THROUGH THE TURKISH LOOKING-Glass:
TURKEY’S DIVERGENT NARRATIVES, NATIONAL IDENTITY & FOREIGN POLICY

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts
in Security Studies

By

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Washington, DC
April 16, 2010
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ABSTRACT:

What constitutes Turkish identity continues to be vehemently debated in contemporary Turkey. Different narratives have emerged to suggest alternative approaches to the Turkish state’s official historical and political narrative. These new narratives challenge some of the core elements of Turkish nationalism, society and, more specifically, foreign policy. As the Turks entertain these different narratives, Turkish foreign policy changes could lead to the development of drastic security problems in the Middle East, Balkans and the Caucasus. Borrowing from different academic and policy expert analyses, this thesis discusses how these narratives were formed and what to expect if either one is adopted as the approach to Turkish foreign policy. The findings of this thesis reaffirmed the importance of Turkish accession to the European Union and how important it is for the Turks to synthesize these divergent narratives to avoid further societal and regional polarization.
I would like to wholeheartedly thank my thesis advisor Dr. Christine Fair for her
dedicated supervision and guidance. Without her expertise and insight, this thesis
would not have been what it is.

I would also like to thank my mother, Muhteber Erkli and sister, Deniz Erkli, for the
motivation they provided me when I needed it the most. I will always be grateful to
have known them as my family members.

For the dedicated patience she showed during my writing process, I would like to thank
Ms. Vera Bossel. Without the opportunity of discussing some of the ideas within this
thesis with her, I would never have reached the conclusions I was able to.

Last, but not least, I would like to thank Georgetown University for having provided me
the excellent opportunity and means to conduct research and publish this thesis. I shall
very much miss the time I spent here and will always look back on it with fond
memories.
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I. Introduction

The Republic of Turkey is at a critical juncture in its history. Even though Turkey is located between different political, social and economic institutions, it is not fully integrated into either of these surrounding entities. In accordance with the wishes of Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic, Turks have long sought to modernize their country and once again join the European “family” by entering the European Union (EU). This accession process, however, has been marred by various political developments and has many Turks frustrated to the point in which many of them question the validity, origins and future path set by the official state’s policy narrative. New challenging narratives, as subjective stories that recollect the past to give national identity meaning and direction, have emerged in Turkey that suggest alternative solutions and perspectives. To most of the Turks these new narratives, with some already having been entertained at the state level, actively undermine the cohesion and unity of the Turkish state and Turkish identity.

The security ramifications of Turkey entertaining and following through with some of the alternative national narratives are potentially disastrous not only for Turkey, but also for regional stability and peace. Which narrative is chosen matters because it directly contributes to the national identity of Turkey and, thus, to its foreign policy decision making process. Therefore, it is absolutely imperative that Turkey is
able to synthesize the divergent narratives and prevent further radicalization of ethnic,
religious and political issues within itself. Failing to pacify this aggravated dichotomous
atmosphere in Turkey could throw Turkey and the entire region into chaos. Even if
pundits might argue against this regional chaos supposition, they cannot contest the fact
that several security challenges in the region are already in existence and demand
coherent policies in order to be tackled. The only way for achieving effective policies in
the region is by having a strong and unified Turkey that is willing to take its place
among its Western allies once again.
II. Why Turkey?

Turkey has been chosen specifically because of its strategic and normative significance. Turkey’s geographic location, deemed the “strategic crossroads” between Asia and Europe, Islam and Christianity, makes it a key actor in many of the region’s political, economic and social issues. This fact matters not only for the Turks, but for the Europeans, Russians and even for the distant Americans. Be it the only warm sea trade route access for the Russians, the Russia by-pass rout of oil and gas for the Europeans, or the military bases located in Anatolia for the Americans, Turkey’s location will continue to be strategically important for many more years to come.¹

Furthermore, Turkey’s recent economic growth, coupled with its expanding population, makes it quite unique and powerful in the Balkans and Middle East regions. In 2008, the Turkish Republic was estimated to have around 72 million inhabitants.² Apart from Iran and Egypt, this is the largest population in the Levant and Balkans. Several international research firms and groups expect Turkey’s population to increase to 97 million by the year 2050.³ With a young and dynamic population, this country has been doing remarkably well with regard to its economy. The average annual gross domestic product (GDP) growth for the last ten years, between 2001 and 2010, has been

around 7 percent. Currently, Turkey is the world’s 17th largest economy and the wealthiest Muslim nation in the world. Economy experts even believe that Turkey will one day be amongst the ten richest countries in the world and will even surpass major EU member states like Italy, granted that it sustains its current GDP growth.\(^4\)

Apart from the population and economy, Turkey also has one of the world’s largest standing armies. Second in size after the United States in NATO, the Turkish armed forces has been assessed as “very experienced and well trained”.\(^5\) Armed with some of the most sophisticated weaponry any armed forces would desire, the Turkish armed forces is capable of projecting force far beyond its borders. For example, Turkish indigenous built frigates, F-16s and C-130 transport planes allow Turkey the ability to mount rapid response operations as far as Somalia. Moreover, Turkish servicemen operating with international organizations in places like Afghanistan, the Balkans, and Somalia have all provided the West the ability to tap into one of the best armed forces in the world to tackle some difficult security issues. Several EU-centric analysts agree that the inclusion of this modern armed force within the EU defense structure would truly make the EU a global power.\(^6\)

