



Constructing Turkish “exceptionalism”: Discourses of liminality and hybridity in post-Cold War Turkish foreign policy[☆]

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A B S T R A C T

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This article examines the discursive practices that enable the construction of Turkish “exceptionalism.” It argues that in an attempt to play the mediator/peacemaker role as an emerging power, the Turkish elite construct an “exceptionalist” identity that portrays Turkey in a liminal state. This liminality and thus the “exceptionalist” identity it creates, is rooted in the hybridization of Turkey’s geographical and historical characteristics. The Turkish foreign policy elite make every effort to underscore Turkey’s geography as a meeting place of different continents. Historically, there has also been an ongoing campaign to depict Turkey’s past as “multicultural” and multi-civilizational. These constructions of identity however, run counter to the Kemalist nation-building project, which is based on “purity” in contrast to “hybridity” both in terms of historiography and practice.

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“It is impossible to separate Turkish foreign policy from Turkey’s past... Napoleon once said that it is geography that dictated foreign policy. I am going to add two more factors: history and the conjuncture... Indeed for a country like Turkey that has liquidated an empire, geography and history hold many advantages and disadvantages as well as many opportunities and challenges and responsibilities” (Demirel, 2002b: pp. 683–684).

“What are the main factors that place Turkey on a different axis and create a unique cultural dynamism? For these factors, one should look into Turkey’s two constant variables related to time and space, into history and geography” (Davutoğlu, 2004: pp. 80–81).

“Turkey is a modern Eurasian country that bridges the East and the West and has successfully managed to synthesize the culture and values of both equally. Our roots in Central Asia and interaction with the Western world that dates back to centuries, grants us the exceptional situation of fully belonging to both continents at the same time” (Gül, 2008).

How do states create a sense of national “exceptionalism?” That is, how do they generate the belief, which sometimes help justify states’

actions and policies (Brummett, 2007: p. 302; Ricento, 2003: p. 613), that they are a “special case ‘outside’ the common patterns and laws of history” (Tyrrell, 1991: p. 1031)? Pointing out or implying that a state and its features are “unique” and “exceptional” is one way of creating such a belief. In addition to highlighting a “unique” geography and history, elites can also construct “exceptionalism” through a series of discursive practices. This paper analyzes and exposes the complex web of discursive practices that shape the construction of Turkish “exceptionalism” in the post-Cold War period. The main argument is that Turkish exceptionalism in the post-Cold War period is constructed *via* liminal representations of the country. That is, while its policymakers imagine Turkey as a mediator/peacemaker between East and West, Turkey is also referred to as a country transitioning from a middle-sized power to a greater power. Turkey’s liminality, or the state of “being neither here nor there” or “being betwixt and between the positions,” to borrow the term from anthropologist Turner (1969: p. 95), is grounded in the hybrid representations of its geography and history. The hybridization of geography is constructed by various discursive practices that portray Turkey as a meeting place of different regions and continents. Turkey, in other words, is portrayed as belonging to two different continents and containing the features of both. The hybridization of history means that Turkey’s past, especially its multiethnic and multireligious Ottoman past is remembered and represented in a multicultural way. In other words, Turkey’s history and geography and thus its liminal status are thereby presented as exceptional in world politics.

With this argument as its background, this paper has two goals. The first goal is to illustrate the long tradition of constructing

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exceptionalism among Turkish policymakers that extended at least through the post-Cold War period (the period under consideration in this paper). With the “neo-Ottomanism” debate *en vogue* yet again (“neo-Ottomanism” itself being a hybrid representation of history), the media have continually pointed to Ahmet Davutoğlu and his book *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* (Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position) published in 2001 as the source of this discourse. In that book Davutoğlu argues that Turkey's two “strategic depths” are its history and geography and that Turks should make the utmost use of these “depths” to turn Turkey into a major power. Yet neither Davutoğlu who is the current Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, nor the “reformed Islamist” Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party-JDP) to which he belongs is the sole architect of the discourse that portrays Turkey's liminality. When the neo-Ottomanism debate resurfaced in the 2000s, some scholars pointed to a “continuity” between the policies of Turgut Özal's Anavatan Partisi (Motherland Party-MP) and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's JDP and especially, Ahmet Davutoğlu's “strategic depth,” doctrine (Murnison 2006: p. 947). Even so, Davutoğlu, the JDP and former Prime Minister Turgut Özal and are not the only actors who portrayed Turkey liminally and banked on hybrid representations of geography and history and thus, deliberately or not, created an exceptionalist identity for Turkey. If neo-Ottomanism is defined as a discourse that highlights Turkey's Ottoman past and mixes it with geographical uniqueness to justify an active foreign policy in Turkey's immediate neighborhood, it can easily be demonstrated that there were shades of unspoken neo-Ottomanism helping to construct an exceptionalist Turkish identity even during the periods in which there was no neo-Ottomanism debate.

