The Nation or the Ummah: Islamism and Turkish Foreign Policy

by

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Synopsis

Turkey's enthusiastic embrace of the Arab Spring set in motion a dynamic that fundamentally altered its relations with the United States, Russia, Qatar, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran, and transformed Turkey from a soft power to a hard power in the tangled geopolitics of the Middle East. Birol Başkan and Ömer Taşpınar argue that the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) Islamist background played a significant role in the country's decision to embrace the uprisings and the subsequent foreign policy direction the country has pursued. They demonstrate that religious ideology is endogenous to—shaping and in turn being shaped by—Turkey's various engagements in the Middle East. The Nation or the Ummah emphasizes that while Islamist religious ideology does not provide specific policy prescriptions, it does shape the way the ruling elite sees and interprets the context and the structural boundaries they operate within.
And finally, we are grateful to Michael Rinella, his editorial team, and two anonymous reviewers at State University of New York Press for their interest, encouragement, suggestions, and criticisms.

INTRODUCTION

“I want to give a very sincere advice, a very genuine warning to Egypt’s President Mr. Hosni Mubarak; … listen to the people’s callings and their most humane demands. Respond without any hesitation to the desire of change coming from the people … Freedoms cannot be delayed and ignored in today’s world.”—Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey’s Then Prime Minister, February 1, 2011

Turkey enthusiastically welcomed the Arab Spring even though this watershed event targeted those very regimes with which it had built cordial relations. Ankara eagerly developed strong relations with the post–Arab Spring regimes that came to power in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, helping them diplomatically, financially, and even in the latter case militarily so that they could stay in power. Turkey’s support to the anti-regime forces in Syria went beyond mere diplomacy and came to include logistics, finance, and weapons. Turkey paid a heavy price for its stance. A military coup in Egypt overthrew the new regime Ankara had diplomatically and economically supported. Under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the Turkish government reacted so harshly to the coup that a total collapse in its diplomatic relations with this most populous Arab country became inevitable. And by supporting the anti-regime forces in Syria, Turkey directly contributed to this country’s plunge into a bloody civil war and as a result came to bear the brunt of the ensuing massive refugee crisis.

