Turkish Islam-Nationalism Under AKP: A New Model for the Muslim World?

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TURKISH ISLAM-NATIONALISM UNDER AKP: A NEW MODEL FOR THE MUSLIM WORLD?

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Abstract
The Justice and Development Party’s (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi/AKP) activities in bridging Islam and nationalism marks a historic milestone in Turkey’s democracy. Throughout its two decades-long leadership, AKP, under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s leadership, demonstrated that nationalism and Islam do not clash with Turkey’s stance on secularism. Such understanding provides AKP with a strategic leverage, both at the domestic and international level, especially within the Muslim world. Reflecting upon Rustow’s democratic transition model and Ibn Khaldun’s classic conceptualisation on ashabiyyah, this article attempts to comprehend how Turkish nationalism is formulated within its relations with Islam as AKP’s political roots. Aside from consolidating its political power at the domestic level, this article suggests that the Islam and democracy synthesis provides an opportunity for Turkey to strengthen its political image and position in the region. In a much broader context, this article attempts to contribute to academic discussions on the relationship between religion and states which undergo the process of democratisation.

Keywords:
Turkey, nationalism, Islam, AKP, Erdoğan

Abstrak
Sepak terjang Partai Keadilan dan Pembangunan (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi/AKP) Turki dalam membangun relasi Islam dan Nasionalisme memberikan torehan penting dalam demokrasi Turki. Dalam hampir dua dekade kepemimpinan Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, AKP, di bawah kepemimpinan Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, menunjukkan bahwa nasionalisme dan Islam bukan suatu hal yang bertentangan dengan prinsip sekulerisme Turki. Hal ini memberikan keuntungan strategis bagi AKP, baik secara domestik maupun internasional, khususnya di dalam dunia Islam. Menggunakan transformasi demokrasi yang disajikan Rustow dan pemahaman klasik ashabiyyah Ibnu Khaldun, artikel ini berusaha untuk melihat proses formulasi nasionalisme Turki dalam kaitannya dengan Islam sebagai akar politik AKP. Selain memperkuat konsolidasi kekuatan politiknya di ranah domestik, artikel ini melihat bahwa sintesa Islam dan demokrasi memberi ruang bagi Turki untuk memperkuat citra dan posisi politiknya di kawasan. Dalam konteks yang lebih luas, artikel ini berusaha ikut berkontribusi dalam diskusi akademik mengenai relasi agama dan negara di negara-negara yang menjalani proses demokratisasi.

Kata kunci:
Turki, nasionalisme, Islam, AKP, Erdoğan
**INTRODUCTION**

The Justice and Development Party’s (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi/AKP) leadership within the past 18 years marks an important milestone in Turkish politics. AKP’s triumph in 2002 has prompted debates and controversies, both within the context of Turkish domestic and international politics. The main factor which drives these debates and controversies to emerge is AKP’s stance as a liberal party with a predominantly Islamic-based supporters in Turkish democratic and secular system (Cinar, 2011). Throughout its modern history, Turkish political dynamics are mostly framed within the centre-periphery or Kemalism-Islamism frameworks (Kubicek, 2020). When Kemalism received criticism in response to issues on domestic and international politics in Turkey, AKP rose to prominence by offering a new political ideology, garnering support from masses across the conservative and liberal ends of the political spectrum.

Despite the recurring debates on its reign, AKP’s almost two decades-long leadership was acquired through the support of the majority of Turkish people. The AKP-led government achieved multiple astonishing accomplishments, especially in pushing for development agendas at the domestic level and advancing expansive foreign policy agendas. From 2002 to 2007, Turkish economy achieved a substantial leap. The AKP-led government under the leadership of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan succeeded to make major improvements to the economy, rendering Turkey eligible to enter the G20. Aside from economic improvements, it is also important to consider how Turkey grew into becoming an exemplary democracy for its Middle Eastern neighbours. In the Muslim world, Turkey’s democratisation is a portrayal of how Islam, secularism, and democracy coexist within the same political setting (Fuller, 2014, pp. 126–146).