The second goal of this paper is to draw attention to the incongruity, or paradox, that this understanding of Turkish exceptionalism, which is based on history and geography, creates. Critical geopolitics is based on the premise that more than geographies, there are geographical representations, that when invented and interpreted, create tools of power in the service of statecraft (O'Tuathail and Dalby 1998: p. 15). For Dijkink (1996), in contrast, it is not only geographical but historical representations too are the tools of power. Dijkink argues that national identity and geopolitical visions (i.e., the way in which a country's policymakers imagine their country's location remember their past and conduct their foreign policy), are inseparable from the construction of a national identity. Dijkink finds a reciprocal relationship between foreign policymaking and the creation of national identity, neither of which can exist without imaginations of location and past. With Turkish exceptionalism, one can talk about two different and contradictory sets of identities prevalent in present-day Turkey, one at the domestic level and the other at the international level. One of these identities is the exceptionalist identity based on the hybridization of geography and history that attempts to portray Turkey as an emerging power as well as a mediator/peacemaker thus positioning it liminally at the international level. The realities at the domestic level are quite different. The official state identity set forth by the Kemalist founders of the Turkish Republic, is based on the “purity” principle (Ersanli, 2002: p. 153). That is, Turkish nation making was “purified” in several regards. First, the Ottoman and Islamic past – the past that the Turkish elites have been trying to reclaim since the 1950s and more forcefully since the 1980s – was initially removed from Turkey's historiography (Ersanli, 2002). Second, Kemalist nation-building was based on excluding and expelling non-Muslim elements from society both rhetorically and more importantly, at a practical level (see for example, Aktar, 2009: pp. 29–62; Çağaptay, 2006: Chapter 6 and 7). It also stood on the premise that all remaining Muslims were “Turks” or, especially in the case of the Kurds were potential “Turks” (Yeğen, 2007).

Third, as a result, even the ancient Anatolian civilizations have only been selectively remembered in history books since the establishment of the Republic (Copeaux, 2002: pp. 399–401). Put differently, as Çolak (2006: p. 599) and Yılmaz and Yosmaoğlu (2008: p. 677) have also argued, hybrid or the “multicultural” and “multi-civilizational” representations of Turkey's past and geography that contain these elements, or the desire to remember these elements contradict the founding premises of the Kemalist state (which takes a purist stance in nation making) as well as the current realities regarding the state of ethnic and religious pluralism in contemporary Turkey.

The remainder of this paper unfolds in four sections. After this introduction, I discuss key concepts, namely exceptionalism, liminality and hybridity. I then analyze the historical background that prepared the way for and perpetuated the emergence of the geographical and historical hybridization that grounds the claims of Turkish exceptionalism. In the third section, I discuss the representational practices of geographical and historical hybridization and finally summarize the paper in the conclusion where I reiterate my main findings and arguments.¹

Defining exceptionalism, liminality and hybridity

Exceptionalism

The literature is replete with the analyses of different claims to exceptionalism. Some analyses are critical, some favorable, and other deconstructive. There is special attention paid to American exceptionalism, but there are also discussions of other claims to exceptionalism such as the Asian, Chinese, Canadian, and Israeli varieties, just to cite a few. One can divide the exceptionalism literature in political science and international relations into two parts. Some of these studies focus on the cultural, religious, historical, strategic or societal underpinnings of a state or a nation that serves as the basis of the claims of difference (Lipset, 1996) and ultimately for the construction of claims of superiority *vis-à-vis* other states and nations (Hodgson, 2009; Merom, 1999). Other studies focus on certain institutional or procedural factors that defy generalizations related to various laws, theories or expectations, or to put it more concisely, on “anomalies” in the political science or international relations literature (Kazemipur 2006; Mahajan 2005; Studlar 2001).

In the Turkish setting however, works explicitly discussing or referring to Turkish exceptionalism are rare and mostly focus on political or economic processes at the domestic level. While Brummett (2007), in analyzing cartoons appearing in 19th century Ottoman newspapers, deconstructs the emergence of Ottoman exceptionalism as a resource to overcome accusations of inferiority, Mardin (2005) talks about a Turkish-Islamic exceptionalism and points to “the specifics of Turkish history ... that have worked cumulatively to create a special setting for Islam, a setting where secularism and Islam interpenetrate” (2005: p. 148). For Angrist (2004), it is the Turkish political system that is “exceptional,” as Turkey is the only country with competitive party politics in the post-Ottoman lands. Öniş and Güven (2010) recently have argued that the fact that Turkey did not renew its agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) should be considered “exceptional.” Michael (2008), in contrast, has linked the politicization of every issue in Turkey to its “geographical and historical exceptionalism.”

However, the construction of an “exceptional” national self-image through the foreign policy process based on Turkey's geographical and historical features and the ways in which this construction has been accomplished seems to have been missed by students of Turkey. This is not to say that Turkey's geographical and historical features have not been elaborated on by others. Turkey's

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