

## Erdogan's Politics of Domination: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Neo-Ottomanism

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**Abstract** Following the dissolution of the Ottoman dynasty in 1924, Turkey experienced profound political transformations. Transitioning from a monarchy under the Ottoman Empire to a republican system under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the country embraced secularism as a foundational principle. This article explores the political rhetoric of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the current President of Turkey, who has revived the concept of Neo-Ottomanism to shape Turkey's developmental trajectory and regional ambitions. By analyzing political statements, policy documents, and public discourses, this study investigates how Erdogan's administration employed Neo-Ottomanism not only to evoke a nostalgic vision of the Ottoman Empire's grandeur but also as a strategic framework for asserting Turkey's regional influence and political dominance. The article argues that Neo-Ottomanism is a symbolic tool for national identity construction and a practical instrument for projecting geopolitical power.

**Abstrak** Setelah runtuhnya dinasti Ottoman pada tahun 1924, Turki mengalami perubahan politik dan pemerintahan yang signifikan. Sebelumnya, Turki menjadi bagian dari monarki Ottoman, sementara kemudian di bawah Kemal Attaturk, Turki mengadopsi sistem pemerintahan Republik dan menerapkan sekularisme. Artikel ini membahas jargon politik yang diadopsi oleh Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Presiden Turki saat ini, yang memperkenalkan apa yang disebut sebagai kebijakan Neo-Ottomanisme untuk memproyeksikan agenda pembangunan dan regional Turki di masa depan. Menganalisis pernyataan politik dan dokumen kebijakan pemerintahan Erdogan, penelitian ini berfokus pada wacana Neo-Ottomanisme dan resonansinya di ruang publik Turki. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa Neo-Ottomanisme tidak hanya digunakan oleh pemerintahan Erdogan untuk membawa imajinasi romantisme tentang keagungan masa lalu Utsmaniyah ke hadapan masyarakat Turki, namun yang lebih penting adalah untuk meletakkan jalan bagi dominasi regional dan politik Turki.

**Keywords** Erdogan; developmental and regional agendas; Neo-Ottomanism; political domination; Turkey

### Introduction

Turkey experienced significant changes in its government after the collapse of the Ottoman dynasty in 1924. Previously, Turkey implemented a monarchical system of government. While post-Ottoman, Kemal Ataturk adopted a Republican system of government and implemented secularism in his government. Meanwhile, during the reign of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, he pursued a Neo-Ottomanism



policy as the basis of the state in acting and executing Turkey's various political agendas in the future.<sup>1</sup> The concept of Neo-Ottomanism emerged as a significant political discourse during the administration of Turgut Özal, who served as Turkey's president from 1991 to 1993. Özal introduced Neo-Ottomanism as a response to identity challenges posed by Kurdish and Islamist movements within Turkey. His interpretation of Neo-Ottomanism emphasized pluralism, acknowledging the role of the Islamic public sphere in shaping Turkey's socio-political landscape. Over time, this concept became embedded in the ideological framework of Turkish governance, evolving into a guiding principle in the construction of modern Turkey. Under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Neo-Ottomanism has gained renewed prominence, serving as both a symbolic and strategic foundation for Turkey's domestic and regional policies.

The concept of Neo-Ottomanism has become one of the discourses that continue to be debated and researched.<sup>2</sup> This study explores the manifestations of Neo-Ottomanism during Erdoğan's administration, both in domestic governance and foreign policy, highlighting its growing influence in Turkey's political landscape. Neo-Ottomanism represents a nostalgic reimagining of Turkey's historical grandeur during the Ottoman Empire's territorial expansion and political dominance. Under Erdoğan's leadership, Neo-Ottomanism has become a central component of the government's agenda, reflected in various strategic policies and decisions to transform Turkey into a strong, self-reliant global power. Key priorities include economic leadership in regional and international spheres and the pursuit of full membership in the European Union. This ambition underscores the Erdoğan administration's vision for Turkey's global prominence. Moreover, the AKP party is also trying to make various approaches and efforts to accept Turkey as a permanent member of the European Union.<sup>3</sup>

Erdoğan is trying his best to make political acceleration and policies related to the success of the Neo-Ottomanism vision. For example, the transfer of the status of the Hagia Sophia from a museum to a mosque and several churches or cathedrals in Turkey changed their status to mosques<sup>4</sup> and the construction of the magnificent Taksim mosque in Istanbul, which was inaugurated directly by President Erdoğan. In this context, Erdoğan seeks to convey to Turkish society that modern Turkey aspires to revive its former glory during the Ottoman era. The vision of Neo-Ottomanism serves as a

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<sup>1</sup> M. Hakan Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire: The Politics of Neo-Ottomanism* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Didem Albayrak and Kürşad Turan, "Neo-Ottomanism in Turkish Foreign Policy Through the Lenses of the Principal-Agent Theory," *Journal of Security, Strategy, and Political Studies* 1 (June 6, 2016): 129–54; Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire*; Gabriela Özel Volfová, "Turkey's Middle Eastern Endeavors: Discourses and Practices of Neo-Ottomanism under the AKP," *Die Welt Des Islams* 56, No. 3/4 (2016): 489–510; M. Hakan Yavuz, "Turkish Identity and Foreign Policy in Flux: The Rise of Neo-Ottomanism," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 7, no. 12 (March 1998): 19–41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10669929808720119>; Ömer Taspınar, "Turkey's Middle East Policies: Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism" (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Volfová, "Turkey's Middle Eastern Endeavors."