In a survey conducted by TESEV in 2012 entitled, “The Evolution of Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East”, 54% of the respondents picked Turkey as a political and economic model in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia trailed behind, which gained votes from 32% of the respondents (Barkey, 2012). Turkey’s popularity shows that it has succeeded to combine politics and religion, while distancing itself from Israel. AKP’s success to attract burgeoning support from masses across the region and high electoral approval at the domestic level is attributed to AKP’s ability in managing the government. The party has grown into an important political power in contemporary Turkish politics (Kucukcan et al., 2011, p. 22).

AKP was established on 14 August 2001, which was declared by, among many others, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Abdullah Gül, and Bulent Arınç. Throughout its
development in Turkish politics since 2002, AKP consistently achieved victories in each parliamentary (legislative) and presidential (executive) elections, as well as referendums. The current president, Erdoğan, is Turkey’s 12th President and AKP’s Chairman. His chairmanship started in 2002. He previously served as the Prime Minister of Turkey for two terms, the last President of Turkey under the parliamentary system, and the first President of Turkey under the presidential system. His length of service emphasises the public’s strong affirmation for his leadership. Moreover, in the 2018 presidential election, Erdoğan managed to win 52.29% of the total votes by only competing in a single round of election, in which five other candidates also competed for the presidential seat (Muharrem İnce acquired 30.6%, Selahattin Demirtaş acquired 8.4%, Meral Akşener acquired 7.29%, Temel Karamollaoğlu acquired 0.9%, and Doğu Perinçek acquired 0.2% of the total votes) ("Turkey Elections", 2018).

Yet, Erdoğan and AKP’s leadership in Turkey is still challenged by issues and criticisms. The President’s expanding power under the presidential system, issues surrounding press freedom, problems in its economy, along with Turkey’s vulnerable position against terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and its affiliates, as well as the Fethullahistic Terror Organisation (FETÖ) are present as internal challenges to Erdoğan and the AKP-led government (Bacik & Coskun, 2011; "Former Turkish General: Coup Attempt Was Conducted By FETO To Undermine Turkey", 2016; Parlar Dal, 2016; Plakoudas, 2018; Ünal, 2016). These challenges are accompanied by multiple regional and global problems which drove Turkey to partake in those problems.

These challenges and criticisms are also influenced by multiple accusations revolving AKP and Erdoğan’s constructs on Turkish political identity. AKP has received accusations of putting forward Islamist, Neo-Ottomanist, and Anti-Secularist stances as it attempts to wipe out Kemalism, which has not only been going on for the past few years, but since it stepped into Turkish politics. Such assumption is strengthened by Cinar’s (2011) argument that AKP’s victory in 2002 has triggered debates and controversies, both at the domestic and international levels.

Turkey’s political transformation under AKP’s reign, within the context of how Islam and democratisation interact, has attracted intense scrutiny from the epistemic community (Findley, 2010; Hale & Ozbudun, 2010; Yavuz, 2009, 2019). During its early years, AKP, in general, was viewed as a good influence for Islam and democracy in the Middle East. Two years after AKP’s triumph in its first election, Nasr (2005), for
example, posited that AKP is an example of the emergence of a new wave of “Muslim democracies.” A reputable think-tank, RAND Corporation, voiced out their optimistic view towards AKP’s emergence in 2008. AKP was perceived to stand out among its predecessors by leaving anti-West rhetoric and endorsing values which aligned with Western values (Rabasa & Larabee, 2008).

After assuming power for almost two decades, AKP and Erdoğan started to receive backlashes for their authoritarian tendencies. In 2019, *Middle East Critique*, a journal on the Middle East, deemed it necessary to publish a special edition on the development of Islamic populism in Turkey under the Erdoğan administration. To introduce the edition, Yavuz and Öztürk wrote that Erdoğan’s formulation on Islam during his administration had facilitated the development of neoliberalism in Turkey (Öztürk, 2019; Yavuz & Öztürk, 2020, p. 239). Meanwhile, Kubicek (2020) viewed that amidst the scholars’ failures in anticipating Erdoğan’s authoritarianism tendencies, adjustments on assumptions and methodologies in studies on democratisation were needed. By employing the concept of ‘politics of belonging’, Sawae (2020) delved into Erdoğan’s populist transformation by investigating the interactive supply-demand relationship between political leaders and supporters. Sawae found that Erdoğan populist politics made use of memories on the shortcomings of secularism to consolidate supports for Islamist and conservative groups. Additionally, Uzer (2020) argued that Erdoğan, unlike past administrations in modern-day Turkey, attempted to romanticise memories on the Ottoman Empire to challenge Kemalism and Western reformist agendas.

