Between soft power and normative intervention
Turkey as a patron state of Muslim communities in the Balkans and Western Europe

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Introduction

Today Turkey is one of the politically most influential Muslim majority states globally and even more so in its immediate neighbourhood. It is a country that has acted as a secular state -even though we have to qualify the secular logic of its inner workings- at least until the early 2000s. Yet, with the ascent to power of the Justice and Development Party, both its domestic political arrangements and its international position have changed significantly.

In this paper, I argue that Turkey, the Turkish state, its directorates and agencies now act as a Muslim patron state. This Muslim patron state behaviour, I contend, is also supported by Turkish civil society actors, which largely share a "Neo-Ottomanist" worldview. I will also look into the internal and external limitations and challenges, which this patron state behaviour faces in two of its most important target areas: The Balkans and Western Europe.

I will substantiate this thesis by investigating Turkey's new presence in the Balkans and in Western Europe. I also suggest that such an inquiry will give us insights into the changing nature of nations states, their understanding of national identity and their relations with diasporas. In short, I suggest that we need to bring back the (Turkish) state into the debate.

I will structure my presentation around five questions:

1. What is the interrelation between Turkey's shift towards a Sunni-Muslim identity in its foreign policy and the constitution of a Turkish Muslim Diaspora in Western Europe and the Balkans?
2. Who are the actors of the Muslim patron state and its Diasporic organisations and which opportunity spaces do they create?
3. What kind of new hierarchies are established between different communities that are on the receiving end of the patron-state model?
4. What are the forms of patron state interventions?
5. And finally, what are the limits and challenges to Turkey's Patron state behaviour?

The paper consists of three parts.

- Conceptual considerations: The Domestic Abroad
- Potentials of and challenges to Turkey as a Muslim patron state in the Muslim word

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I. Conceptual considerations: "The Domestic abroad" and new Diaspora politics

The literature on transnationalism and diasporas tends to see 'diasporas as independent actors exerting influence on homeland foreign policies' (Shain and Barth (2003) in their influential essay on 'Diasporas and International Relations Theory'). Yet, while this model may be insightful when talking about US-based diasporas (particularly the Israel lobby), it explanatory value for the Turkish case is limited.

I suggest turning to the field of 'constructivist diaspora studies' instead. This field seeks to understand the transforming relations between nation-states and their diasporas. I would like to explore Latha Varadarajan's notion of 'The Domestic Abroad' on the role of 'Diasporas in international relations' (2010).

Varadarajan defines diasporas not as "independent actors" but as dependent on a nation state. His work is about state initiatives that aim to build diasporas of their citizens. He looks particularly into the cases of India and Mexico, and relations with their respective diaspora communities in the US. Yet, "what makes this phenomenon noteworthy is that it is not peculiar to just India or Mexico. As even a cursory look at global politics in the beginning of the twenty-first century reveals, a large number of countries, including the People's Republic of China, Russia, Turkey, South Korea,..., are actively involved in constituting sections of their diaspora as not just part of a larger deterritorialized nation, but a new constituency that is connected to, and has claims on, the institutional structures of the state" (Varadarajan, 2010: 5).

He continues to suggest that this transforming relation between nation-states and diasporas and the emergence of the "Domestic Abroad" has been driven by state-actors, but until now attracted little scrutiny. This, I believe is the case for the Turkish case too.

And so is the fact that the current diaspora dynamics of Turkey have little to do with a 'retreat of the state', but quite to the contrary "reaffirms its sovereignty" in a much larger diasporic space. Often, the role of the state is crucial, even indispensable in shaping amorphous bodies of citizens and ex-citizens in distant geographies into Diasporas that will be acting in the interest of their countries of origin.

The question of patron client relations in international relations is also a long-standing trope in International relations theory, as Christopher Carney reminds us on his work on patron-client relations among Less Developed Countries. The patron-clintency here is rooted in anthropological studies which have used it to describe 'intraregional relationships between leaders and followers. In such settings ... patrons dispense particular favours to their subjects, or clients, in return for loyalty' (Carney, 1989).