<sup>4</sup> "Turkey converts another former Istanbul church into a mosque," accessed November 16, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/8/21/turkey-converts-another-former-istanbul-church-into-a-mosque>.

comprehensive agenda guiding the Turkish government's domestic and foreign policies. Beyond a mere political program, Neo-Ottomanism functions as a strategic tool to consolidate Erdogan's authority, strengthen the influence of the ruling elite, and fortify alliances with coalition parties, including the AKP. This vision aims to stabilize the domestic political landscape and garner public support for upcoming elections, and bolster Turkey's bid for permanent membership in the European Union, positioning the country as a dominant regional power.

This research's primary objective is to comprehensively analyze off's praxis of Neo-Ottomanism as manifested in Erdogan's various policies. This study also aims to explore the strengthening of Neo-Ottomanism within the broader political landscape of Turkey. The interplay between secularism, post-Islamism—represented by the AKP party—and Neo-Ottomanism constitutes a critical issue in the realization of this vision. Despite their inherent potential for conflict, Erdogan's leadership seeks to negotiate these three elements to create a harmonious political framework. Examining the relationship between Erdogan's policies and the praxis of Neo-Ottomanism provides valuable insights into the dynamics of contemporary Turkey. Furthermore, the growing influence of Neo-Ottomanism within Erdogan's political agenda is inseparable from his strategic efforts to consolidate his authority and prolong his leadership as Turkey's president.

This research uses literature research by tracing various sources related to Turkish Neo-Ottomanism which is the focus of study in this research. The primary sources used in this study are several works and books related to Neo-Ottomanism discourses, academic theses, research reports, and various literature that are appropriate and related to the themes discussed in this study. In addition, the author also conducts a literature review on several journal articles and recent research related to the emerging Neo-Ottomanism discourse. Furthermore, from some data and facts found from various literature, these data are clustered according to the variables and subject matter discussed in this study.

This study employs a historical and interdisciplinary approach to the data analysis process. The data are carefully selected and filtered based on their relevance to the research theme and focus. The selected data are then analyzed using appropriate theoretical frameworks to address the research problems comprehensively. The analysis technique combines descriptive narratives and analytical interpretations, thoroughly examining the material objects under study.

Moreover, the author presents the data and facts gathered from various scholarly sources related to Neo-Ottomanism and its connection to contemporary Turkish politics. Selecting credible literature with verifiable validity is a crucial step to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the information. This methodological approach enables the study to offer a nuanced understanding of the manifestation of Neo-Ottomanism in Turkey and its implications for the political policies under Erdogan's administration.

The discourse of Neo-Ottomanism explored in this study necessitates the application of an appropriate theoretical framework to analyze the underlying academic issues critically. The selection of a relevant theory is essential to support the data and literature analysis process, enhancing the overall rigor of the research. The interconnection between Erdogan's policies and the praxis of Neo-Ottomanism serves as a pivotal aspect in comprehensively understanding the dynamics of contemporary Turkey.

Furthermore, the increasing prominence of Neo-Ottomanism in Erdogan's political agenda is an undeniable feature of modern Turkish politics. The various policies implemented by Erdogan are inextricably linked to his broader strategy of consolidating power and reinforcing his leadership position as Turkey's president. This study aims to unravel these complexities by situating Neo-Ottomanism within the broader socio-political landscape of Turkey.

The authors employ oligarchy theory as the analytical framework to examine the research problems in this study. According to the *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, oligarchy is defined as a system of governance in which political power is concentrated in the hands of a small, privileged minority. This theoretical approach provides a critical lens to explore the dynamics of power consolidation and the influence of elite groups in Turkish politics under Erdogan's leadership. The term oligarchy is taken from the Greek, namely "oligarchia", which means government by a few. The word oligarchy itself consists of *oligoi* (a few) and *arkhein* (to rule). Thus, oligarchy is a form of government in which a small privileged group rules or holds political power. Winters stated that oligarchy requires an effort to place two dimensions. Firstly, the oligarchy has a basis of power that is very difficult to resolve and balance comprehensively. Second, the oligarchy has a broad and systemic power scope, even though it is in a large community position. If it is associated with the object of research in this study, namely the leadership of Erdogan ruling Turkey, it shows an oligarchic tendency. This makes Turkey's political and economic situation and conditions only controlled by a portion of the political elite and certain groups.

In the context of Neo-Ottomanism under Erdogan's leadership, modern Turkey has been shaped by an oligarchic system driven by President Erdogan, the AKP party, and supporting political elites. The consolidation of power within this framework has reinforced the Neo-Ottomanism vision as a central pillar of Erdogan's governance. This underscores Erdogan's significant role in shaping Turkey's political trajectory, necessitating a deeper exploration of how Neo-Ottomanism influences the country's future direction.