By situating these theoretical and practical debates, it becomes important to reflect on how nationalist narratives are developed within the context of Turkey’s democratisation process under the Erdoğan- and AKP-led government. Henceforth, this article attempts to investigate the process of how Turkish nationalism was formed by highlighting how it was interlinked with traditional Islamic values which AKP upholds as its political roots. Aside from consolidating its political power at the domestic level, this article posits that the Islam-democracy synthesis provides many possibilities for Turkey to strengthen its political image and position in the region. Within a broader context, this article is intended to contribute to academic discussions on the relationship between religions and democratising states.
ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Identity in International Relations

Identity has become a central theme in recent developments in the Middle East, including Turkey. Such phenomenon was affirmed by Hinnebusch (2016), who points out that one unique feature of studies on Middle Eastern politics is the immense power which identity holds. Identity plays a prominent role in the regional dynamics, as 84% of Middle Eastern countries are dominated by ethno-linguistic influences (Hinnebusch, 2016).

Explanations on the significant role of identity dated back to Ibn Khaldun’s *Muqaddimah*, which contained his understanding and conceptualisation on identity. Ibn Khaldun stated that a society which resides in a certain region may be characterised by a power which stemmed from the attitude of ‘*ashabiyyah*’. Such attitude is understood as a strategy which strengthens social cohesiveness and the solidarity of a nation. In the contemporary times, such attitude can be interpreted as nationalism. *Ashabiyyah* is an important aspect in understanding the power of identity in regional politics (Khaldun, 2001, pp. viii and 677). *Ashabiyyah* refers to the pride over belonging to certain group, which is a common feature in the Middle East’s multiplicity of identities.¹

Ibn Khaldun’s conceptualisation on *ashabiyyah* posits that the ability of a certain group to form and run a government is associated with their social and political characteristics. These characteristics become the driving force and the basis of the existence of a state or political institution. Ibn Khaldun (2011) also states that *ashabiyyah* occupies a prominent role in expanding the influence of a state. Therefore, failure in utilising *ashabiyyah* will hamper a state from expanding its sphere of influence.

The existence of an Islamic identity within the context of Turkey is at the centre of our scrutiny. The relationship between religion and the state within Turkey’s secularist standpoint should be noted. Henceforth, it is important to frame the existing reality in Turkey as a transformation from Islamism to Post-Islamism.

Islamism is understood as “ideologies and movements that strive to establish some kind of an Islamic order” (Bayat, 1996). Islamism clearly carries the purpose of establishing an Islamic system. In this case, Post-Islamism differs as it attempts to construct and plan “the rationale and modalities of transcending Islam in social, political and intellectual domains” (Bayat, 1996). The latter understanding on the relationship between Islam and the state was adopted by Erdoğan’s with AKP and, in a broader context, by Rashid Ghannouchi with the Ennahdha Movement in Tunisia.
AKP’s development throughout the past two decades, along with the democratisation process taking place in Turkey, have been rather dynamic. In this article, Rustow’s democratic transition model serves as a framework to comprehend the occurring phenomenon in Turkey. Rustow’s model scrutinises the different phases of interactions between context and actor. First, national solidarity is developed as a context to contestations between political actors. Second, the ‘preparatory’ phase occurs, which is influenced by conflict of interests pertaining to the development of a new political view. Such conflict is rather inclusive to a multiplicity of actors with different identities, ideologies, and other interests. The third phase, dubbed as the ‘decision’ phase, is characterised with a political conflict which is needed to enable a healthy regime transition. The ‘habituation’ phase, as the last phase, occurs when actors attempt to ensure its survivability amidst the established democratic system (Rustow, 1970).

**Secular Nationalism vs. Islamic Nationalism**

AKP’s conceptualisation of nationalism cannot be fully separated from its proximity with Islamism (or Post-Islamism) which runs deep within AKP. AKP is deemed as a synthesis of the conservative side of Turkish politics. Such condition has been sustained since the establishment of the Democratic Party (*Demokrat Partisi*) in 1950, the Justice Party (*Adalet Partisi*) in 1970, the Motherland Party (*Anavatan Partisi*) in the 1980s, and the True Path Party (*Doğru Yol Partisi*) in the 1980s.

