındıkoğlu. Erol Güngör, who had been a student of Mümtaz Turhan, continued this thread. The politicization of this debate was explicitly tangible after 1969.
23. Taşkın, *Milliyetçi Muhafazakar Entelijansiya*, pp. 128-134.
24. Taşkın, *Milliyetçi Muhafazakar Entelijansiya*, pp. 133-143; Emin Alper-Özgür Sevgi Göral, “Aydınlar Ocağı” in *MTSD*, Vol. V, pp. 583-584. *Aydınlar Klübü* was renamed *Aydınlar Ocağı* (Intellectuals’ Hearth) in 1970 and sought to promote a “Turkish-Islamic synthesis” against the socialist trends in the country.
25. Turhan Feyizoğlu, *Fırtınalı Yıllarda Ülkücü Hareket* (İstanbul: Ozan, 2000), pp. 760-785; Mustafa Çalık, *MHP Hareketinin Kaynakları ve Gelişimi* (Ankara: Cedit Yayınları, 1996), pp. 117-127. For the detailed list see *Milli Hareket* 31-32 (February-March 1969).
26. Osman Turan and Yüksel Serdengeçti joined the MHP in the late 1960s. Erol Güngör started to work in close collaboration with the party leadership from the early 1970s). Necip Fazıl, who had been invited to give speeches in the *ülkü ocakları*, joined the party in 1977.
27. Sadi Somuncuoğlu, Interview by the author; Kösoğlu, *Hatıralar*, pp. 160-181, 221.
28. Sadi Somuncuoğlu, Interview by the author; Kösoğlu, *Hatıralar*; 160-181.
29. See Nevzat Kösoğlu, *Dündar Taşer* (Ankara: Alternatif, 2003); Ziya Nur Aksun, *Dündar Taşer’in Büyük Türkiye’si*, (İstanbul: Kutluğ, 1974).
30. Dündar Taşer, “Biz Kimiz?”, *Devlet*, 7 April 1969.
31. Güngör, “Dündar Taşer’in Büyük Türkiye’si”; *Töre*, 18 December 1972.
32. Güngör, “Dündar Taşer’in Büyük Türkiye’si”.
33. Nevzat Kösoğlu, *Kitap Şuuru* (İstanbul: Ötüken, 1994), pp. 87-89; for a discussion of the early Kemalist historiography on the Ottoman period see Ersanlı, *İktidar ve Tarih*, pp. 106-113, 12; Taşer, “Biz Kimiz?”
34. Osman Turan, *Türk Cihan Hakimiyeti Mefkuresi (Türk Cihan Hakimiyeti Mefkuresi Tarihi)*, p. 300.
35. This term is obviously derived from “fena-fi’llah”, a concept in sufism and means to express annihilation in God, which sufi mystic should strive to achieve. Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd ed., s.v., “Annihilation and Abiding in God”.

36. Aksun, *Dündar Taşer'in Büyük Türkiye'si*, p. 23.
37. Certain examples from the lives of non-Muslim military commanders and high ranking state servants had a decent place in this historiography. Dündar Taşer gives the examples of Müsürüs Pasha, Ottoman Ambassador to London, and Alfred Rüstem Beg, the representative of the Ottoman foreign office in the USA. Aksun, *Dündar Taşer'in Büyük Türkiye'si*, pp. 119-121, 147.
38. Aksun, *Dündar Taşer'in Büyük Türkiye'si*, pp. 46-51.
39. *Devlet*, 1 September 1969.
40. Aksun, *Dündar Taşer'in Büyük Türkiye'si*, pp. 46-51; Taşer, "Biz Kimiz?"
41. *Milli Nizam Partisi Kuruluş Bildirgesi*.
42. Necmettin Erbakan, *Milliyet*, 25 September 1969.
43. Necmettin Erbakan, Interview, *Milliyet*, 25 September 1969. In the MNP regulation book it was forbidden for a Mason to register in the party. *MNP Parti Tüzüğü* (Ankara: Haktanır, 1970).
44. Necmettin Erbakan, "Prof. Dr. Necmettin Erbakan Milli Görüş'ün Tanımı", [www.youtube.com/watch?v=KSOEDTVOSQM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KSOEDTVOSQM) (accessed on 5 July 2013).
45. Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, *Başmakalelerim* (İstanbul: Büyükdoğu, 1999), pp. 117-118.
46. See Alparslan Türkeş's 1969 congress speech in *Milli Hareket* 32 (March 1969); in a conference held at ODTÜ in 1970 Türkeş argued that the rulers of Turkey and Turkish intellectuals had been following the wrong mentality for a hundred and fifty years. See Metin Turhan, *Ülkü Ocakları*, pp. 19-22; Dündar Taşer, "Batılılaşmak", *Devlet*, 19 October 1970.
47. Osman Yüksel Serdengeçti, "Radyodaki Seçim Konuşmalarım: 1969 Seçimleri" in Osman Yüksel Serdengeçti, *Bir Nesli Nasıl Mahvettikler* (İstanbul: TEV, 2010).
48. Serdengeçti, "Seçim Konuşmaları".
49. Serdengeçti "Seçim Konuşmaları".
50. Necmettin Erbakan, *1977 Seçim Konuşmaları*.
51. *Milli Nizam Partisi Kuruluş Bildirgesi*, 1969.
52. Many of the historical studies by conservative nationalist academics were on Seljuk history See İbrahim Kafesoğlu, *Selçuklu Tarihi ve Büyük Selçuklu İmparatoru Melikşah* (İstanbul: Meb, 1973), Osman Turan, *Selçuklular Zamanında Türkiye* and *Selçuklular ve İslamiyet* (İstanbul: Turan, 1971).
53. In one of his election speeches O. Yüksel Serdengeçti said: "Since 1071 we have sacrificed countless generations for the sake of these lands; now on these lands under which millions of unidentified martyrs are buried there are some people who sell their nation to foreigners." Serdengeçti, *Seçim Konuşmaları*.
54. *Devlet*, 6 September 1971.
55. Turhan, *Ülkü Ocakları*, p. 98.
56. Necmettin Erbakan, *1977 Seçim Konuşmaları*.
57. Aksun, *Dündar Taşer'in Büyük Türkiye'si*, p. 41.
58. Aksun, *Dündar Taşer'in Büyük Türkiye'si*, pp. 105-106.
59. Taşer, "Biz Kimiz?"
60. In the 1990s Erbakan introduced the slogan of *adil düzen* (Just Order) in a bid to replace the "corrupt order".
61. *Milli Nizam Partisi Kuruluş Bildirgesi*.
62. The *akıncı* were irregular cavalry during the first centuries of the Ottoman Empire, based on and primarily for service in Europe. Their name derives from the verbal noun *akın* (from *ak-mak*, "to flow, be