### **Neo-Ottomanism and Erdogan's Political Policies**

Neo-Ottomanism emerged in the Turkish political landscape and was studied as a discourse when the term was used during the reign of President Turgut Özal. In Özal's view, Neo-Ottomanism is part of political identity in emphasizing the pluralism side and the role of Islam in the public sphere. This condition makes Özal one of the important architects in the export process of liberal economic orientation and the actor behind establishing a new Turkey in contemporary Turkish politics.<sup>5</sup> For him, Neo-Ottomanism was an important part of achieving Turkey's vision of political and social work.

Neo-Ottomanism remains a dynamic discourse in both academic and Turkish political studies, continuously evolving in response to the prevailing socio-political context. The concept is significantly influenced by the political leadership in power and how government leaders implement policies and decisions. Under Erdogan's administration, Neo-Ottomanism is a guiding framework for various domestic and foreign policies, reflecting the administration's broader political ambitions and aspirations. Several empirical findings evidence the praxis of Neo-Ottomanism in Erdogan's policies. According to Cagaptay, Neo-Ottomanism plays a pivotal role in shaping Turkey's political performance, particularly in Ahmet Davutoglu's "strategic depth" policy during his tenure as Turkey's foreign minister. This indicates that the government's policies are well-calculated and aligned with long-term strategic objectives, reinforcing the vision of Neo-Ottomanism in both internal and external affairs.

Neo-Ottomanism also reshaped the past for current political domination. Neo-Ottomanism was built by the AKP party through various policies during the Erdogan administration that focused on the West to the East and various other issues in the regional scope.<sup>6</sup> Discussions and debates about Neo-Ottomanism are divided into two parts: Neo-Ottomanism as state identity vis-a-vis social identity and emphasis on domestic issues. This concept also responds to the Kemalist ideology and identity shaped by the Republic of Turkey. Furthermore, the idea of finding Turkey's relationship with the past during the Ottoman period was embodied in the idea of Neo-Ottomanism. Second, Neo-Ottomanism emphasizes Turkey's foreign policy more because the state structure created after the War of Independence did not have a vision capable of bringing Turkey into a great world power. To that end, Turkey needs to reflect on the Ottoman past and develop deeper, multi-dimensional relations with other countries that were formerly Ottoman territories. In other words, Neo-Ottomanism seeks to establish and enhance cultural, economic, social, and political relations with the former Ottoman territories by exploiting Turkey's historical, geographical, cultural, and religious ties.<sup>7</sup> Neo-Ottomanism was a big

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<sup>5</sup> Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire*.

<sup>6</sup> Albayrak and Turan, "Neo-Ottomanism in Turkish Foreign Policy Through the Lenses of the Principal-Agent Theory."

<sup>7</sup> Albayrak and Turan.

ambition of Erdogan during his reign in Turkey. This can be evidenced by Erdogan's speech in front of his supporters at the celebration of the 15th-century conquest of Istanbul by the Ottoman sultanate by Sultan Mehmed II. This event marked the victory of Muslims over the Christian West.

"This conquest meant being able to transcend walls that the West thought was impenetrable".<sup>8</sup>

Erdogan's statement highlights Turkey's historical triumph over the West through the conquest of Istanbul in 1453, positioning this event as a symbolic reference for Turkey's contemporary political aspirations. During his leadership, Erdogan strategically integrates Neo-Ottomanism into various policy implementations, reflecting the vision of reviving Turkey's historical legacy. His domestic and foreign policies are crafted to align with Neo-Ottoman ideals, reinforcing Turkey's influence both regionally and globally. Cagaptay underscores Erdogan's pivotal role in shaping the Turkish political landscape, illustrating how his leadership intertwines with the broader discourse of Neo-Ottomanism. Since he took office as prime minister in 2013 and president in 2014, Erdogan has been the unshakable leader of Turkey after Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, Erdogan also stated in rhetorical language, "*From today, we will make our foreign policy and not listen to others.*" This implies that Erdogan had great ambitions during his tenure to control and regulate his foreign policy with the Neo-Ottomanism vision that he echoed.<sup>10</sup> Erdogan also said in his speech:

"The Republic of Turkey, just like our previous countries, which were a continuation of each other, is also a continuation of the Ottomans. Of course, the borders have changed. The form of government has changed. But the essence is the same, and the soul is the same; even the institutions are the same."<sup>11</sup>

According to Cagaptay, Erdogan is recognized as a prominent populist leader on the global stage. His leadership style is characterized by efforts to marginalize and impose harsh demographic measures against those who oppose him. Erdogan's populism has enabled him to cultivate a loyal base, primarily among conservative segments of society. Simultaneously, his policies are credited with reducing poverty rates in Turkey, contributing to a polarized public opinion. Turkish society is divided into two camps: those who revere him and those who strongly oppose him. Erdogan seeks to reshape public perception and foster a more favorable image through strategic self-presentation. Ultimately, his pursuit of consolidating power culminated in declaring himself as president with full authority, establishing an increasingly authoritarian regime in Turkey.

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<sup>8</sup> Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire*.

<sup>9</sup> Soner Cagaptay, *The New Sultan: Erdogan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey* (I.B.Tauris, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Burak Bekdil, "Why neo-Ottomanism is bad for Turkey," accessed December 17, 2021, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/why-neo-ottomanism-is-bad-for-turkey-10886683>.

<sup>11</sup> Merve Şebnem Oruç, "'Neo-Ottomanism' and Erdoğan: Comparisons, Facts | Column," *Daily Sabah*, February 24, 2021, <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/columns/neo-ottomanism-and-erdogan-comparisons-facts>.