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\(^6\) Gözen, R. (2003). *Turkey’s Delicate Position between NATO and the ESDP.* Department of International Relations Atılım University. p. 72
With all this being said, Turkey is more than just the sum of its parts. Turkey is predominantly Muslim, yet a secular and liberal democracy. Though its democracy is far from perfect, Turkey is, arguably, one of the only Muslim nations in the world that has successfully modernized to the point in which its people live and work relatively well off and in peace. This fact means a lot for Muslims worldwide. Turkey’s successful experiment with democracy illustrates to the world that being Muslim does not necessarily mean that one cannot have democracy in their respective country. Islam and democracy could co-exist and Turkey is indeed a success story that can prove this peaceful coexistence. Samuel Huntington’s clash of civilizations theory could be avoided in that a Muslim nation like Turkey could prove that the “black and white” lines that separate Islam from the “rest” is not so clear after all. The contemporary relevance of this fact is especially salient for the post-9/11 world.7

Not everything pertaining to the case of Turkey, however, is so positive or heartening. For example, Turkey, despite its reforms and over 40 years of waiting, still has not joined the EU. Many politicians and Turks now believe that this is not because of weak domestic reforms, but rather because of the fact that Turks are a Muslim nation seeking to join a predominantly Christian dominated organization.8 Though a brief glance at the current state of affairs could perhaps suggest that this assumption is true, it

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8 Keskin, E. (n.d.) Islam: A Bridge or Breach Between Turkey and the EU. Middle East Technical University. p.3
does not necessarily have to be made true by allowing it to be a “self-fulfilling” prophecy. Turkey joining the EU would demonstrate to the world that a Muslim nation could belong to an organization that proclaims democracy and human rights as its uniting norms rather than religious affiliation. If Turkey is allowed to join the EU, the schism between the two political bodies seen today would be not about religion, but about political reforms or economic issues.\(^9\)

The case study of Turkey allows the opportunity for this thesis to apply the topic concerned of narratives and identity to a country that matters strategically, economically and symbolically. Furthermore, the fact that Turkish foreign policy is changing means that this case is dynamic, contemporary and, potentially, very important for regional and international peace. This thesis argues that by approaching Turkey via this interdisciplinary method, one can gain new insights into how foreign policy is formed not only in Turkey, but around the world. Narratives, identity issues and other social phenomena should not be ignored by both academics and policy makers in their quest to understand why nations act the way they do.

**Structure of the Thesis**

The purpose of this thesis is to illustrate and argue just how important national narratives are within the context of identity formation and security issues. In order to

\(^9\) Ibid.
demonstrate how national narratives are important, this thesis will first devote its analysis to discussing how exactly narratives formulate meanings for national identities and how they are deliberately formed, retained or edited by political bodies. Having done so, this thesis will continue with the description of the official modern narrative of the Turkish Republic. In this section, the important reforms of Atatürk and the events after his death to the present day will be revisited. In the following section some of the challenging narratives to the official Turkish state will be discussed. It is in this section that the arguments of the neo-Ottomanists and ethnic parties in Turkey will be explored.

This paper will also discuss, with the contributions of several prominent policy analysts, the possible “end-states” that Turkey and its foreign policy might arrive at if it chooses to follow through with a specific narrative. The security analysis and debates will be within these sections. This thesis will conclude by returning to its original hypothesis of how important it is for Turkey to synthesize its narratives, if even possible.

Theories & Caveats

Literature

For the sections of this thesis pertaining to the discussion of national narrative and identity formation the works of Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, and Anthony Smith will be used predominantly, among others, in order to provide the thematic arguments
needed. These authors belong to a cadre of academics who have debated, for the better half of this last century, on how and why nations formulate collective identities. Though some of their views differ, this thesis can make use of the diversity of arguments they present. It is important to note here that this thesis does not intend to merely summarize these differing accounts, but instead use the varied views within the context of Turkey.

With regard to literature on Turkey, this thesis will mostly draw upon from the works of Bernard Lewis, Andrew Mango, and Stephen Kinzer. These authors, having made extensive use of primary sources in Turkey, will provide this thesis the possibility to use these secondary sources not only as means to “access” those primary sources, but also to entertain any specific comments they might have pertaining to the subject at hand. Also, the fact that these authors have written from different perspectives on different aspects of Turkey’s national identity makes them all unique with regard to their contributions.

The last body of work will be provided by policy experts such as Zeyno Baran, Soner Cagaptay and Omer Taspinar. These famed policy analysts are from different schools of thought with regard to Turkey’s political and social issues. Their different interpretations as to which path Turkey should pursue and how the “West” should accommodate—or not—Turkey’s strategic concerns will provide this thesis the
arguments that illustrate just how vital understanding Turkey’s national problems is for not only the Turks, but for its allies and even adversaries.

Concepts & Definitions

This thesis relies on several assumptions and working definitions that provide this thesis the conceptual frameworks needed to make its case. In this brief section, this thesis will like to discuss some of the definitions and assumptions relied upon. It is important to note here that by no means does the use of these concepts and definitions negate the validity of the conclusions attained by the end of this thesis. The scope of this thesis might be affected or its findings might mean that the results cannot be applied across the board to other cases, but for the sake of the arguments, these concepts and definitions offer sound working premises that are needed to undertake the topic analysis.

This thesis will be narrowing its scope to only the examination of national identity and narrative’s influence on foreign policy. The formulation of foreign policy is a complex process that is influenced by many factors. For example, the economic and military capabilities of a state could be the only factors a certain policy official considers during his decision making process. In this essay, however, the only variable that will be studied will be national identity and its role on the foreign policy decision making in Turkey. Hence, this thesis is assuming that the variables that contribute to
foreign policy formulation are independent variables from the other variables that could influence decision making.