This warm embrace of the Arab Spring clearly put at risk Ankara’s interests with the pro–status quo powers of the region, namely Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the two Arab countries that had always been Turkey’s largest trading partners in the Middle East. Turkey’s actions and reactions during the Arab Spring eventually led to its isolation and badly tarnished its image in the region. Why did Turkey embrace the Arab Spring with such hubris? This book seeks to explain the logic behind Turkish foreign policy during and after the Arab Spring to shed light on what constituted a sea change in Ankara’s traditional approach toward the region. In an attempt to see the connections between domestic political change and foreign policy reformulation, the study closely examines how Turkey’s internal evolution under the ruling Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party—the JDP) impacted its strategic logic during this tumultuous era. The core assertion of our study is that Islamism as both ideology and vision goes a long way in explaining the prism through which the JDP approached the Arab Spring and implemented its strategy. As the analysis will illustrate, such an ideological approach constitutes a sharp departure from the conventional foreign policy ideology of Turkey known as Kemalism—named after the founding father of the republic Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. This rather radical shift from Kemalism to Islamism has not been sudden. It took almost a decade for the JDP to consolidate
its political power at home. Only after he subdued political resistance and monopolized decision making, the country's hegemonic leader, then Prime Minister, now President Erdoğan, ventured into an Islamist direction in his foreign policy. Even then, it remains questionable if such a turn would have been feasible without exceptionally tempting regional opportunities, such as the collapse of the deeply entrenched political autocratic systems in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. In that sense, the domestic political context of Turkey and the regional context of the Middle East had to serendipitously converge for an Islamist foreign policy to emerge. When the regional upheaval began, JDP's reemerging Islamist ideology quickly adopted a theory that saw what was happening in the region in line with its assumptions, ideals, vision, and expectations. According to this ideological interpretation, the Arab Spring was a unique historic opportunity that was sweeping away the culturally alienated ruling establishments in the Arab world and bringing to power the “true voice” of the people, the Islamists. Acting on such an ideological interpretation of the events, foreign policy makers in Ankara welcomed the Arab Spring with the calculation that Turkey could better work with the new post–Arab Spring regimes in the Middle East and thus improve its own sphere influence in the region and standing in the world. For about two and half years—from late 2010 when the first signs of unrest emerged until the summer of 2013, when the military coup in Egypt toppled the Muslim Brotherhood government—the Arab Spring provided great hope and expectations to Turkey's Islamist decision makers. In such a regional context foreign policy makers in Ankara needed to make strategic sense of what was unfolding in region. Islamism provided the most convenient explanatory prism. It could simply be not a coincidence that just when Turkey was getting rid of its secularist shackles and returning to a sense of “Muslim greatness” the Arab Spring was also toppling deeply rooted secularist autocrats. In the eyes of the JDP special providence was at play. The time was finally ripe both at home and in the region for the peaceful and democratic rise of Islam. The Kemalists within the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs or in the Turkish General Staff no longer had the power, the political will, and the strategic vision to resist what seemed like divine justice. This is not to suggest, however, that Islamism single handedly determined every twist and turn of Turkish foreign policy during the Arab Spring. Pragmatism, mercantilism, and opportunism were never fully out the door. For instance, while Turkey very quickly called on the leader of Egypt to step down, it decided to wait for months before doing the same with the leader of Syria. Similarly, because of financial interests with the Qaddafi regime, Ankara opposed military intervention in Libya, but later changed its position when it saw the tide turning and Western powers mobilizing. In Syria, after burning bridges with the Assad regime and mobilizing the opposition against Damascus, Ankara itself began to call for a Western military intervention. The JDP's selectivity became even more obvious in Yemen and Bahrain, where it left the direction of developments in the hands of the Gulf States while elsewhere it saw its historical responsibility to become involved. Turkey's Islamism during this era was never fully divorced from geopolitical considerations and economic interests. In short, this book claims and illustrates the influential role ideology played in shaping the general direction of Turkey's foreign policy during the Arab
Spring. Yet, given the role of pragmatic considerations in driving some specific actions and reactions, our discussion also recognizes that Islamism never provided an all-encompassing "road map" for Turkey's actions during this period. In many ways, Islamism, especially in the Turkish case, is what can be called a "thin" ideology, which provides broad objectives without a detailed course of action or blueprint. And even these broad objectives are subject to interpretation and evaluation.

Ideology is an often overlooked factor in scholarly analyses of foreign policy and international politics. This is not without good reason. The concept ideology is highly elusive, often confused with others, hotly contested, and often employed pejoratively. As David McLellan declares, ideology might indeed be "the most elusive concept in the whole of social science." To elaborate on the book's argument, therefore, it might be useful to clarify the concept first and then discuss what major international relations theories say about it.

**Ideology and International Relations Theories**

Ideology is at its core a set of ideas and beliefs, some of which are unconsciously held, more often than not unquestioned, and passionately defended to be true. Beyond this core, ideology consists of derivative ideas and beliefs, which fall in two broad categories: one category consists of political, economic, social, or cultural policy recommendations. The other is an interpretive framework, which enables ideology's adherents to make sense of historical and contemporary events and actors.

Ideologies should be viewed as competing traditions of thinking. They are not products of single individuals, but rather constructed and reconstructed over a long period of time with contributions from many different individuals sharing the same core ideas and beliefs and upholding the similar derivative ideas and beliefs. It is because they are traditions ideologies have their own existence independently of political individuals, groups, movements, or parties. As such, they are part of the structure within which the agency makes choices. It is often the case that ideologies are not overly descriptive. They set forth ideals, but do not specify in detail method(s) or mechanism(s) to realize them. Hence ideology's adherents are left free to pick the best method(s) or mechanism(s) to pursue their desired ideals. If it helps the ultimate ideals, ideology can even condone and encourage the pursuit of a strategy that will facilitate acquisition of more power and wealth. However paradoxical it might seem, ideology's adherents can therefore be pragmatic and realistic as well. All in all, it might prove elusive to see ideology at work and study it as a cause.