Moreover, the influence of past Islamist groups in Turkey also shaped AKP’s development, which could be traced back to the establishments of the National Order Party (*Milli Nizam Partisi*) in 1970 (dissolved in 1971), the National Salvation Party (*Milli Selamet Partisi*) in 1972 (dissolved in 1981), the Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*) in 1983 (dissolved in 1998), until when the Virtue Party (*Fazilet Partisi*) experienced a rupture in 1997 (dissolved in 2001) and was split into AKP and the Felicity Party (*Saadet Partisi*) in 2001.

Hale and Ozbudun (2010) conceived that AKP’s characteristics portrayed the sensitivity of Turkish nationalism when it was combined with traditional and Islamist values, as well as a commitment towards technological modernisation. They also rejected the argument that AKP was purely a continuation of the Welfare Party, which clearly upheld the ‘National Outlook (*Milli Görüş*)’ ideology and stood for economic policies which would facilitate the establishment of a ‘Just Order (*Adil Düzen*)’ model (Hale & Ozbudun, 2010).2
The National Outlook and Hizmet Fethullah Gülen Movements existed as two important political powers which has penetrated Turkish secularist power, adding a new nuance to the dynamics of Islamist politics in Turkey since the 1970s. Both movements succeeded to form an alliance which played an immense role in Turkey’s politics and society (Fuller, 2014, pp. 95–109, 154). Yet, the 2016 military coup shattered their harmonious alliance.

Turkish nationalism takes its roots from Kemalist nationalism. Such standpoint is also known as ‘Ataturkism (Atatürküllük)’ which stems from Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s past reign. Kemalist nationalism emerged as the Ottoman Empire ceased from existence during the World War I, facilitating the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923.3

Kemalism (Kemalizm) consists of six main values, which are widely known as the ‘altı-ok (six arches)’, as symbolised in the Republican People’s Party’s (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi/CHP) symbol. The six values include: republicanism (cumhuriyetçilik), nationalism (miliyetçilik), populism (halkçilik), secularism (laiklik), etatism (devletçilik), and reformation (devrimçilik) (Kara, 2020).

As an ideology, Kemalism has developed over time, which lead to different interpretations on Kemalism. For example, in the 1960s, by reflecting upon Kemalism, Turkey transformed from a single party to a multiparty system, strengthening the military’s power as the frontrunner of Kemalism. The military’s role in sustaining Kemalism in Turkey was evident in its attempt to conduct coups against the government in 1960, 1971, 1980, and 1997, as well as their failure to take over the government in 2016.

The military coup in 1960 was instigated in response to Prime Minister Adnan Menderes’s decision to legalise reciting the ‘azan (call to prayer)’ in Arabic, which was previously recited in Turkish. Menderes was deemed as a serious threat to Turkey’s secularism by the opposition and the military. Then, a series of violence in 1971, propelled by an economic crisis, pushed the military to acquire political control and urged Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel to step down. Then, in 1980, clashes between the right- and left-wing groups compelled the military, under General Kenan Evran, to commence a coup. Then, in 1997, Turkey’s military took over the government from Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan and proceeded to ban the Welfare Party (“A Brief History of Military Takeovers in Turkey from 1960 to 2007”, 2017).

AKP’s venture in Turkish democracy has undergone many fluctuations. From 2003 to 2011, AKP and Turkey commenced a ‘Silent Revolution’, in which Turkey was
deemed as a “consolidated liberal democratic rule” (Aydinli, 2011; Heper & Yıldırım, 2011). Issues revolving Turkish democratisation varied. One major challenge which the government faced was the 2013 Gezi Park Protest in İstanbul. The massive demonstration, which started off as a pro-environment movement, transformed into an anti-government protest. The demonstration worsened when multiple corruption scandals, along with the Ergenekon and the Sledgehammer issues arose and tainted AKP’s standing.

Pressures towards Turkey’s democracy heightened with multiple terrorist threats attacks in Turkey, which was commenced by ISIS, PKK, and the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front (Devrimci Halk Kurtuluş Partisi-Cephesi/DHKP-C). These threats emerged in multiple areas within and bordering regions in Turkey, as demonstrated by threats which erupted in the Turkey-Syria border from the Democratic Union Party-People's Protection Units (Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat-Yekineyen Parastina Gel or PYD-YPG), as a PKK-affiliated group, and ISIS. Another threat towards AKP emerged from the Fethullah Gülen-affiliated group which Erdoğan accused as the mastermind behind the coup in 2016.