Moreover, the Turkish populace requires a president who demonstrates a steadfast commitment to safeguarding the rights of all citizens. Should Erdogan secure the presidency, he must acknowledge and accommodate the political aspirations of the entire population, particularly concerning the unresolved Kurdish issue. Additionally, Erdogan must recognize the importance of refraining from imposing a rigid interpretation of conservative Islam, which may not align with the diverse social fabric of Turkish society. Turkey's heterogeneous composition, encompassing various social, political, ethnic, and religious groups, necessitates an inclusive approach that upholds pluralism and fosters social cohesion.

Ahmet Davutoglu's statement as Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey also explained about Neo-Ottomanism, namely as follows:

"Yes, we are the new Ottomans. We are forced to engage with neighboring countries. We even went to Africa. The superpowers are watching us in confusion." <sup>12</sup>

In addition, Lutfi Dogan, former head of the Diyanet directorate, also stated that Mehmet Zahid Kotku, a prominent Naksibendi sheikh of Turkey, once said:

"The core identity and character of the injured nation is Islam. Your main heritage is Islam, and as a Muslim. You can heal this wound by healing this wound by listening to what the Turkish people want. What they want is a sense of justice and restoration of their Islam-Ottoman identity."

Meanwhile, regarding the meaning of Mehmet Zahid Kotku's words by "wounded nation", Dogan said:

"For us Turkish Muslims, we were forced out of the Balkans, Caucasus, and Crimea and persecuted by European powers. Not only were our communities forced out of the Balkans, as is still the case in Bosnia today, but our beautiful vocabulary and language were wiped out. On the one hand, the entire post-Ottoman system of secularism, nationalism, and nation-states, including NATO membership, was imposed by Europe. We never had a chance to heal our government and historic wounds and mourn the world we went through." <sup>13</sup>

From Dogan's statement above, Dogan tries to evoke a sense of melancholy and nostalgia for the culture, region, and confidence in the long-lost Ottoman era. The ever-present feeling of nostalgia for a stronger, religious, and prosperous Turkey has played an important role in shaping political discourse among Turkish conservatives. Kotku and Dogan's statements above basically convey a general bitter feeling for the suffering of Muslims around the world and try to dream of victory and historical nicks during the Ottoman dynasty, which was able to control various regions and expand to various

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<sup>12</sup> Iwaylo Hristov, "Neo-Ottomanism – Emergence, Ideology and Political Doctrine," *Social Evolution & History* 18 (March 1, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.30884/seh/2019.01.08>.

<sup>13</sup> Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire*.

countries, both in Africa and Europe.

On the other hand, the problems that have surfaced in the Turkish government's internal politics are the vulnerability of the conflict between the pro-Erdogan and anti-AKP blocs, as well as the attacks of ISIS and the PKK, which are enemies of the Erdogan government. Not only that, clashes from various camps and groups, as well as external threats that threaten Turkey's security stability, have led to civil unrest. If Erdogan can overcome these problems, he will be a successful president. However, if that fails, then he will be remembered by the Turkish people as a failed president and bring ruin to modern Turkey.

Furthermore, Erdogan issued decisions and responses in the context of Turkish politics, which can be read as part of their efforts to succeed in the vision of Neo-Ottomanism, which has become the spirit of the Turkish government in achieving Turkish glory as was the case during the Ottoman dynasty. Foreign policy and public opinion on the issue of Turkey's accession to the European Union are also crucial discussions in the Erdogan government. It is also influenced by the historical heritage of the Ottoman Turks as a European power in Eastern Europe (McDonald 2012). In addition, Turkey's foreign policy cannot be separated from the influence of the legacy of the Ottoman Turkish dynasty in its implementation. The political elite behind Erdogan's government has also played an important role in trying to reclaim the Ottoman past in terms of its foreign policy.<sup>14</sup>

Turkey's foreign policy that has attracted the most attention is Turkey's efforts to try to become a permanent member of the European Union. In this regard, Turkey is trying to establish good relations with Europe. This shows that Turkey is trying hard to become a permanent member of the European Union. However, Turkey has a historical history that makes Turkey considered to have a bad record for the European world. Relations between Turkey and Europe have also experienced various challenges in recent decades. Moreover, the cooperation between the two is also quite promising, especially on policy issues such as trade, migration, and energy.<sup>15</sup>

As Turkey's foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu played a pivotal role in shaping the foreign policies implemented during Erdogan's administration. His political career began following the AKP party's electoral victory in November 2002. Before his political involvement, Davutoglu had an academic background and was appointed foreign policy adviser to Prime Minister Erdogan on May 1, 2009. Subsequently, he ascended to the position of foreign minister. During his tenure, Davutoglu sought to actualize his foreign policy vision, which he articulated in his seminal work *Strategic Depth*. He elaborated on his ideas through various platforms, including speeches, interviews, and scholarly

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<sup>14</sup> Lerna K. Yanık, "Bringing the Empire Back In: The Gradual Discovery of the Ottoman Empire in Turkish Foreign Policy," *Die Welt Des Islams* 56, No. 3/4 (2016): 466–88.