It is this anthropological view point, which may help us understand the dynamics of patron client relations and how they interact. How are patron-client relations, which are an immutable characteristic of the Turkish political sphere, exported into and drawn upon by forming diasporas?

II. Turkey as a Muslim Patron State: From Kemalism to the contested ummah

Based on the insights of this brief methodological consideration on diasporas and the state, I will now approach each of the five questions, which I outlined at the beginning.

What is the interrelation between Turkey's shift towards a Sunni-Muslim identity in its foreign policy and the constitution of a Turkish Muslim Diaspora in Western Europe and the Balkans?

Here we first have to establish that Turkey is indeed now acting on the basis of a Sunni-Muslim identity and briefly trace its transformation from a Kemalist to a Sunni Muslim actor. Ferhat Kentel argued
in the early 2000s that Turkey’s diasporic politics in Western Europe and the Balkans were considerably impeded by a ‘crisis in Turkish national identity’ (Kentel, 2001: 357) and the Republic’s founding ideology, which was ethnic rather than religious, and Turkist rather than pan-Islamist. In terms of Islamic values, it was promoting what many observers have called a Kemalist ‘state Islam’.

Yet throughout the 1980s, Turkish immigrant communities in Western Europe increasingly came to identify themselves through their religious affiliations. Major conflicts in the Balkans were also fought along religious lines. Particularly during the Bosnian War, Muslim solidarity became a major mobilising force for Muslim communities in Turkey and beyond. Yet, as Kentel showed, Turkey’s foreign policy actors were bound by their commitment to a Turkist understanding of (national identity) and hence stayed, if not indifferent, at least on the side lines of the question if Islam and foreign policy. Turkey’s interaction was hence limited to the remaining Turkish communities particularly in the Western Balkans (particularly Macedonia and Kosovo), which were dwindling in numbers and largely marginalised.

This Turkist, ethnicity-based policy was also tried in the countries of Central Asia after the fall of the Soviet regime. This policy, however, soon reached its limits. Let us remember the largely unsuccessful attempts by several Turkish leaders, above all of Turgut Ozal, to use ethnicity and language as an avenue of establishing economic and political power in the Turkic Republics of Central Asia and in Azerbaijan.

In Germany and Western Europe, the Turkish nation state seemed to lose influence on immigrant communities throughout the 1980s and 90s. It cooperated with extreme right-wing and nationalist Turkish organisations, which again, limited its appeal among conservative Sunni Muslim Turkish communities. Among members of the Turkish Foreign service, the Turkish ‘workers’ in Germany were akin to the undesired new immigrants in the ‘gecekondu’s of Turkish cities and hence not much of a desirable ally in its foreign policy. In terms of Muslim Turkish organisations, which were creating the infrastructure of Turkish Muslim religious life -Milli Gorus, VIKZ, ATIB- Turkish agencies and consular sections were equally suspicious.

Now, obviously this has changed with the Justice and Development Party, which itself has its roots in the Milli Gorus movement. Germany, of course, was a main repository of the transnational presence of this movement and a place where both mobilisation and funding sustained the parties close to the movement in Turkey.

Particularly since the term of Ahmet Davutoglu first as FP advisor to the Prime Minister and then as Foreign Minister, relations with Turkish Diasporas intensified and became more differentiated. The once undesired ‘Turkish workers’ in Turkey, whose identity and everyday culture has been less exposed to that of the Kemalist nation state were seen as culturally close, natural allies for a more Muslim, as well as more self-confident and powerful Turkey.

Yet, Davutoglu's policy went far beyond the Turkish communities in Western Europe and the Turkish-speaking communities in the Western Balkans. We have to see Turkey’s diaspora policy under Erdogan and Davutoglu in the context of what many observers (if not the authors of this policy) have described as 'Neo-Ottomanism' (Öktem, et al, 2012): The understanding that with the demise of the Ottoman Empire, the Muslim world lost its last stronghold against Western domination and that this historical injustice can only be remedied by the return of Turkey to its former role as leader of the Muslim world, or at least, as leader of the Muslims in Turkey’s reach.