Additionally this thesis would like to clarify the relationship it is assuming between national identity and foreign policy formulation. This thesis assumes that national identity is the most important factor that determines a state’s foreign policy output. National identity, the collective identity of a nation of people imagined, constructed or real, provides a macro-level group a certain sense of destiny and common struggle. As rational acting decision makers, foreign policy experts’ decisions reflect what they believe or interpret to be the desire of the collective will. Collective will, at least in this thesis, is reflected in the political parties chosen by the people. Yet this thesis would like to acknowledge that national identity in reality is probably influenced by foreign policy choices and other external developments as well. Nevertheless, this thesis will treat Turkey’s national identity as the key causal determinant to Turkey’s foreign policy.
Anachronistic errors will be avoided as much as possible, yet it is inevitable that certain terms and meanings will be applied as if they were in a temporal vacuum. For instance neo-Ottomanism, a recently coined term, commits gross fallacies with regard to its interpretation of the defunct Ottoman Empire. Since this thesis will discuss and accept neo-Ottomanism for its face value, it too will be accepting these fallacies and will be working with them. Though this author has been pro-active in ascertaining the validity of what some of the referenced authors have argued within their respective works, it will have to go with some of the inaccuracies or biases of their works. By diversifying the selection from different approaches, this thesis hopes to minimize selection bias.
III. National Identities & Narratives

Theory of the Nation, Nation-State and Nationalism

Academic controversy pertaining to what exactly constitutes the modern nation-state and its components continues to this day. Scholars from highly respected institutes have dissected the nation-state under the proverbial microscope and have been divided into two main camps: one camp saying that the nation-state and nationalism is basically fabricated and artificial while the other camp argues that the nation-state might be a politicized concept, but it rests on empirical facts that prove it to be a genuine phenomenon. This thesis will now explore some of those arguments in order to theoretically understand what a modern nation-state entails. Afterwards, this thesis will examine how national identities and narratives are created and explore the relationship between the two.

The best point of departure to make sense of the meaning behind the nation-state and its components would be with what Anderson argued in his famed book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Anderson posits that the modern nation, a collective group of people, give meaning to their collective existence by fabricating (or imagining as he put it) a collective consciousness. Anderson further argues that this is more than just group dynamics in that this community is not necessarily reliant on pure empirical observation. According to Anderson, people that do not even know each other still can share an idea of
belongingness to a common national identity. It is in that sense that he adds the “imagined” aspect to his analysis.\textsuperscript{10} Anderson’s analysis allows this thesis a unique perspective that will be further discussed in the application of the case study of Turkey later on.

Adding to Anderson’s discussion are the two intellectuals Smith and Gellner. These two scholars offer further insight to this discussion and debate the authenticity of the nation-state and nationalism. Smith argues that the nation-state and nationalism are fabricated political phenomena which have ideological reasons of existence. In order words, Smith believes that nationalism is an ideological instrument designed to propagate specific narratives to encourage group formation and foster group cohesion. However, it is important to note here that Smith also argues that common traits between people must exist in order to provide the necessary empirical foundations needed for the concepts of the state and the nation to exist. It is with this in mind that Smith emphasizes the importance of pre-modern traits, for example ethnicity and language, for the modern nation-state, even if the modern nation-state and nationalism phenomena have their own set of characteristics.\textsuperscript{11}


Gellner does not necessarily disagree with Smith, but does try to remind him and others that the “ideological” component of the nation and nation-state does perhaps weigh in as the most important factor of all. Gellner, much like Anderson, is convinced that the concept of nationalism is fabricated and done with the intentional thought of uniting peoples into groups. Gellner, however, believes that nationalism was created by nations and states in order to provide its members the zeal and identification needed to achieve a functioning society.\footnote{Gellner, E. (1983). \textit{Nations and Nationalism}. Ithaca, New York : Cornell University Press. p. 1-5, 123-129, 134-137} While sociologists might call this approach a rather “functionalist” one, Gellner is more interested in describing rather than proscribing an approach to nationalism.

The last political philosopher this thesis will like to include is Eric Hobsbawm. Hobsbawm belongs to the same school of thought that Gellner and Anderson belong to. His contribution, however, stresses the pragmatic nature of this entire subject. Hobsbawm believes that though nations and nationalism might be “artificial”, a person that wishes to belong to a particular nation only has to believe they are a part of it in order to truly be treated as such.\footnote{Hobsbawm, E. J. (1992). \textit{Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, myth, reality} (2\textsuperscript{nd} Ed.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. p. 8}

Another significant contribution Hobsbawm makes comes from his approach towards nations and how they are quite malleable and organic entities. Hobsbawm
believes that nations can be led to appear or act in certain forms and directions through the suggestions offered by different narratives, artifacts and myths. Hobsbawm calls this “social engineering” and discusses it in length in his book *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth and Reality*. Statesmen, historians and other “social engineers” could manipulate narratives, myths and artifacts to change the way a nation behaves, votes, or even just merely exists on a day to day basis. For example, newly elected statesmen could alter the textbooks of school children to indoctrinate them with new values. Museums could be changed or completely revised to change the nation’s collective memory. Memorials, done to commemorate either military or civilian national accomplishments, could be torn and replaced with new ones to influence how a nation views its past and, consequently, its future.

**Nationalizing Identity**
The process of identity formation is highly complex and multi-layered. Differing schools have long sought to thoroughly explain how identities are formed, both at the individual and national levels. Though their approaches might be different, some similarities can be identified across these diverse disciplines. One such interdisciplinary work that can provide a rather holistic approach to this subject is the work done by Daniel Bar-Tal and Ohad David in their article entitled, “A Socio-psychological Conception of Collective Identity: The Case of National-Identity as an Example.”

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14 Ibid, p. 10, 112
Bar-Tal and David thoroughly define and discuss what they mean by collective identity. According to them, collective identity is, “the ability of individuals to identify by name the collective (in our case, a nation) in which they consider themselves to be members and to express some measure of emotional attachment indicating the extent of their desire to belong to this collective and the degree of importance attributed to it.”