<sup>15</sup> Özge Zihnioğlu, *EU–Turkey Relations: Civil Society and Depoliticization*, Routledge Studies in European Foreign Policy (Routledge, 2019).



articles. The origins of the *Strategic Depth* doctrine can be traced back to Turgut Özal's Neo-Ottomanism approach, which emphasized Turkey's historical and geopolitical significance in regional and global affairs. The concept expresses multi-dimensional politics. This also indicates that Turkey has the result of the historical heritage of the Ottoman Empire and has a very wide area.<sup>16</sup>

Apart from Ahmet Davutoglu's contribution, Turkey's foreign policy cannot be separated from the influence and intervention of the AKP party.<sup>17</sup> This can be traced to how Turkey's democratic discourse, identity, and foreign policy are under the control of the AKP party (Keyman and Gumuscu 2014). The context of globalization has had an impact on the direction of Turkey's transformation in the last few decades. In this case, the AKP party is trying to pursue economic globalization after coming to power in 2002. It has benefited from the neoliberal expansion that had a major electoral impact.

The proactive attitude of Turkey's foreign policy is also considered to be one of the characteristics and features of how the AKP party plays a big role in framing Turkey's foreign policy. However, the debate about the proactive attitude of Turkey's foreign policy has been going on since the 1990s, and at that time, the Turkish foreign minister was Ismail Cem. Furthermore, in the 1980s, the president of Turkey was held by Turgut Ozal, the Homeland Party leader. In this context, Turkey's search effort responded effectively to the issues that emerged after the Cold War, which caused debate in the 1980s and the late 1990s and became a central issue for the sustainability of Turkey's foreign policy during Ismail Cem's tenure as foreign minister. However, a foreign policy that tends to be proactive should not be reduced by the AKP and become a rational choice as a guide for the continuity of Turkey's foreign policy under the Erdogan government. For example, Turkey's foreign policy toward the Middle East, especially towards three countries bordering Turkey, such as Iran, Iraq, and Syria, is a priority in Turkey's foreign policy. Moreover, the issue of Kurdish and Israel's aggressive attitudes after the Arab Spring forced the Erdogan government to play an important role in this transformation process.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, the Erdogan government is trying to carry out various policies that are considered populist and lead to oligarchy. Oligarchy is the understanding of a form of government whose political power is controlled and co-opted by a small minority.<sup>19</sup> Winters reveals the discourse and conceptual reconstruction of the study of oligarchy. He tries to build his theoretical framework based on oligarchic material, namely wealth that is concentrated in certain individuals. This concept can be traced to several of Erdogan's policies, such as Turkey's domestic and foreign issues, namely Erdogan's efforts to form a

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<sup>16</sup> Alexander Murinson, "The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy," *Middle Eastern Studies* 42, No. 6 (2006): 945–64.

<sup>17</sup> M. Hakan Yavuz, "Social and Intellectual Origins of Neo-Ottomanism: Searching for a Post-National Vision," *Die Welt Des Islams* 56, No. 3/4 (2016): 438–65.

<sup>18</sup> M. Sheharyar Khan, "The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy Towards the Middle East," *Policy Perspectives* 12, No. 1 (2015): 31–50, <https://doi.org/10.13169/polipers.12.1.0031>.

<sup>19</sup> Abdur Rozaki, *Islam, Oligarki Politik & Perlawanan Sosial*, 2016.

new face of Turkey in issues and issues related to the Middle East.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, Erdogan's role has been instrumental in constructing a new political order grounded in the vision of Neo-Ottomanism. One of the prominent symbols of this vision is the construction of the Camlica Mosque, which stands as a monumental achievement during Erdogan's administration. Additionally, Erdogan orchestrated a constitutional referendum in 2017, which not only solidified his position as both the party chairman and the President of Turkey but also marked a significant shift in Turkey's political landscape. The referendum, heavily influenced by populist tendencies, was driven by Erdogan and the AKP party as key actors behind its implementation. This constitutional reform altered Turkey's legal framework and restructured its electoral system (Uçum, 2017). It was also viewed as a strategic step toward initiating comprehensive reforms across various dimensions of the Turkish political system. These changes signified the beginning of a reformative process to strengthen public-government relations and facilitate Turkey's transition to what was presented as a full democracy. Furthermore, the AKP party's victory in the Turkish general election in November 2002 was a critical momentum, establishing Erdogan as a central figure in Turkey's political constellation.

The AKP party is also considered a party that expresses the condition of post-Islamism in the Turkish political constellation. Post-Islamism itself can be said as a tendency or attitude of Islamic groups that seek to negotiate between Islam and democracy.<sup>21</sup> The role of the AKP party in building the vision of Neo-Ottomanism in the practice of Erdogan's policies cannot be denied. The reason is that the AKP played an important role in elaborating Neo-Ottomanism into the frame of reference for the Erdogan government. The involvement of the AKP party in Turkish government policies can prove this. The policies put forward in recent years are based on promoting peace, active diplomacy, and political and economic gain. In addition, the AKP also strives to maintain stability and prosperity, both domestically and in the region.<sup>22</sup>

The ascendance of the AKP in domestic politics, coupled with structural transformations in the region, prompted a significant shift in Turkey's foreign policy, making it more proactive within the regional landscape. Under Erdogan's leadership, Turkey adopted a multilateral approach that extended beyond security concerns, guided by the "zero-problem" policy toward neighboring countries. However, the outbreak of the Arab Spring triggered a fundamental axis shift in Turkish political strategy. Consequently, Turkey began to intervene in the internal affairs of several Arab nations, a move widely perceived as part of the broader Neo-Ottoman vision. This policy shift, however, has drawn

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<sup>20</sup> Cagaptay, *Erdogan's Empire*.