This ‘near Muslim abroad’ translates foremost into the former Ottoman sphere of influence, in which, not surprisingly, the Balkans have a major symbolic importance.

For some time it looked as if the idea of Turkish leadership of the Muslim world would extend also into the Arab lands, whose populations were incensed by Erdogan's strong language against Israel. With the failure of Turkey’s engagement in Syria, Egypt and Palestine and its reliance on the now
defeated Islamist actors like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Syria and Hamas in Palestine, Turkish Foreign policy received a reality check it could hardly ignore. In the Turkic Republics of Central Asia, as well as in Azerbaijdan, the AKP failed to find allies among what are mostly secular, anti-Muslim and deeply undemocratic authoritarian states. Hence, the geography of implementation of the 'Neo-Ottomanist' project seems now to have shrunk back to the Balkans and the Turkish immigrant communities in Western Europe.

Nevertheless, the Neo-Ottomanist framework and the desire for some form of Turkish leadership of parts of the Muslim world, I argue, provides the main ideological framework within which the current Turkish government has been seeking to constitute its new 'Domestic Abroad'.

Who are the actors of the Muslim patron state and its Diasporic organisations and which opportunity spaces are created by the Muslim patron state?

Here we can see a large number of actors: State agencies, civil society organisations and religious and economic networks. All of them are related to and supported by the Turkish state in one way or another, supporting Varadarajan's contention about the central role of the state in new diaspora politics. To give you a very simplified overview (Cf. Öktem 2012, 2011):

- **The Presidency of Expatriate Turks and Related Communities**
  - Particularly in Western European immigrant countries
  - Established in 2010 with the dual aim to ameliorate the position of Turkish citizens abroad AND to establish lobby and pressure groups.
- **Intellectual Islamic networks supported by Foreign minister Davutoglu particularly in Kosovo, Macedonia and Bosnia**
  - Networks from the time of the International Islamic University in Malaysia
  - Modernist Islam and Muslim elites
  - particularly influential among Muslim Albanians
- **The Turkish presidency of religious affairs (Diyanet)**
  - Expanded to Western Europe in the 1980s (initially to propagate Turkish state Islam)
  - Began operations in Central Asia and Western Balkans (under Ozal) to establish and support formal Muslim organisations modelled on the Diyanet; to support religious education; to facilitate Balkan Islamic communities in questions of religious practice and particularly the hajj (Eurasian Islam Shura, Balkans Islam Shura)
- **The Agency for Economic Development (TIKA)**
  - Again, first established under Turgut Ozal, to provide development aid in Central Asia
  - is present globally
  - but particularly involved in major projects in the Balkans (restoration of Ottoman mosques, support for the formal Muslim organisations)
- **The Yunus Emre Cultural Centres**
- **The Hizmet movement with its educational and business networks**
  - this is the globally acting network of schools and business networks inspired by the spiritual leader Fethullah Gulen
  - runs close to a 1,000 schools worldwide
very important among Muslim communities in the Balkans (where it also runs some religious schools, especially in Albania, where all medreses are operated by actors close to the Hizmet movement)

- increasingly also in Western Europe and Germany, where several schools and educational institutions operate, as well lobby groups such as Union of European Turkish Democrats

- but also particularly in the US, where in addition to more than 100 colleges, it is a mayor player in lobbying organisations such as the 'Rumi Forum'.

- Religious foundations, charities and human relief organisations such IHH, Denizfeneri and Kimse Yok mu.

These are, largely, the actors, which operate from Turkey. While they are organised differently and adhere to different understandings of Islam and Muslim modernity, they also all share a common background in the habitus of Naqshibandi tradition. And they also subscribe, in one way or another, to a neo-Ottoman understanding of Turkey's place in the world and the importance of Islamic mission, mostly, but not exclusively to Muslims. Nevertheless, there are also significant points of contention between these different actors that need to be explored.