Not only this elusiveness of both defining the term ideology and proving its existence, but also the term's heavily negative connotations affected its treatment in the field of international relations. The term in fact has a rather long history. It was in the aftermath of the French Revolution that Antoine Destutt de Tracy coined the concept ideology in reference to a new science—the science of ideas. Yet the project failed to evolve into a separate science, as it happened in the case of sociology or psychology. Instead, soon after its conceptualization, ideology acquired a very pejorative connotation, thanks to Napoleon Bonaparte. This negative perception of ideology has continued unabated until modern times, at the intellectual, popular, and academic levels. Alvin W. Gouldner vividly captures the state of scholarship by the 1970s: "in
the ordinary language of everyday life, as in the extraordinary language of sociology (be it academic sociology or Marxist), ‘ideology’ is stigmatized as a pathological object. It is seen as irrational cognition; as defective discourse; as false consciousness; as bad sociology.” Gouldner argues, “ideology serves such functions, or better ‘dysfunctions,’ that might just as well be realized by numerous other ‘adaptive’ responses to ‘cultural strain’: alcoholism, psychosomatic symptoms, and nail-chewing … as cognition.” Gouldner goes on to add, “ideology is cast in the role of the force of darkness, the nonrational,” and adds, “When speaking of ideology, sociology loses its hushed voice and opaque language; its technical language suddenly joins forces with blunt and lively common parlance. It characterizes ideology as the mind-inflaming realm of the doctrinaire, the dogmatic, the impassioned, the dehumanizing, the false, the irrational and, of course, the ‘extremist’ consciousness.”

Then newly developing, the discipline of international relations escaped from this unfolding conceptual mess simply by declaring ideology as unnecessary to its subject area. “International politics,” declares Hans Morgenthau, “like all politics, is a struggle for power.” Whatever statesmen ultimately hope to realize in international politics, Morgenthau holds, they have to pursue power first to realize them. “Power is,” declares Morgenthau, “always the immediate aim.” This has always been the feature of international politics. “The struggle for power,” Morgenthau states, “is universal in time and space and is an undeniable fact of experience … Throughout historical time, regardless of social, economic, and political conditions, states have met each other in contests for power.” Having defined states’ first and foremost objective as the pursuit of power, realism holds that studying their ultimate objectives becomes unnecessary for the broader study of international politics or international relations.

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Kenneth Waltz. As a matter of fact, for Kenneth Waltz, any subsystemic feature, be it economy, social, or ideology, will “lead to the infinite proliferation of variables” and thus unnecessarily complicate any study of world politics. What really critically matters in international relations is the distribution of material capabilities or, more specifically, economic and military power, across the states. In the anarchic international state environment, “the pressures of competition,” Waltz declares, “weigh more heavily than ideological preferences or internal political pressures.” Ideology, like any other substate feature for that matter, inescapably becomes subordinate to state interest. International movements, whether inspired by cosmopolitan liberalism in the mid-nineteenth century, international socialism in the early twentieth century, or international communism post-1917 Revolution, for example, were all, Waltz claims, “captured by individual nations, adherents of the creed were harnessed to the nation’s interest, international programs were manipulated by national governments, and ideology became a prop to national policy.”