<sup>21</sup> Ihsan Yilmaz, "Post-Secularism, Post-Islamism and Islam in the Public Sphere," in *Modern Islamic Thinking and Activism*, ed. Erkan Toğuşlu and Johan Leman, 1st ed., Dynamics in the West and in the Middle East (Leuven University Press, 2014), 91–100.

<sup>22</sup> Khan, "The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy Towards the Middle East."

strong criticism from opposition parties, particularly those with anti-AKP and anti-Erdogan sentiments, posing significant challenges to the Erdogan administration's political legitimacy and foreign policy direction.

However, Erdogan is also trying to negotiate between Neo-Ottomanism, secularism, and post-Islamism, which are intertwined with each other. This means that the three elements experience an inseparable clash because Neo-Ottomanism itself contradicts the concept of secularism, which tends to separate the interests of religion and the state. Meanwhile, Neo-Ottomanism must also go hand in hand with post-Islamism, which the AKP party represents as one of the Islamic parties in Turkey. On the other hand, the AKP party also negotiates with various other elements, including ultranationalist, secular, and nationalist parties. Therefore, Erdogan took a role related to the Neo-Ottomanism vision in the political narratives during his reign. Erdogan's policies on secularism and state-religion discourse in the context of contemporary Turkey are also important in determining the future of Turkey's politics.<sup>23</sup>

#### **Erdogan: Between Neo-Ottomanism vis-a-vis Kemalist**

Erdogan's policies have been considered quite controversial in recent years. This is considered a condition for strengthening Neo-Ottomanism in Turkey. Turkey's foreign policy towards the Kurdish issue is also the biggest challenge for the Erdogan government. His position and power will be threatened if he cannot prevent transnational threats.<sup>24</sup> To that end, Erdogan needs to rethink much of his foreign policy agenda, which tends to be ambitious. The policies that are made are vulnerable to various threats and face many enemies. Of course, this will add to the various domestic tensions in the country and worsen the Turkish crisis in the future.

The AKP is trying to change its image as a party with pro-market and pro-Western conservative democratic leanings. The AKP also places EU membership efforts at the very top of its domestic and foreign policy agenda. This has also earned the AKP the support of the Turkish business community, liberal intellectuals, and most of the Turkish middle class.<sup>25</sup> The AKP is widely regarded as an Islamic-oriented party in Turkey, representing the paradigm of post-Islamism and serving as a pivotal foundation for implementing the Neo-Ottomanism vision pursued by Erdogan in his political policies. The Neo-Ottomanism vision, as conceptualized by Ahmet Davutoglu during his tenure as Turkey's Foreign Minister, presents a distinct departure from the policies enacted under the leadership of Necmettin Erbakan. Erbakan sought to establish Islamic alliances with several Muslim-majority

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<sup>23</sup> Emir Kaya, *Secularism and State Religion in Modern Turkey: Law, Policy-Making and the Diyanet* (I.B. Tauris, 2018).

<sup>24</sup> Cagaptay, *The New Sultan*.

<sup>25</sup> Taspinar, "Turkey's Middle East Policies."

countries, such as Libya, Iran, Malaysia, and Indonesia, as an explicit alternative to Western alliances. In contrast, the Neo-Ottomanism vision promoted by the AKP draws inspiration from Özal's approach, which aimed to revive Turkey's Ottoman legacy while fostering a new national consensus that integrates Turkish identity with pluralistic coexistence.

In addition, several factors that determine the tendency of Neo-Ottomanism within the AKP party are the willingness to try to make peace with the Ottoman heritage and Turkish Islam in Turkey's internal and external policies. Neo-Ottomanism itself does not seek to call for the efforts of Turkish imperialism in the Middle East and the Balkans. In the view of Neo-Ottomanism does not seek to institutionalize the Islamic legal system in the modern Turkish landscape. However, he sought to accommodate more moderate secularism at home and was active in foreign affairs. Neo-Ottomanism also provided more lenient powers in political, economic, diplomatic, and cultural influence in some areas of the former Ottoman dynasty. It also gives Turkey its strategic and national interests. The Neo-Ottoman vision itself is an attempt to redefine Turkey's strategic and national identity.

The concept of Neo-Ottomanism in its implementation also opens a conceptualization of citizenship that is less accommodating to ethnicity and more multicultural. Thus, Neo-Ottomanism does not pose a major threat regarding Kurdish cultural rights and national expression. Not only that, the elasticity of Kurdish demands for cultural and political rights, the Neo-Ottoman mindset chooses to accommodate these demands within the framework of multiculturalism and Muslim identity. That is, Neo-Ottomanism is not like the hard-line Kemalists who are trying to assimilate the Kurds. However, the framework of Neo-Ottomanism seeks to allow Islam to play a larger role in building a common identity. This is also like what happened during the Ottoman dynasty which played an important role in the issue between the Kurds and the Turks.