Moreover, these authors also identify macro and micro level influences that facilitate the formation of collective identity for a society. For example, an important macro level contributor is the awareness of sharing a similar identity. An important micro level factor is, among others, the importance of belonging for an individual member and the desire for national attachment they embody.

Perhaps more important than what these authors have defined and identified is the meta-level research they have conducted and the results they have gathered from the different authors and schools they drew upon. Examining over 100 different scholarly works, Bar-Tal and David were able to find keywords that best describe what national identity entails and means. The list below contains the characteristics of national identity they were able to deduce: a common fate in which the nation believes that it is its destiny; the perception of positive uniqueness and differentiation from other groups in which the nation can celebrate its own sense of uniqueness; coordinated activities in

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16Ibid. 359
which the nation could use to function as a society; sharing beliefs, attitudes, values and norms to provide the nation a sense of cohesion; concern about collective welfare, mobilization and readiness for sacrifice so that the nation can and will fight to survive; the perception of continuity so that the nation can know of its existence’s historical relevancy.  

Moreover, Bar-Tal and David recognized the following as elements that give national identity meaning: territory to demarcate a “living-zone” for the nation; culture and language to create a national personality for the nation; collective memory so that the nation can remember and retain memories of events deemed nationally important; societal beliefs so that the nation can make a sense of its own character.

Interestingly so, the conclusions of Bar-Tal and David are in congruence with this thesis’ aforementioned assumptions in that narratives do indeed contribute to national identity as earlier assumed. For the sake of this thesis, the points discussed above will suffice to include all the essentials national narratives tend to incorporate into their story-telling process.

17 Ibid, p. 359
18 Ibid, p. 359
IV. Turkey’s Official National Narrative

A New Paradigm: Birth of the Republic

The modern Republic of Turkey was born in 1923 after the demise of the centuries old Ottoman Empire. This new republic was almost literally founded from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire in the two devastating wars, World War I and the Turkish War of Independence, which were waged before it could be recognized as a sovereign nation-state by the international community. At the helm of this new nation-state was the triumphant Mustafa Kemal and, beneath him, like-minded progressive leaders that all desired to establish a new and enlightened identity for the Turks.

Kemal had distinguished himself in both of these wars and had led a struggle against the occupying powers that had moved in as the Ottoman Empire lay in shambles after World War One. While the dispirited Ottoman Sultan of the time was willing to accommodate the occupying forces and their desire to carve up Anatolian Turkey into various spheres of influence with the notorious Sevres Treaty, Kemal’s revolutionaries publically called upon all Turks to continue to fight on against both the occupying forces and the Ottoman elite that had sided with the occupiers. Having miraculously chased out the occupying powers, Kemal ordered the 700-year-old Ottoman sultanate abolished in 1922. Soon thereafter, Kemal abolished the supreme religious leader title

of the Islamic world: the Caliphate. It is once again important to note here that the official narrative of the Turkish Republic strongly indicates that these reforms were not imposed, but desired by the overwhelming majority that had partaken in, what would be historically called, the national struggle for independence.21

The political, social and economic reforms of Kemal, now honored by the Turks with the Turkish word for father of the Turks “Atatürk”, did not just cease with the above mentioned political edicts. The Republic of Turkey, through its new national narrative, sought to actively remove and replace all things that were once considered Ottoman.22 This thesis will now discuss how and why the Turkish state’s narrative did what it believed was in the best interest for the new republic.

Let Bygones be Bygones
The rift between the Ottoman Empire and the new republic needs to be further examined because parts of the Turkish national narrative still remain unresolved. When the new nationalist Turkish state enacted these reforms, it was with the clear idea of achieving distance between the old, corrupt Ottoman Empire and itself. For example, the language and alphabet reforms broke away from the standard text used for centuries. The new alphabet and Turkish language effectively cleansed words that were hybrid

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21 Kinzer’s arguments in his book are in line with what the official Turkish narrative teaches at school. This author, through his personal experience, can vouch for this fact. Kinzer, S. (2001) Crescent and Star: Turkey between Two Worlds. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. p.35-42

with regard to their nature and not “Turkish”. New generations of Turkish students, and this is more evident today, were taught this new alphabet and could not read the old Ottoman scripts from the last 700 years.\textsuperscript{23} This effectively ensured that there was no going back to the Ottoman Empire and that the Turkish national narrative was the only accessible source for Turkish history.

The secularization reforms and the right of women to participate in social affairs and vote as free members within the new Turkish society challenged an aspect of the former Ottoman Empire that had been vital for its existence: a male dominated quasi-religious society. Though the Ottoman Empire had introduced several reforms since throughout the 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries, it never fully reformed the way its society operated on a day to day basis. Women were not necessarily seen as inferiors, but had to stay home most of the time and be conservative with their clothing when in public. The Ottoman state, ruling with the male elites of the empire, allowed religious tolerance for its minorities, but had Islamic law as the foundation of its justice system. When the Turkish republic removed Islam from the state and allowed women to remove their veils and join the workforce, it did so by using the modern models presented by European nation-states such as France and Switzerland.\textsuperscript{24}

What is also remarkable is how the new Turkish state actually began reinterpreting Turkish collective past and memory. Ottoman victories, like the much

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, 276
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, 273
celebrated sacking of Istanbul in 1453, were reinterpreted as ‘Turkish’ victories.” The logic was that since Turks had made up most of the warrior elite in the Ottoman Empire, these victories were Turkish achievements and less so the achievements of the other nationals that had lived within the cosmopolitan empire. The role of the crack-elite soldiers of the Sultan, the Janissary Christian converts, was overlooked and only their latter insolence and revolts were emphasized to illustrate the problems experienced within the Ottoman Empire. To this end, traditional Ottoman clothing and Ottoman music were dismissed as “not modern” and not representative of the new and progressive Turkish nation.