Throughout its development, the dynamics at the domestic level led to major implications towards AKP’s policies which was largely unpopular, such as declaring a state of emergency, eliminating supporters and members of Fethullah Gülen-affiliated groups in multiple public institutions and the military, along with other policies on law enforcement, education, public service, the non-profit sector, business, and many others. Such condition resulted in allegations from the domestic constituents and international communities on the development of authoritarianism in Turkey. However, in executive and legislative or referendum under the AKP-led government since 2002, AKP and Erdogan have constantly claimed their victories by winning the majority of the votes.

**RESEARCH METHOD**

This research paper employs a qualitative approach to understand the identity construction in contemporary Turkey. Using a within-case analytical method, the authors seek to conduct in-depth exploration to reveal the processes and patterns of the identity construction taking place in Turkey under Erdogan’s AKP-led administrations. In building the arguments, the authors use Rustow’s democratic transformation framework as well as the concept of *ashabiyyah* coined by Ibn Khaldun to locate the historical development of identity formation in Turkey within the long-standing secular nationalism.
versus Islamic nationalism debate. Data is collected mainly from secondary sources including academic publications, news, and quoted official releases.

**DISCUSSION**

**Turkey and an Alternative Image in the Muslim World**

The Middle East experienced many tumultuous dynamics after the Arab Spring. One of them being balancing attempts by multiple regional powers. Duran and Yulmaz (2013) argued that four regional powers emerged after the Arab Spring, namely Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt. It has been evident that the ongoing balance of power in the region revolved around the aforementioned states (Duran & Yilmaz, 2013).

In general, every state offers a conceptual modification on how Islam is incorporated with the state’s system of governance. For instance, Iran is committed to position itself as an ‘axis of evil’ against the United States (US), Israel, and Western imperialism. Iran seeks to radically change the existing status quo in the region. To legitimise itself, Iran conducts Shia-based theopolitics. Saudi Arabia also demonstrates strong desire to portray itself as a regional leader. Riyadh places itself as the ‘Guardian of Two Holiest Sites’ and a representative of the Sunni side of Islam. Saudi’s governance, similar to Iran, revolves around Sunni-based theopolitics.

These contrasting bases of theopolitics have inflicted an inherent conflict between Sunni and Shia, both within the context of the Middle East and at the global level, which are driven by the cross-border nature of the conflict. Moreover, the Sunni-Shia clash could result in proxy wars, which serve as an opportunity for external powers to intervene in the regional political dynamics.

Egypt is also an important actor in the Middle East. Such importance is attributed to the presence of Al Azhar, an education institution which has become a symbol of modernity, along with being a central location for the development of the Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwanul Muslimin*). Moreover, the Tahrir Revolution, as noted by Dallmayr, served as a representation of Islam’s response to Western modernity and presented an alternative to Turkish Kemalist democracy or Iran’s Shia-based theopolitics (Duran & Yilmaz, 2013).

Then, Turkey’s success to grow into an economic power has boosted Turkey’s popularity abroad. Aside from its impressive economic growth, its foreign policy choices in the Muslim world also contributed to Turkey’s growing popularity. Such condition is
supported by Turkey’s compromising posture to multiple issues and its rather pluralist theopolitics (Duran & Yilmaz, 2013).

Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey are each an example to the different models of Middle Eastern regional leadership which Duran and Yilmaz (2013) proposed, each is characterised by a combination of strategic goals, national interests, security issues, and ideological visions which each carry. What stood out in such comparison is the differences in how Islam is interpreted within the context of a state and how it is mobilised. All the four states above have acquired the necessary soft power to gain legitimacy in the region (Duran & Yilmaz, 2013).

Out of the four mentioned models on how states engage with Islam, the Turkish model has gained popularity in the Middle East. The public views the model in a positive light, as portrayed by the positive perception which the Middle Eastern people bear towards Turkey which was recorded in multiple surveys. The Turkish model has boosted confidence on the Muslim world’s standing and created a new facet on attempts to find a balance between Islam and the West. Turkey in the 20th century has grown into a new alternative in discussions on how Islam is engaged with the West. Cınar (2011) argued that after the 9/11, Islam was depicted as an evil enemy, but AKP’s victory painted a different picture in Turkey’s politics. AKP, which is predominantly supported by Islamists, has faced difficulties in leading a democratic and secular government.