In addition, the two things also have in common, namely a sense of patriotism and a strong attachment to the Turkish nation-state.<sup>26</sup> However, Neo-Ottomanism attempts to express a more pragmatic and liberal mindset than Kemalism. Moreover, the issue of the nation-state and the achievements of the modern Turkish republic were not rejected by Neo-Ottomanism. What needs to be reconsidered between the two things is ultimately centered on Turkey's national interest. Not only that, both Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism are represented in Turkey's policies, of course, it becomes a further investigation of how the two have conflicting interests and inherent ideological differences. Thus, Kemalism and Neo-Ottomanism essentially lead to the expression of the policy practices of the Turkish government, both at home and abroad.

In addition, Turkey has implemented a secular government since the reign of Mustafa Kemal

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<sup>26</sup> Taspinar.

Attatürk after the collapse of the Ottoman dynasty in 1923. The term secular itself is a term that is considered to have originated from the Turkish state itself. Secularism is a concept that distinguishes and separates matters related to religion and state issues. However, to accurately trace the characteristics of the Turkish state, it needs to be assessed objectively. In addition, the depiction of Turkey as a secular state refers to the structural foundations of the Turkish Republic.<sup>27</sup> Secularism itself became an objective conceptual model and was appropriated by the Turkish state and politicized. Turkish secularism is not only used as a political principle but also as a mature and immovable ideological construction, namely secularist ideology.

Meanwhile, Erdogan and the AKP party view that the country's political administration is a secondary necessity but that Turkish citizens are not required to do so. It also does not benefit secular states if they adopt a private, secular worldview. Even when Erdogan issued his statement regarding secularism in Turkey, namely:

"The state may, but the individual cannot be secular". (Yeni Safak, January 26, 2008)

The AKP party's understanding of secularism, represented by Erdogan in his statement above, is in stark contrast to Kemalism's understanding so far. The former president of the Republic of Turkey, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, stated that secularism is a way of life that an individual should adopt. In this case, a secular individual must confine religion to the sacred place of his conscience and prohibit his beliefs from influencing the world. When viewed from the two opinions between Erdogan and Sezer on the issue of secularism, it represents a wider social division.

However, the dynamics of contemporary Turkish political reality are shaped by structural, ideological, and economic considerations, rendering the aspiration for an Islamic State increasingly obsolete. This development reflects the evolution of the Turkish Islamist movement, which acknowledges that the application of Islamic law in the public sphere is not only impractical but potentially detrimental to the broader objectives of religion itself. Moreover, Erdogan posits that secularism can be advantageous for religion when manifested in its original form. He argues that the primary issue with secularism in contemporary Turkey is its failure to protect religious freedom and autonomy adequately. Consequently, the AKP advocates for a redefinition of secularism that guarantees religious autonomy and facilitates the exercise of religious freedoms. This reinterpreted vision of secularism aligns with democratic principles, equality, and religious freedom. The AKP also adopts an adaptive and transformative approach, consciously avoiding direct confrontation with Kemalism while seeking to harmonize secularism with the party's political and religious agenda.

Because of these conditions, the AKP tries to adopt a safer approach and does not cause

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<sup>27</sup> Axiarlis and Evangelia, *Political Islam and the Secular State in Turkey: Democracy, Reform and the Justice and Development Party*, Library of Modern Turkey 11. (I.B. Tauris, 2014).

confrontation with Kemalism. The AKP views secularism as a prerequisite for democracy that guarantees freedom of religion and conscience, as well as adapting and questioning Kemalism with its perspective and point of view. This approach is one of the characteristics and things that distinguish the AKP party from previous pro-Islamic parties. Islamic parties tend to be active critiques of aggressive secularism and Kemalist policies and views. However, this approach may be in keeping with Islamic tradition, but it also makes conditions vulnerable to Kemalist opposition.

Ne-Ottomanism is getting stronger in Turkey and is also influenced by several factors. First, the rise of Neo-Ottomanism as an ideology, ideal, and policy in Turkey cannot be separated from the role and contribution of the AKP party founded by Recep Tayyib Erdogan in 2001.<sup>28</sup> Neo-Ottomanism itself is more of an effort to unite all ethnic communities, regardless of their ethnic origin or religious affiliation. This was done as an effort to preserve the Ottoman state as part of its historical heritage and was necessary to ensure the prosperity of its people. Second, the vision of Neo-Ottomanism seeks to suggest a radical transformation of Turkey's domestic political system and its foreign policy priorities. The main goal of Neo-Ottomanism itself is for Turkey to become a regional and international leader and power. Erdogan and the AKP party used this situation to mobilize various Turkish political policies to be able to realize these targets and ideals. Third, Erdogan is trying to brand himself as a politician who has succeeded in reconciling Islam and democracy. Erdogan is also trying to glorify the glory days of the Ottoman dynasty. Erdogan did this to pursue Turkey's dreams and target to become a leader at the regional and international levels.