For the sake of clarification, neither Morgenthau nor Waltz explicitly suggests that ideology plays no role in driving states’ foreign policies. Morgenthau acknowledges that ideology might inform states’ ultimate objectives, for the realization of which, though, they will need power. Waltz, on the other hand, suggests that states might pay a heavy price in the survival of the fittest environment of international relations if they ideologically pursue their foreign policies. Three other prominent neorealists, Stephen Krasner, Stephen Walt, and John Mearsheimer, also argue that ideology might play a role in driving state foreign policies. Krasner, for example, argues that the United States pursued openly ideological objectives in waging a bloody war in Vietnam and paid a heavy price for that. Walt, on the other hand, argues that states with similar ideologies are more likely to forge alliances. In his later book, Walt argues that ideologies lead states into conflicts, especially in post-revolutionary contexts. Mearsheimer likewise acknowledges especially nationalism’s role in generating a number of interstate conflicts in the past as well as great powers’ pursuit of their ideologies abroad.

Despite these acknowledgements, however, it is fair to say that the realist/neorealist school treats ideology as a residual category and prioritizes power or economic interest or more materialistic factors. Ideology either plays no role or, if it does, a limited role under extraordinary circumstances.

Neorealism’s rival, Neoliberalism, is no different. Neoliberalism argues that international institutions and norms alleviate the so-called security dilemma, which realism/neorealism claims states face in the anarchic international system, and promote interstate cooperation. When it comes to ideology, however, neoliberalism has many parallels with neorealism. Robert Keohane, the most prominent member of this school, argues that states pursue “wealth and power” and, he almost reluctantly adds, “perhaps other values as well.” Keohane even empties “ideology” out of an otherwise Marxist concept, hegemony, when he claims that hegemony is not “false consciousness.” Keohane argues that non-hegemonic states also pursue their self-interests when they abide by the hegemonic world order.

Constructivism, the third major school in international relations, emerges as a critique of both realism/neorealism and neoliberalism on the grounds that they are overly materialistic.
argues that ideational factors, such as norms, beliefs, culture, and ideology, are also critical in shaping state interests. Yet ideology does not receive an exclusive treatment even in the hands of constructivists: this is in large part because influential constructivists either adhere to systemic level of analysis and hence ignore state- or substate-level factors, including ideology, or focus their attentions on other, more general categories of ideational factors, such as norms and culture. Foreign policy analysis, a subfield that distinguished itself from international relations in the late 1950s and early 1960s, is much more open to ideology's role in international relations as it focuses on the actual processes of foreign policy decision-making. Such a focus necessitates taking into account factors that guide actual individuals or groups of individuals. These factors are multisourced internally as well as externally: “The mind of a foreign policymaker,” declare Valerie M. Hudson and Benjamin S. Day, “is not a tabula rasa: it contains complex and intricately related information and patterns, such as beliefs, attitudes, values, experiences, emotions, traits, style, memory, and national and self-conceptions.” Furthermore, Hudson and Day add, “Each decision maker's mind is a microcosm of the variety possible in a given society. Culture, history, geography, economics, political institutions, ideology, demographics, and innumerable other factors shape the societal context in which the decision maker operates.”