These actors create spaces of opportunities for their participants. These range from from scholarships and education opportunities to interpersonal, cultural and intellectual networks.

What kind of new hierarchies are established between different communities?

This is where the Presidency of Expatriate Turks is the most active at the moment. The Expatriate Citizens Advisory Council 'Yurtdisi Vatandaslar Danisma Kurulu (YVDK)' is a body established by the Presidency to create an interface between local Turkish NGOs and the Turkish state. At the same time, and in the words of Bekir Bozdag, the President of Expatriate Turks, it is a 'Turkish Diaspora Council', Turkey's representation in Germany and a lobby group for Turkish interests.

This brings me to the question of possible new hierarchies: Who is included, who is excluded, who is deemed worthy of proximity to the Turkish state and its opportunities, and who not?

So far, I have only anecdotal evidence to share, yet it appears that the council is heavily male dominated, and has a strong presence of Milli Gorus activists. At the same time, some Alevi organisations seem to be part of the Presidency's network.

So I would like to ask to what extent the Presidency is open to groups operating outside of Turkey's Sunni-Islamic mainstream identity and whether the preference for groups of a certain persuasion leads, inadvertently, to the exclusion of others, particularly of Alevis and Kurds. And how this may affect relations between these communities.

Just to make a small excursus here: In a parallel fashion, the shift in Turkey's foreign policy from an ethnic towards a religious conception of diaspora had major effects in Kosovo and Macedonia. Many ethnic Turkish actors, who were courted by Ankara before 2002, saw the waning of their influence, and eventually, a shift towards support to Muslim Albanian actors. This has bred significant dismay among the Turkish communities.

How does the patron state interaction occur?

Let us first look at the Balkans. Here we see a major presence of Turkish schools by the Hizmet network, the work of TİKA in supporting the renovation of Ottoman mosques and architectural heritage and the emergence of the Presidency of Religious Affairs, the DIYANET, as a primus inter pares between the formal Islamic communities in the Balkans, and finally Turkey's efforts at mediation in Muslim issues.
The Presidency of Religious Affairs have generally been welcomed by what outside Bosnia, are relatively poor Islamic communities which often face secular states suspicious of Muslim organisations.

Yet, particularly in Bosnia, with its much more organised Islamic community, tensions have flared up repeatedly. The two most obvious cases, which come to mind here are Turkey's involvement in the conflict between the two Islamic communities in Sandzak, as well as its mediation efforts between Serbia and BiH regarding the Srebrenica genocide. In both cases, Turkey's mediation did not resolve the issue and in the second, it led to a resolution of the Serbian Parliament, which did not mention the term genocide. Both instances have been seen in a very critical light by Bosniak Islamic institutions and actors.

If we now shift the perspective to Western Europe, we see the Presidency of Expatriate Turks, as well as the personal interventions by Prime Minister Erdogan on issues of integration and assimilation especially in Germany.

Erdogan's speech on February 11, 2008 in Cologne, in which he likened German efforts at integration to assimilation and labelled assimilation as 'a crime against humanity' shocked the German public, and was perceived by many observers as 'meddling into German affairs'. He continued to underline the importance of religion in the formation and preservation of Turkish identity abroad (Spiegel, 2008).

The new President of the Diyanet, Mehmet Görmez, followed up on this statement in November 2010, when he criticized German initiatives for the education of Islam and the launch of University departments for Islamic theology (Phillip, 2010). Two years later, Görmez re-instated this point suggesting that the education of imams in Germany would not have the desirable effect if the Diyanet is not integrated in these efforts. He made the case for a strong role of DITIB in the future of Islam in Germany and a strong cooperation between Diyanet and DITIB.

The Presidency of Expatriate Turks is still relatively new, but I would like to cite two cases, which the Presidency has been involved with. These are cases of Turkish families, whose children are taken into care by European social services and child welfare agencies:

- Edanur Karademir, who claims that her mentally disabled child has been taken from her by social services 10 years ago, and is now being raised up as a Christian.
- Yunus Azeroglu, a child that was taken from his family in the Netherlands and given to the foster care of a lesbian couple.