According to Winters' perspective on oligarchy, the concept is categorized into several distinct types. The first type is warring oligarchy, which refers to an oligarchic system established to accumulate wealth through conflict, conquest, and warfare. The second type is a collective oligarchy or ruling oligarchy, characterized by institutionalizing oligarchic power through violence, upheld by norms and regulations determined by a collective group of rulers. The third type is a sultanic oligarchy, wherein the means of coercion are monopolized by an individual oligarch rather than by state institutions regulated by law. Lastly, civil oligarchy represents a system in which economic elites exert significant influence over political decisions while adhering to legal frameworks and maintaining a separation between wealth accumulation and direct coercive control. This type surrenders most of its power to the government, where the law is stronger than the individual.<sup>29</sup>

From the oligarchic perspective, we see that Erdogan is a sultanic oligarch type. He tries to carry out a monopoly and mobilize various policies that he issues following his interests as president and Turkey's ambition to become a superpower and leader in the region and internationally. Erdogan's

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<sup>28</sup> Hristov, "Neo-Ottomanism – Emergence, Ideology and Political Doctrine."

<sup>29</sup> Rozaki, *Islam, Oligarki Politik & Perlawanan Sosial*.

policies in recent years indicate Erdogan's ambition to become president again in the coming period. In addition, he is also trying to find political support to win the Turkish election. The most important thing is that Erdogan's policies aim to win sympathy from conservative Islamic circles and ultra-nationalist groups to give their support and vote for Erdogan's victory.

In addition, his supporters consider Erdogan to be unaffiliated with radical Islam. Instead, he sought to free religious Turks from the constraints and discrimination that befell them. Erdogan expressed sympathy for Hamas in 2004. When Hamas won the Palestinian elections, Hamas leaders warmly welcomed Erdogan. However, Hamas is not the only Islamist group that Erdogan supports. Erdogan also expressed his support for the Muslim Brotherhood. When Mohamed Morsi won the Egyptian election, Morsi greeted Erdogan in Cairo. Furthermore, the two also signed an economic cooperation agreement. When the Egyptian military toppled the Morsi regime in 2013, Erdogan called the move unacceptable and demanded Morsi's release and restoration of power.<sup>30</sup> Fourth, Turkey's intervention in Syria is also seen as an ambitious Neo-Ottomanism project. This is also done by Turkey to ensure Turkey's international influence and expansion.<sup>31</sup> Not only that, but the politics of Neo-Ottomanism in Turkey are also not limited to neighboring countries. However, Turkey is also expanding its military expansion in various regions, from the Middle East to North Africa. Turkey also intervened militarily in Libya and organized a counter-offensive on the part of the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord against the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by Khalifa Haftar.

Therefore, the process of negotiating the political trajectory of contemporary Turkey under the Erdogan administration presents a significant challenge to the government's future stability. Failure to mitigate and manage emerging conflicts may result in profound political repercussions. If Erdogan cannot address these issues effectively, his administration risks losing public support, potentially jeopardizing his position as president. Furthermore, Erdogan's efforts to suppress potential political opposition and consolidate both domestic and regional political dominance underscore his strategy to maintain power amidst the complex political landscape.

## **Conclusion**

The vision of Neo-Ottomanism during the reign of Erdogan became the framework for Turkey's future politics. The role of Erdogan and the political elites of the AKP party as one of the coalition parties in Erdogan's political circle is the key to the success of the Neo-Ottomanism vision in the contemporary Turkish political landscape. Erdogan's economic policies and Turkey's domestic and foreign policies are

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<sup>30</sup> Amelia Sullivan, "Unconditional Surrender: The Rise of President Erdogan and the End of Kemalist Turkey," *History in the Making* 11, no. 1 (October 9, 2019), <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making/vol11/iss1/5>.

<sup>31</sup> "Turkey's aggressive neo-Ottomanism," Vrede, accessed November 16, 2021, <https://vrede.be/en/news/turkeys-aggressive-neo-ottomanism>.

also based on the Neo-Ottomanism conceptual framework. Erdogan's policies reflect attempts to negotiate Neo-Ottomanism in the Ottoman territory, secularism on domination of the region, and post-Islamism as an AKP's ideology. Although these three things clash with each other. However, Erdogan tried to make efforts to negotiate to reduce the turmoil of the conflict. Therefore, the approach and vision of Neo-Ottomanism seek to accommodate this so as not to cause serious conflicts within the Erdogan government.

Erdogan's policies, which tend to be Neo-Ottomanism, have also received various criticisms and rejections from various parties. This policy is considered to have weakened the Kemalist values that have taken root and grown in Turkey. However, on the other hand, the vision of Neo-Ottomanism is also one of the key alternatives for Erdogan to carry out political acceleration, especially in getting public votes in the process of the Turkish presidential election in the future. Neo-Ottomanism, in a more concrete sense, is a political tool of Erdogan and the political elites behind the Turkish government. AKP party seeks to carry out political alternatives by enforcing the vision of Neo-Ottomanism, which seems to glorify the heyday of the Ottoman dynasty. However, this situation also makes the Erdogan government experience dynamics and challenges from various groups that are against the thoughts of Erdogan and the AKP party. For this reason, Neo-Ottomanism will continue to proceed following the Turkish political situation and conditions, as well as who has the power to govern the Turkish government in the future.

Finally, Turkey, under Erdogan's regime, is trying to negotiate with the European Union and not bring Islamization into the European Union. But Erdogan is struggling to execute the powerful Neo-Ottomanism.

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