A new historical narrative emerged that emphasized the pre-Ottoman Turkish era. Different Turkic empires and the common ancestry with the Turks in Central Asia were thoroughly presented as the historical origins of the Turks. Turkish folk music was favored and old Turkish style clothing made a “reappearance”, especially in rural Anatolian Turkish villages. The new Turkish state’s historical narrative traced Turkish ancestry back as far as 9000 BC and described the Turks as an Aryan race that is white, hard working and honorable. Soon afterwards, scientific studies were conducted to “prove” these suppositions. Though some of these assumptions were not entirely

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25 Ibid, 274
26 Ibid, 269
inaccurate, the symbolic significance of these new historicized elements was far greater than its scientific contribution. Basically, it reminded modern Turks to acknowledge their collective existence even before the advent of the Ottoman Empire. This utilitarian consideration, no matter how politicized and anachronistically flawed with regard to its logic, sought to foster a sense of historical continuity and collective fate and destiny for the Turks.

These historical narratives, however, did not take into consideration of the minorities that had remained in the Republic of Turkey, even after the great population exchanges and political divisions. Perhaps one of the biggest omissions was that of one concerning the Kurds. Even though the Turks and Kurds had fought alongside each other in both World War I and the Turkish War of Independence, their ethnicity was dismissed as “mountain-Turks”. The reason why the new Turkish state feared in acknowledging their ethnicity was perhaps of the same reason why the Ottoman Empire had declined and, ultimately, ceased to exist: wars of ethnic nationalisms. Though this fear of possible separatism was perhaps justified in the republic’s early and weak stage of existence, it was never again fully tackled. Hence, the official state narrative left this issue an open ended one and effectively failed to resolve any future possibilities of conflict.

Before concluding this section, it is important to state that Atatürk believed that Turkey’s future was with Europe. This was one of the reasons why his reforms and, subsequently the state’s reforms, were called “Westernizing” ones. This process is still continuing today and is still referred by many as the “Westernization” of Turkey. How accurate this term is highly dubious, but it seems to be accepted by many as indeed what is going on in Turkey.\(^{29}\)

Symbols & Artifacts
New national musical arrangements and symbols were also introduced to compliment what the state narratives advocated. The new Turkish national anthem, used during the war of independence and adopted soon thereafter, departed from the late Ottoman national anthem in that its lyrics emphasized new vigor and confidence for patriotic struggle. Its tune and tempo were bold much like that of a military march used during actual fighting instead of exhibitionary showcasing. While the Ottoman national anthem used minor keys, the new Turkish national anthem used mostly major keys and emphasized each syllable quite rigorously. It achieved what it aimed for in that the new Turkish nation felt an awakened a sense of national destiny and romantic nationalism.

Interestingly enough, the new Turkish Republic did not remove the Islamic symbols of the crescent and star from its new flag. This restraint was important in that

it illustrated that a secular republic was not necessarily against religion. Islam was accepted as the official religion of the Turks and the Atatürk himself was publically a practicing Muslim. The abolition of the Caliphate and the public ban of the veil, however, drew criticism from the conservative and religious members of society. In fact, several violent incidents took place in which republican Turkish soldiers were attacked or even murdered by regional religious fundamentalists. The Turkish state responded with even more secular reforms and reminded the fundamentalists that this new republic would not tolerate any religious influence whatsoever.\textsuperscript{30}

**Turkish National Narrative Since 1938**

After the death of Atatürk in 1938, the Turkish Republic witnessed several serious tests of survival. Led by Atatürk’s party, the Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (Republican People’s Party), Turkey was skillfully able to avoid entering World War II. After public demand for more democracy, Turkey moved into the pluralist system of democracy in the 1950s. Sadly, Turkey failed this test of democracy and was unable to prevent three military coups within the short period between the years of 1960-1982. It was, however, able to thwart the spread of Communism in Turkey and strategically allied itself with the West through its membership in NATO. All in the meantime, the cult of Atatürk was fully constructed and revered by the majority of Turks in Turkey. Be it

driven by the state or by the people, monuments were created throughout Turkey cherishing Atatürk and his legacy.\textsuperscript{31}

Several additions were made to the Turkish state’s narrative between 1938 and 2010. The two most important were the Turkish-EU relations and the Turkish military’s new identity, re-defined by the 1982 constitution. These new narratives have influenced Turkish identity quite considerably in the last 20-30 years. The EU-Turkish relations narrative tests the very success of Atatürk’s state and the degree in which Turks can call themselves “European” once again. However, the possibility of Turkey not joining the EU and the long arduous process has proven quite unnerving for the Turks. The end-game for this has yet to be played out, but many Turks have already begun questioning that potential identity and destiny.\textsuperscript{32}

The Turkish military institution has become the “guardian of secularism and democracy” in Turkey and continues to monitor politics really closely. After three interventions and through its reinterpretation of its own societal role, the Turkish military believes that the Turkish state is under siege from religious and ethnic threats and, therefore, needs to maintain a strong political presence to uphold Atatürk’s legacy. Also, the Turkish military continues to remain an important societal element for the common Turkish man. Since conscription in Turkey is mandatory, the Turkish military


\textsuperscript{32}Ibid.
is one of the most important places where the common Turkish man can be indoctrinated with national values and honor. Though recently the Turkish military seems to have moved away from wanting to intervene in politics, it still remains an important actor that receives enormous respect from many members of Turkish society.  

To conclude this part of the thesis, the modern Turkish narrative defined Turkish identity as that of one that is republican, secular, western-orientated and progressive. This change in Turkish identity is best observed by Heath Lowry’s analysis on being Muslim and Turkish. As Lowry points out, a Turkish person in the Ottoman Empire, if asked who he is, would have first responded “Elhamdulilah Muslumanim” (basically translated to “Praise be Allah, I am a Muslim”). Then, if the asked to elaborate, the same person would have responded with his name and later which city they came from. Only eventually, if at all, would that person say “I am a Turk.” In the modern Turkish Republic, Atatürk and his reforms made Turks proud enough to first say “I am a Turk.”