Such condition attracted responses from different actors. The US, during the George W. Bush’s presidency, targeted Turkey in its ‘freedom-agenda’, pointing to the possibility of positioning Turkey as a symbol of moderate Islam and a potential model for democratisation in the Middle East. The US perceived Turkey as a potential entry point in forming partnerships with the Muslim world (Traub, 2018). Then, under the Obama administration, Turkey was the first destination of his presidential trips after he was inaugurated as the US President. Instead of dubbing the US’s partnership with Turkey as a ‘strategic partnership’, Obama emphasised that the relationship between the US and Turkey is a ‘model of partnership’ ("Obama Says US, Turkey Can Be Model for the World", n.d.). Moreover, the founder of the Ennahdha Movement, Rashid Ghannouchi, stated that Turkey is an example to how states could bridge Islam and democracy (Bartal, 2020).

Under AKP’s leadership, Turkey was able to create a balance between security, democratisation, and economic growth, along with ensuring civil supremacy over the military. AKP’s foreign policy agendas illustrate that their status as a secular country does
not hinder them from providing protection and putting attention towards issues within the Muslim world (Fuller, 2014, pp. 126–146). After the Arab Spring, the alternative to state-religion relations and theopolitical policies which Turkey offers have pushed them to consider more religion-related factors in their policies. To explain the relationship between Turkey and the West, Abdullah Gül noted Turkey’s unique experience in finding the middle ground between democratic values—including respect to human rights, the supremacy of law, good governance, accountability, transparency, and gender equality—and its Muslim identity (Gül, 2004).

One important moment which enhanced Turkey’s standing within the Muslim world was the momentous 2009 World Economic Forum in Davos. Erdoğan’s criticism towards Israel’s President, Shimon Peres, attracted sympathy across the Muslim world (“Recep Erdogan Storms out of Davos after Clash with Israeli President over Gaza”, 2009). His criticism added to the complexity in Turkey-Israel relations, after a Turkish ship, which delivered humanitarian reliefs, was previously attacked by Israel in 2008, which had initially strengthened Turkey’s reputation in the Muslim world (Bayoumi, 2010). Additionally, the West has also been relying on Turkey. These dynamics left rooms for Turkey to constructively and proportionately engage in partnerships with the West, while keeping their critical stance against the West intact.

The Turkish model pushed multiple governmental institutions to support Turkey’s quest to improve its soft power in the Middle East and, at a broader context, in the Muslim world. For example, the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) in Turkey became more significant in protecting interests which are affiliated with Islam and in strengthening participations in international institutions to improve Turkey’s influence. Such institutional posture is sustained by multiple activities, such as providing scholarships through the Turkey Diyanet Foundation (Turk Diyanet Vakfı/TDV) (Fuller, 2014, pp. 110–125).

Duran and Yilmaz (2013) maintained that the Turkish model is a long-term alternative to the conservative and authoritarian model which is offered by Saudi Arabia. Turkey’s secularism does not rigidly govern how state should incorporate religious factors in its conduct. Turkey tends to make use of Islamic semantics, such as those pertaining to politics, history, humanitarianism, justice, and human rights, in its narratives. Turkey’s foreign policy agenda, as an extension of the Turkish model, encapsulates Turkey’s intention to emerge as a ‘natural leader’ in the region, as well as a
‘historical big-brother’ and ‘protector’ to the Muslim world (Gürzel, 2014; Trofimov, 2014).

Turkey’s New Image?

Multiple literatures interpret AKP’s position in the Muslim world’s politics in various ways. Hale and Ozbudun contended that AKP was not an Islamic party if its political direction were to be scrutinised. They argued that AKP was a secular party which attempted to neutralise the state’s position against religions. Moreover, Hale and Ozbudun pointed out that AKP rejected an ‘Islamist-worldview’ which carried the intention of Islamising the society through coercive means (Hale & Ozbudun, 2010).