As Kenneth Waltz rightly predicts, foreign policy analysis uncovers a wide variety of factors from all levels of analysis that affect foreign policy making. Ideology is one of these factors and influences foreign policy making through multiple channels. Scholarly analyses of Turkey’s foreign policy illustrate these channels. For example, according to Mustafa Aydın, Kemalism, the official state ideology since the foundation of the Republic, set three major goals and principles for governments: the first is the protection of complete independence of the Turkish nation-state; the second is the pursuit of a realistic and peaceful foreign policy; and the third is the attainment of a status on par with the most advanced (civilized) nations in world. As Aydın also alludes, these goals and principles not only guide and inspire foreign policy makers, but also serve as parameters or red lines of foreign policy that governments should not or cannot cross over. For Kemalism, the most advanced and civilized nations in the world are from/in the West, and therefore the third goal/principle, for a number of studies, imposes a pro-Western orientation in foreign policy making. “The strong ideological orientation,” Philip Robins claims, “contained an umbilical link between the Western value system of the Kemalist elite and the external orientation of the state.” This orientation was best typified by Turkey’s “Westpolitik,” in other words, Turkey’s membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization or NATO and its relations with the United States and its pursuit of membership in the EU [the European Union]. Bozdağlıoğlu also argues that it is because of Kemalist ideology that “Turkey, throughout its modern history, fully identified itself with the West, especially with Europe, and established close relations with the United States, while she maintained a very low profile in her relations with the Muslim Middle East, from which she derived much of her cultural heritage.” Bozdağlıoğlu’s study stands as an example of how the constructivist turn in international relations influenced...
scholarly analyses of Turkey’s foreign policy: ideology is primarily treated as a marker or constituent of identity. A number of studies follow this line of inquiry. Hasan Kösebalaban, for example, distinguishes four ideology-identity groups in Turkey and attaches to each foreign policy positions. For example, secularist nationalists (Kemalists) oppose “integrationist policies that compromise national sovereignty” and “close relations with the Arab world and Islamic Republic of Iran”; Islamic nationalists support “close cooperative relations and integration with the Muslim world” and “competitive relations with Iran” and oppose “close relations with Israel”; secular liberals support “close cooperative relations and integration with the West (thus in favor of solving problems with Greece)” and are not enthusiastic about integration with the non-Western countries; finally, Islamic liberals support “close cooperative relations and integration with the West as well as with the Muslim world” and “competitive relations with Iran and Greece” and are not enthusiastic about “close relations with Israel.”

In this book we depart from the existing studies by describing in detail the content of ideology under consideration and seeking to pin it down as an explanation for an observed change in Turkey’s foreign policy. First we delink the ideology-identity axis so frequently observed in constructivist studies. This is not to suggest that ideologies singly or in combination do not contribute to the formation of a particular identity. It is rather to argue that ideology should not strictly be equated with any specific, unidimensional, identity-related, or unrelated foreign policy as the existing studies tend to do. Ideology prescribes ultimate goals or ideals, say, the unity of all Muslims, but generally is not specific enough to list specific policies to realize those goals or ideals. The existing studies tend to derive their ideology-identity categorizations from the policies pursued by actors while they are in power and therefore provide almost tautological explanations based on the assumption that there is a seamless connection between actual policies and ideological-identity configurations. As we explore, what is followed as policy may not always reflect ideological convictions. By the same token, ideological inclinations before coming to power are perhaps more important, because they reflect with more fidelity the ideals and aspirations without the limits imposed by what is politically feasible. What is needed in a foreign policy analysis is a more detailed description of the content of the ideology under consideration. As will be seen, ideology provides quite general political goals and ideals to be realized. It is equally critical and even more pertinent that ideology provide an interpretive framework with which its adherents interpret the world. Ideology-guided interpretive framework is what helps its adherents make sense of their environments, especially in times of high uncertainty. Ideology then influences foreign policy through two channels: first, by setting ideals and aspirations for realization; and second, by establishing a prism to interpret international/regional events. Our work is an attempt to focus more exclusively on ideology as an independent driver of policy. This book claims that it is because of ideology that its adherents pursue a particular course of action or adopt a particular foreign policy. To prove this claim, the book shows the fit between the ideology under consideration, Islamism, and the particular course of action or foreign policy under consideration, embracing the Arab Spring. Furthermore, to add more persuasion to the
The book discusses what course of action or foreign policy adherents of an alternative, preferably opposing, ideology would follow. Fortunately, one ideology, Kemalism, has been hegemonic in driving foreign policy in our case, and thus the past gives us plenty of material to think counterfactually.

Sources, Transliteration, and Outline of the Book

Turkish foreign policy has attracted considerable scholarly attention. In Turkey itself is a vibrant community of international relations scholars and foreign policy analysts who have produced high-quality analyses in both English and Turkish. This scholarly output is too voluminous to provide any fair review or even bibliography of it in the limited space available here. For the most part, our narrative greatly benefits from this literature. Citations provided throughout the book, however, are in no way exhaustive of all available studies in English and Turkish.