This thesis will now move onto the next section in which it will explore two of the new contesting narratives that have emerged within the last 20 years in Turkey and how they both offer an alternative definition of Turkish identity. These contesting narratives...
narratives will be analyzed in the context of how they challenge the Turkish national narrative and identity.
V. Challenges to the Official Turkish National Narrative

Romanticizing the Ottoman Past: Neo-Ottoman Turkish Identity

The first challenge to the official Turkish narrative this thesis will discuss is that of the one offered by the Turks that have a rekindled interest with all things Ottoman. These Turks, sometimes called neo-Ottomans, desire to reach back into history and rediscover their Ottoman roots. Their efforts usually produce romanticized and biased conclusions about the Ottoman Empire. While most of these Turks, however, do not necessarily wish to directly challenge the official narrative of the Turkish state, they do so by indirectly going against the state’s historical advice of looking forward instead of backwards into history. Moreover, since the state has such a rigid understanding of what the modern Turkish identity is, it seldom accepts anything outside of this definition.

The first such “neo-Ottoman” to suggest that there is more to Turkish identity than the one accounted for by the official state was Adnan Menderes. Chosen as the Turkish prime minister soon after the first real multi-party elections in 1950, Menderes began to reemphasize the importance of Muslim identity to the Turks. He began shifting Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle-East as much as the West. Moreover, he encouraged research into the Ottoman aspects of the Turkish Republic and even brought back the Arabic call to prayer that had been read in Turkish at mosques across Turkey for quite some time. Though popular and elected three times,
he was unable to escape the gallows after being disposed by the Turkish military in 1960. Menderes was eventually pardoned, but controversy still exists as to how much irreparable damage his populist, neo-Ottomanist policies inflicted on the Turkish Republic.  

It would be more than 20 years before another “neo-Ottoman” would come to power. Though Turgut Özal, elected as the Turkish Prime Minister and President in the 1980s, differed from Menderes and his policies, he too believed in the importance of discovering the Ottoman roots of the Turkish society. Özal enacted various cultural and social policies that all aimed at re-introducing the non-political elements of the Ottoman Empire. New memorials in Istanbul and Ankara praised accomplished Ottoman sultans, statesmen, poets and generals. Old Ottoman music was added back into the song lists of national choirs. Even Ottoman marching bands were reintroduced and admired by many as a cultural heritage that had long been forgotten.

The most recent neo-Ottomanists are the members of the currently incumbent government in Turkey: the AKP party. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu have been likened to Özal and have been referred to as “neo-Ottomanists”, even if the AKP refuses to identify with this

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36 Ibid, p. 81-107
description. The AKP party, defining itself as a conservative right-wing party, has been actively trying to liberalize the secular establishment’s staunch bans on allowing veiled women into public schools and universities. Furthermore, with the confidence granted by the strengthening Turkish economy, the AKP party has directed Turkish foreign policy to look to the Middle East as much as it looks towards the west. The AKP party now actively speaks of establishing good relations with countries that once belonged to the Ottoman Empire.¹³⁸

These political parties and figures have all contributed specific nuances to the meaning of Turkish identity. The development of the neo-Ottoman narrative since the 1950s in Turkey has offered Turks an alternative narrative account to their state’s account of Turkey’s identity. While the official state’s account had emphasized universalist republicanism, the neo-Ottoman narrative offers multicultural pluralism. The state narrative prioritizes secularism as neo-Ottoman narrative stresses moderate Islamic conservatism. Finally, neo-Ottomanism suggests the Turks to look towards other Muslim nations as much as, if not more, than Europe for political and social engagement.¹³⁹

¹³⁹Ibid.
Kurdish Nationalism
The other great challenge to the official Turkish state’s narrative comes from the Kurdish minority that lives within Turkey. The Kurds are the largest ethnic nation in the world without a state of their own. They constitute around 20 percent of the Turkish population and inhabit an area they loosely call “Kurdistan”. This Kurdistan spans across four Middle Eastern state borders and has been suspiciously viewed by the governments of those states as a possible security threat. Though not every Kurd in Turkey subscribes to the Kurdish nationalist narrative, a substantial amount of followers have been advocating for political independence for the last 80 years.

As was previously stated, the official Turkish state narrative traditionally viewed the Kurds as “mountain Turks” and outright dismissed their ethnic existence. The young republic was successful in crushing any Kurdish revolts it encountered and this issue lay relatively submerged within Turkish national consciousness. However, the terrorist PKK group and the power vacuum in Iraq after the Iraq War of 2003 resurrected this issue and tensions continue to remain high about the possibility of a Kurdish nation-state in northern Iraq and in South Eastern Turkey.40

Apart from this potential challenge to the Turkish borders is the challenge this issue poses to the meaning of citizenship in Turkey. When Atatürk conceived the notion of who is a citizen of the new Turkish Republic, he did so with a civic approach to

nationalism in mind. According to Atatürk, a citizen of Turkey was anyone who called
themselves and perceived themselves to be “Turkish”. It was not the ethnic group one
belonged to that mattered in determining citizenship, but rather the belief in common
principles that would unite the various different ethnicities in Turkey. These principles,
stated before, were republicanism, secularism, and, among others, progressive
modernism. If one could identify with these principles and call themselves “Turkish”,
then that person had the same entitlements and citizenship rights as any other.  