Hale and Ozbudun specifically argued that AKP would be similar with a conservative group in a Western democracy. AKP’s conservative-democratic viewpoint was evident in multiple cases. First, the National Security Council published a decree on 28 February 1997, which defined Islamist politics as a threat to Turkey. Second, a new capitalist class, dubbed as the ‘Anatolian Islamic Bourgeoisie’, emerged, championing economic thoughts with neoliberal nuances in the 1980s. Third, the working class in Turkish metropolitans started to voice out their disappointment towards the Turkish government prior to AKP’s rise to power. Fourth, Muslim intellectuals started to shift their views and outlook. These four factors substantially influenced AKP’s stances and policies, which were accommodative towards changes without having to fully leave their conservative standpoint (Hale & Ozbudun, 2010).

AKP takes its roots from traditional Islamic Turkish customs which are intertwined with Turkish nationalism. AKP seemed to attempt to highlight that Islam is a system which cannot be separated from Turkey in the same manner that nationalism is. AKP conceptualises AKP as an “ideological instrument of building hegemon in a social formation” (Hale & Ozbudun, 2010).

AKP’s ability to survive and thrive is also attributed to its ability to maintain Turkish nationalism within its core value in exercising its control over the government. It would be impossible for AKP to maintain its popularity in the past two decades without their ability to incorporate nationalism in their policies. The core position which Turkish nationalism occupies is reinstated by Ibrahim Kalin, an adviser to Erdoğan, who maintained that the key to materialising Turkish nationalism was by learning from Ibn Khaldun’s views on ashabiyyah (Kalin, 2016).
The second element which accompanies nationalism is Islam. AKP’s conceptualisation on nationalism attempts to point out that the conceptual relations between ‘Türk’ dan ‘Muslimhood’ are not conflictual. Instead, AKP posits that Islam and Muslimhood stand at the core of Turkish national identity and they do not need to be relegated in debates on ‘Turkishness’. These viewpoints differ from the Millî Görüş Movement’s stance as one of the origins of Islamist political movements in Turkey (Saraçoğlu & Demirkol, 2015).

Synthesising Islam and Turkish secularism is not an easy task. Rustow provided a framework which could depict the strategy which Turkish Islamist groups have developed to be able to sustain themselves by showcasing a non-confrontative strategy amidst Turkey’s democracy.

As the previous sections noted, in the past 18 years, the AKP-led Turkish government experienced remarkable dynamics, both at the domestic and international levels. Turkey’s position, which stands at the intersection between Asia, Europe, Africa, and is directly a neighbour to the Middle East prompted Ankara to be involved in the regional contestations. Such condition presented Turkey with a wide array of complex security concerns which Turkey needs to respond to. It is important to note that AKP’s reign has painted a new colour in Turkish long history of political contestations. AKP’s promotion of the “New Turkey” imagery has become an important cornerstone in AKP’s quest to realise what it calls as the “Turkey Vision 2023.” Such imagery is an attempt to boost the confidence in Turkey’s ability to bridge Islam and democracy amidst Turkish secular nuances. Turkey, under AKP, attempts to balance out security, democratisation, and economic development, which are supplemented by civilian control over the military.

Islam has acquired a different position in Turkey in comparison to its position prior to 2002. The state and religions no longer stand in contrast to each other. Before 2002, resistances against religions were strongly expressed, as demonstrated by multiple phenomena which occurred at that time. The establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, which embraced secularism, marked the beginning of the separation between religions and the state. The ban to wear headscarf did not occur during Atatürk’s leadership, but instead was imposed after the 1980 coup and was reinstated in 1997 by banning headscarf in universities. These phenomena was intensified by the expulsion of Merve Kavakci, who then served as a member of the Turkish parliament, for wearing headscarf ("Turkey’s History of Headscarf Bans Explained", n.d.).
AKP attempted to resolve frictions between religions and the state. AKP paid much attention to abolishing the ban against wearing headscarf, despite receiving pressures from the opposition. In one of his speech, Erdoğan stated that AKP believes that all women have equal rights, whether they choose to wear or to not wear headscarf. AKP’s success to repeal the ban was achieved over a long period of time, leading to the success to revoke the ban in universities, governmental institutions, and schools in 2010, 2013, and 2014, respectively ("Turkey’s History of Headscarf Bans Explained", n.d.).