poured out”), which means a “raid, incursion into enemy territory”. Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd ed., s.v, “Akıncı”.

63. See Namık Kemal Zeybek, *Ülkü Yolu* (Ankara: 1979).

64. Zeybek, *Ülkü Yolu*, pp. 14-24; Dündar Taşer, “Milliyetçi Hareket ve Gençlik”, *Devlet*, 8 September 1969, ‘Gençlik’, *Devlet*, 28 December 1970; Necmettin Erbakan, “Prof Dr Necmettin Erbakan, İzmit Konuşması, MSP dönemi”, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbe6hhotis](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbe6hhotis), (accessed on 5 July 2013).

65. Nationalist historian Osman Turan skillfully articulated the concept of *nizam-ı alem*, ascribing to it the meaning that the Turks had a special mission to bring order to the world as a whole. See Turan, pp. 199-202. Beşir Ayvazoğlu notes that the usage of this term in Ottoman sources bears a different meaning, however; for example, in Sultan Mehmed II's *kanunname nizam-ı alem* implies socio-political order in the Ottoman Empire. Beşir Ayvazoğlu, *Tanrı Dağından Hıra Dağına* (İstanbul: Kapı, 2010), pp. 156-57.

66. *Nizam-ı Alem* was suspended by Türkeş's order in late 1979 on the grounds that it propagated some ideas concerning religion and nation incompatible with the MHP's nationalism. Burhan Kavuncu and Sadi Somuncuoğlu, Interviews by the author.

67. *Nizam-ı Alem*, 5 October 1979.

68. Zeybek, *Ülkü Yolu*, pp. 12-14.

69. *Birliğe Çağrı*, 29 March 1980.

70. *Devlet*, 6 September 1971.

71. *Milliyet*, 30 May 1976, 30 May 1976, 29 May 1978.

72. *Milliyet*, 29 May 1977.

73. Mustafa Verkaya, Interview by the author.

74. Tanıl Bora and Kemal Can, *Devlet Ocak Dergah*, pp. 423-434 and *Devlet ve Kuzgun*, pp. 32-61.

75. Türkeş had initiated the foundation of the MÇP in 1985, which was to change its name to the MHP in 1992 congress, where most of the MHP board members of the 1970s and former *ülkü ocakları* leaders were opposed to his candidacy.

76. Dündar Taşer, “Batılılaşmak”, *Devlet*, 19 October 1970.

77. See Türkeş's congress speech in 1977, *Devlet* 9 May 1977.

78. *21.Yüzyılda bir Alperen*: Muhsin Yazıcıoğlu (Ankara: Öncü, 2009), p. 102.

79. Interview with Muhsin Yazıcıoğlu, 2008; [http://cenksarigol.blogspot.com/2008\\_11\\_01\\_archive.html](http://cenksarigol.blogspot.com/2008_11_01_archive.html)

80. *Milli Gazete*, 25 March-26 March 1994.

81. *Milli Gazete*, 25 March 1994.

82. *Milli Gazete*, 26 March 1994.

83. *Milli Gazete*, 26 March 1994.

84. *Milli Gazete*, 29 May-30 May 1994.

85. See Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's comments on secularism and the EU union, *Milliyet*, 22.08.2001.

86. See Abdullah Gül's visit to Algeria, *Hurriyet*, 12.04.2005.

87. Ahmed Davudoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik*, (İstanbul: Küre, 2001), pp. 52-83.

88. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0jdulYcZ1s>

89. [http://www.turkocagi.org.tr/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=2137&catid=58:basnda-tuerk-ocaklar&Itemid=253](http://www.turkocagi.org.tr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2137&catid=58:basnda-tuerk-ocaklar&Itemid=253)

90. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eNtl5W4A8tY>