A great deal of debate has recently emerged in Turkey about this form of and
approach to nationalism. Many scholars that argue for a more liberal state policy
towards Turkey’s multiethnic composition believe that Atatürk and the state perhaps
had the right idea about the form of nationalism, but should have thought more about
using the word “Turk” as the “common denominator” for the new republic. These
scholars argue that by using an ethnic term as if it was a “principle”, the Turkish state
not only did not acknowledge the existence of the Kurds, but also forced them to
assimilate their identity even if the benefits of citizenship were offered.

Interestingly enough, the neo-Ottomanists are traditionally the most sympathetic
to the concerns of the Kurds and their identity. Their advocacy of multiculturalism,
superseded by an overarching Islamic identity that unites these different Muslim

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Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations, volume 6 number 3&4. p. 122
identities, allows for the Kurds to be recognized as an ethnic minority. However, the cost of this recognition is the risk of antagonizing the republican Turks. When Turgut Özal discussed of how perhaps the Republic of Turkey should have been called the Republic of Anatolia, he drew widespread criticism from entrenched republican ministers and members of society.\textsuperscript{43} The AKP has also been the only party recently that has a rather liberal approach to the Kurdish ethnic issues in Turkey. Yet, it too is criticized for compromising core republican values and the sovereignty that Atatürk and the Turkish Republic has long fought for and upheld.

This issue is currently on-going in Turkey and escalates each time a PKK terrorist attack takes place or a Kurdish party is banned for breaching the Turkish constitution. It is more than likely that it will continue to challenge the Turkish state narrative and Turkish national identity. A resolution of this problem, at least within the short term, seems quite difficult and unachievable as many of the parties are emotionally rallied up. Perhaps the only attainable goal at the moment is to not further escalate this sensitive issue and look for new and pragmatic ways to tackle it once and for all.

\textsuperscript{43}Ibid.
VI. Foreign Policy Implications

Which narrative account of Turkish identity the Turks prefer will determine which political party is elected and the foreign policy Turkey will pursue in the future. At present there are two major parties in Turkey that are competing for the elections in 2011. Representing the political center right is the currently incumbent AKP while the center leftist CHP is preparing for its first possible win since the 1970-1980s. These new parties represent the two divergent narratives this thesis has discussed so far. AKP predominantly follows the neo-Ottoman narrative while the CHP favors the official republican narrative of the republic.

Remarkably both narratives have stressed the importance of Turkey joining the EU. As was discussed earlier, Turkey’s EU journey was begun over 40 years ago. For the duration of those years, it was both the center right and the center left that had navigated Turkish foreign and domestic policy towards the EU. Recently, AKP party took over this process and had even earned Turkey the status of being an official candidate country of the EU. Since then, however, the relationship between the EU and Turkey has deteriorated quite rapidly. French and German suggestion of “strategic partnership” instead of full membership and public statements that Turkey does not belong to the EU has had a changing influence on both the neo-Ottoman and the republican narratives. Both narratives now begun distancing themselves from all things “European” and the EU accession process has ground to a halt.
Return of the Ottoman Empire?
The neo-Ottoman narrative has recently begun emphasizing the Islamic character of Turkish identity and has begun looking towards the Middle East more than towards the West. Most of the policies the AKP party has initiated with these Middle Eastern countries go against main EU and NATO policies. For example, neo-Ottomanist Turkey has started moving away from its strategic partnership with Israel and has publicly stated its support of Hamas and has even criticized Israel quite vehemently in the international arena. It seems that neo-Ottomanist appeal to the Muslim populations of Syria, Iraq and Palestine had to come at the cost of the 60 year Israeli-Turkish strategic partnership.44

The security consequences of neo-Ottomanist foreign policy could also be potentially disastrous. Little accomplishment in resolving the Armenian and Cypriot issues indicates an unwillingness of neo-Ottoman Turkey to make peace with its Christian neighbors. To be fair, Turkey has initiated the process of normalization of relations with both Armenia and Cyprus, but unwillingness to see through it to the end has resulted in near abandonment of these normalization processes. A solution to either case, at least in the near future, seems highly unobtainable.

One must not forget that a key component of the Ottoman Empire was its expansionist imperial policy. Regardless of the fact that neo-Ottomanism suggests a

“zero problems with its neighbors” policy, it cannot be “Ottoman” and not have illusions of grandeur guiding its foreign policy approach. Recent historians, be it Turkish or foreign, have begun suggesting the theory that all problems currently in the Middle East can be causally linked to the time when the Ottoman Empire fell. They argue that the fall of the Ottoman Empire after World War I left a power vacuum in that region and, since then, conflicts there have been all about different nations and states trying to master that anarchy. Most of these historians actively suggest Turkey to re-emerge under an Ottoman personality and “fill in that power vacuum”. 45

A neo-Ottoman Turkey role could perhaps help fill that power vacuum, but at what cost? It is important to note here that many of the neighboring nations of Turkey actually have their national narratives built on their epic struggles against the Ottomans. A quick glance at Bulgarian and Greek narratives would demonstrate this fact quietly candidly. A militarily and economically strong emergent Ottoman Empire-esque Turkey could unnerve these countries and damage years of confidence building policies these nations had engaged in. Dissenting opinions from these countries have already begun appearing and many of them stress the importance of re-incorporating Turkey

under the Western sphere of influence by allowing it into the EU and thus preventing the rise of a new Ottoman Empire.\textsuperscript{46}

Almost paradoxically, however, is the possible conflict between neo-Ottoman Turkey and Iran. Though Turkey continues to upset the West by objecting to any possible sanctions on Iran, it cannot sit back and allow Iranian influence to expand in Iraq or Lebanon. Middle Eastern Sunni Muslim lands, historically, had all been a part of the Ottoman Empire. The possibility of Shi’te Iranian influence in the Middle East was limited militarily by the Ottoman Empire.\textsuperscript{47} Hence, it is only logical before Turkish and Iranian interests clash. They may be fighting Kurdish separatists together today and Turkey might continue to argue for engagement with Iran, but to presume these policies will remain constant would be shortsighted.