The themes of gender, family and religion are at the core of these two cases and the mobilising strategy of the Presidency. The notion of the Islamic family underlines these interventions and stand in contrast to the newly reached agreement over new forms of family life and differentiated social arrangements in Europe.

What are the limits and challenges to Turkey's Patron state behaviour?

I have already mentioned that Turkey's policy of Muslim patron state behaviour and diaspora building has encountered both acclaim and criticism. After failed attempts in both Central Asia and the Arab world, hence, Turkey's sphere of influence in Islamic matters has encountered a reality check, and its ambitions have been limited to the Balkans and Western Europe.

In the Balkans, Turkish actors have been able to exert some level of influence in religious matters and have been able to establish limited networks of patron-client relations through intellectual and religious networks.

Yet, the Diyanet's role as an organ of the Turkish state and as a Presidency under the direct control of the Prime Ministry raises questions. In core symbolic areas such as the Srebrenica genocide and the
mediation in religio-political conflicts, they have faced major criticism. They are also facing suspicions from secular elites as well as from non-Muslim communities. The discourse of Neo-Ottomanism and Davutoglu's sometimes patronising attitudes towards Bosniaks have weakened its leverage in the region. The extent to which patron-client relations have been established with Muslim communities in the Balkans is limited.

In Western Europe, and particularly in Germany, Turkey's diaspora and religious policies have not been able to reach beyond parts of the Turkish diaspora community, and interventions by the Turkish Prime Minister and the President of the Diyanet have rather polarised the debate in Germany.

So it seems that Turkish efforts at acting as patron of Muslim communities in its 'Domestic Abroad' have been curtailed by a number of factors, among which I would like to cite the following:

- A notion of hubristic policies and rhetorical overreach in the realm of a neo-Ottoman worldview
- A lack of understanding for the historical experiences of Muslim communities in the Balkans and institutional conflicts
- A lack of constructive engagement with German (and European) debates on the future of Islam in Europe and particularly on the question of the education of Imams.
- And finally, the structural challenge of the Presidency of Religious Affairs as a Turkish state institution.

This does, however, not change the fact that Turkey remains one of the most important Muslim countries of reference in the Balkans and among the large Muslim immigrant communities in Western Europe. Despite overreach and hubris, Turkey is a Muslim Patron state that sees itself acts as the protecting power of Muslim communities in this geography and that has the largest, centrally organised Islamic Community in the world. Its interventions, hence, will continue to be felt in Germany as well as in the Balkans. They will be shaped, as much by Turkish domestic politics as they will be by Turkey's future relations with European Union.

III. Conclusion

In concluding, I would like to come back to the larger point, which Varadarajan makes about the paradox of the 'Domestic Abroad'. On the one hand, we have -as expressed in the activities of the Presidency of Expat Turks and the Diyanet, as well as other state agencies and NGOs- an understanding that "dissociates the nation from a fixed territory and to link the state as a structure of authority and rule to that territorially diffused nation" -in the case of Turkey this is even more complicated by the soft borders of the nation as a construct within a larger Islamic or Ottoman space-. On the other hand, we see that this does not lead to the dissolution of the nation state or the emergence of independently acting diasporas, as might have been expected, but to something else: It seems to reinforce nation-state power in some areas (in Turkey), while it also undermines it in other areas (i.e. in Germany).

To summarize, Turkey is increasingly more involved in the construction of a Turkish and Muslim diaspora, and of its Turkish Muslim 'Domestic Abroad'. In doing this, it creates opportunity spaces for Muslims in different countries, based on a model of patron-client relations, in which adherence to normative propositions regarding Islamic practice result in opportunities. Yet, the model of patron-clientcy faces limitations in that it excludes some groups at the expense of other, and that ultimately prioritizes conservative Sunni-Muslim Turks over other groups.
In closing, I want to suggest that as in the Kemalist project of modernisation, the Islamic project of diaspora building is a contested one that ultimately limits Turkey’s influence among Muslim communities in its neighbourhoods.

Sources


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