The religions-state clash was deemed as a serious threat for the majority of AKP’s supporters, which came from the Turkish traditional Islamist groups. Moreover, AKP aspired to highlight Islam’s position as an inseparable component of Turkey. AKP’s approach in navigating through Turkey’s secularism is an interesting object of scrutiny. AKP does not overtly stand against secularism, but it has slowly transformed how secularism is interpreted in Turkey. Upholding “justice” and “human rights” is a rational choice for AKP in providing rooms for religious expressions to emerge in public life, which had previously been a problem in Turkish modern history.

AKP is deemed to implement a mechanism which differs from the ones applied by other Middle Eastern states in synthesising Islamic values and norms with liberal democratic principles and individual freedom. Atasoy (2009) posited that AKP was never anti-Kemalist nor anti-secularist. Instead, AKP was a pro-Islam party, but not an Islamist party. AKP believed that Islam would be an authentic system for Turkey and was the roots of Turkish Islamist traditions. Atasoy (2009) also stated that a synthesis of Islam and Turkey had been previously developed in the 1980s by the Turkish Hearts (Aydinlar Oçağı) group. These developments contributed to AKP’s ideological development, which was highly influenced by the Islam- and Turkish-nuanced nationalism developed by Fazil Kisakurek (Atasoy, 2009). However, it could not be denied that what AKP developed was a form of Islamic-nationalism (Cınar, 2011).

**CONCLUSION**
AKP’s stance demonstrated that secularism in Turkey is not a threat to the existence of Islam. Instead, secularism provides AKP with the opportunity to develop an understanding that Islam cannot be separated from the Turkish society. In this case, AKP succeeded to consolidate the conservative and liberalist takes on Islam in the political, economy, and socio-cultural dimensions.
Throughout its development, Islamist politics in Turkey has experienced multiple organic transformations. The establishment, development, and dissolution of Islamist political parties in Turkey, before AKP’s victory in Turkish democracy, have been influenced by pressures from the military. Multiple military coups in Turkey have hindered the development of Islamist politics in Turkey.

These phenomena displayed the responsive nature of Islamist groups towards transformations. However, it is important to note that the responsive posture which was displayed in the 1970s to early 2000s is different from what has been evident since the AKP rose to prominence in early 2000. One difference which clearly stands out is the shift from the rigid views and posture which past Islamist groups adopted to the flexible ones which AKP has showcased. Said flexibility is an important feature in AKP’s leadership. In addition, AKP’s political manoeuvres have succeeded to position Islam as an inseparable aspect of the Turkish people.

The AKP’s construct of the inseparable nature of Islam from Turkish nationalism points to two important implications. First, at the domestic level, this goes to show that AKP’s attempt to consolidate political power and attract sympathy from the public succeeded to contribute to its electoral success. Second, at the international level, AKP’s understanding on the religion-state relations has facilitated Turkey to expand its soft power, especially within the Muslim world.

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**Note:**

1 There is a wide variety of identities which are associated with the Middle East, such as Arab, Islamism, Shia, Zaydi, Houthi, Alawi, Kurd, Druze, Copt, Kemalism, Zionism, Wahabism, etc.

2 The National Outlook Movement (*Milli Görüş*) refers to an Islamist political movement which was initiated by Necmettin Erbakan in the 1970s. The movement criticised the political and economic system which secular-Kemalist upheld, which was deemed to marginalise people living in rural areas. The movement believed that modernisation in Turkey should be achieved by combining Turkish and Islamic values. Erbakan had also been an active founder of many political parties to put forward the values which the National Outlook Movement strived for, including the National Order Party (*Milli Nizam Partisi*) which was dissolved in 1971 and the National Salvation Party (*Milli Selamet Partisi*) which was dissolved in 1981. Substantially speaking, Islam-based parties which succeeded both parties have adopted a part or the whole ideological values of the National Outlook Movement. ‘Just Order’ refers to the economic model which the Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*) proposed in the 1991 general election. The model was offered as an alternative to the capitalist and socialist economic systems, which emphasised an interest-free economy and promoted state control over the economy (Hale & Ozbudun, 2010; Yavuz, 2009).

3 The Ottoman Empire’s collapse was attributed to multiple internal crises within the empire, including problems revolving commitment to modernisation, wars in multiple areas due to demands to withdraw from the empire, attacks from external powers, resistances from conservative groups, etc.