An Isolated & Fractured Turkey
What is the alternative to a neo-Ottomanist Turkey and foreign policy? If the CHP party wins the 2011 election with a significant margin strong enough to make it the sole decider of what Turkish identity means for the near future, there is the very real possibility that Turkey might end up strategically isolated. Since CHP has also been moving away from favoring the EU accession process, it has begun stressing Turkish


national sovereignty that seems to have, for many, been corrupted by the EU reforms imposed on it by the EU.\textsuperscript{48}

With the EU future in jeopardy and the Middle East option far too “Ottoman” for its taste, Turkey could try strategically courting the Turkic nations to form a secular, ethnic organization of its own. Nevertheless, the fact that Russia is also emerging as a powerful country once again has this option ruled out—unless Turkey is ready to challenge Russian interests in Central Asia. With this possibility really unlikely, it is probable that Turkey may be forced to shy away from foreign affairs all together, as it has chosen to do so at various times throughout its 80 year history.\textsuperscript{49}

The consequences for a potential isolation are enormous for Turkey. Not only does its economy heavily rely on its transactions with the West and regional powers, but its whole democratization process remains dependent on possible EU accession. With the EU accession option ruled out and its economy suffering set-backs, it is more than probable that internal conflicts will intensify. The Kurdish nationalist issue will especially be explosive as the Turks do not feel the need to follow up on granting them more democratic and ethnic rights.\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{48} Inac, H. (n.d.) \textit{Identity Problems with Turkey during the European Union Integration Process}. Journal of Economic and Social Research. p. 41
\textsuperscript{49} Barysch, K. (2010). \textit{Can Turkey Combine EU Accession and Regional Leadership?} Centre for European Reform. p. 4
The other challenge to Turkey’s internal stability will come from the Islamist members of Turkish society. Like the Kurdish issue, the Islamists in Turkey will not be able to convince the Turkish government to continue its democratization reforms that it had begun under the auspices of EU accession. Veiled women will continue to be not allowed into state schools, universities or government jobs. Increased tensions will only evoke harsher government responses and, if the government is unable to prevent mass hysteria or riots, the Turkish military might feel that it has to stage yet another coup d’état to restore order. The Turkish economy will suffer a massive set-back that many believe would take Turkey years to recover from.51

With republican Turkey suffering a proverbial “implosion”, the region could descend into chaos as conflicts might spill-over into northern Iraq, Syria or the Caucasus. The Turkish government, in its need to unite the country, might deliberately make use of the “common enemy” motif and provoke a war with a foreign power to coalesce the divided Turkish society. The possibility of this conflict escalating into a regional war does not take such a stretch of imagination from that point on.52

VII. Conclusion

When Mutafà Kemal Atatürk founded the new Turkish republic, he did so under great hardship. Perhaps Hobsbawm’s approach to nationalism is what Atatürk had in mind when he said “Happy is he/she that can call themselves a Turk”. It was a simple and pragmatic solution to a complex problem that still continues to plague Turkey today. Or maybe Gellner and Anderson were right in stating that nations are imagined communities that need imagined social roles to facilitate a collective sense of unity and cohesion. If this is true, then the Turkish nation-state is perhaps one of the most difficultly conceived and imagined communities in the world for it requires its members to thoroughly understanding complex notions of religion, modernity and identity. No matter which account of nationalism is used to explain the Turkish nation-state, one thing is obvious: Turkey is still continuing to define its national identity and must not be lost as a strategic partner for the West within its process to do so.

This author cannot overemphasize how important it is for Turkey to actually join the EU. Not only would this help solve some of the possible challenges listed above, but it would also deconstruct many of the bigoted narratives Islamic fundamentalists and right wing fascists propagate in Turkey, Europe or elsewhere. A democratic Turkey, confident of its future destiny in Europe, would finally be able to tackle some of the problems it could not afford to discuss till then. The synthesis of neo-Ottoman, republican and Kurdish narratives would be achieved because these issues would not be
able to drag Turkish identity or its foreign policy in complete opposite directions anymore.

To synthesize these narratives, the EU and Turkey need to oversee the development of national remembrance museums, edit national textbooks to provide a more democratic and balanced representation of Turkish society and so forth. The republican narrative has to start owning up to its Ottoman past and prevent being the “dialectical opposite” of all things Ottoman. The neo-Ottoman narrative, on the other hand, has to thoroughly understand that the Ottoman Empire was a multicultural empire that also had Christian and Jewish subjects that greatly aided its development and existence. If the neo-Ottomans do desire to carry out a neo-Ottoman Turkish foreign policy, they can not only approach other Muslims, but also must approach regional Christian and Jewish nation(s) to be truly “Ottoman”.

The EU, however, needs to actively reinforce the fact that Turkey is a republic and that a return to the Ottoman Empire or the formation of a Kurdistan is strictly out of the question. Moreover, European rhetoric about Turkey not being European has to be curtailed. Europeans must understand that it is in their interests as well to see Turkey as a member state within the EU. Brussels needs to be more proactive in encourage its EU member states to engage and resolve the obstacles that are barring the Turkish accession process. If the EU wishes to stay competitively powerful in a world projected to have
many emergent great powers, it must move beyond its parochial approach to integration and accommodation.

Once Turkey is in the EU, recognition will be granted to those that wish for it via the Turkish state owning up to its responsibilities of governance and fulfillment of aspirations will come in the form of economic prosperity provided by EU market liberalization and democratic institutionalization. As living standards increase and democracy becomes entrenched, the polarized Turkish society can finally approach some of these identities issues with pragmatism. This way, Turkey will have made peace with its past and ethnic differences and could look forward to tackling the security challenges its new European identity demands of it to do so.
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