



# A telling story of IR in the periphery: telling Turkey about the world, telling the world about Turkey

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## Duality as a Key Feature of IR in Turkey

The study of IR in Turkey has been characterized by a dual story-line: telling Turkey about the world and telling the world about Turkey. This duality has crystallized in both student training and scholarly research. University students have been instructed on Turkey's needs *vis-à-vis* world politics as captured by the ostensibly 'theory-free facts' of History and Law (and more recently, Geopolitics). That diplomatic service entry examination also requires mastery over Law and History has only reinforced this tendency in IR training (Oran 2001). Scholarly literature, in turn, has either reported on the state of world politics or Turkey's domestic and foreign policy dynamics (Kürkçüoğlu 1980; Sander 1982). The select few who sought to contribute to the study of IR through theoretically grounding their accounts on Turkey (or any other case) has remained an exception (e.g., Sezer 1972; Bölükbaşı 1988; Karaosmanoğlu 1992; Keyman and Öniş 2007).

In lieu of evidence, consider Turkey's longest running IR journal, the English-medium *Turkish Yearbook of International Relations*. An overview of the *Yearbook* 1960 through 2007 reveals the following break-down of 284 articles published: international affairs 33 per cent (94); diplomatic history 19 per cent (54); Turkey's foreign policy 18.3 per cent (52); domestic politics 17 per cent (49); international law 9.1 per cent (26); other 3.1 per cent (9). When checked against other long-running scholarly journals *Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi Dergisi* (Journal of the Faculty of Political Sciences), *METU Studies in Development*, and the policy journal *Dış Politika* (Foreign Policy), these figures further substantiate our point that scholarly research has been shaped around two major story-lines.

The duality in Turkey's IR is also borne out by the disparity between the topics of Ph.D. research and international publications (TÜBA 2007: 180–1). Whereas scholars seem to choose a wide variety of topics in their Ph.D. research (comprising international affairs, diplomatic history, international law as well as



Turkey's foreign policy), their international publications cluster around specific aspects of Turkey's foreign policy (as with Turkey–EU relations and civil-military dynamics). The point being, Ph.D. research, with its broad range of topics, has reflected one of the story-lines (telling Turkey about the world) while international publications has reflected the other (telling the world about Turkey).

### **Origins of the Duality**

One could trace the origins of the duality back to early attempts at introducing IR to Turkey's universities in the mid-1950s, which coincided with Cold War efforts to locate Turkey firmly in the 'West' (as opposed to the Soviet-led 'Eastern Bloc'). Previously Turkey's approach to Political Science was shaped under French influence (Aybay 1977). In the post-WWII period, many students and junior scholars went to study and/or conduct research in universities in the United States benefiting from US fellowships. On their return they brought new ideas and methods inspired by US IR. One such idea was to set up an IR course. In 1956, the first such course was offered by the Faculty of Political Science in Ankara. Well until 1967 when another such course was introduced, it remained the token IR course whereas the curriculum retained its Law and History emphasis. During this period, only one book on international politics was published (see Bilge 1966) as opposed to numerous books on various aspects of Diplomatic History and International Law.

We learn from the minutes of the committee that was convened to discuss the name, substance and teaching methods of this first IR course that the subject was introduced to serve the noble yet ambiguous task of 'Turkey's needs' (NA 1962). That high level bureaucrats from Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs were also invited to join this committee to *not only* state their needs (in terms of the qualifications of graduates) *but also* provide officially produced material for teaching purposes suggests that the aforementioned duality in Turkey's IR was by design as much as circumstance. Clearly, those present at the meeting operated on the assumption that there were two types of knowledge: knowledge about the world 'out there' and that of the world 'in here'; students were to be informed of the former and become competent in accounting for the latter. Here lie the origins of the duality in Turkey's IR. For years, students (including future scholars) were trained to think of knowledge about world politics in terms of two distinct story-lines.

### **Accounting for the Duality in Turkey's IR**

How to explain such duality in Turkey's IR while avoiding assumptions of Turkish exceptionalism? For this duality cannot be taken as a mere product of prevailing assumptions regarding Turkey's 'unique' qualities. It is true that the bulk of the writings presents Turkey as 'one of a kind', which, in turn, is



warranted by assumptions regarding its ‘unique’ history and geography (e.g., Gönlübol 1974; Sander 1982). Yet, broader dynamics in the production of social science knowledge also need to be taken into account. In what follows, we identify two global dynamics that have helped produce such duality in Turkey’s IR. These are the disciplinary politics of IR and the dynamics of international politics.

**Disciplinary politics of IR:** The hierarchical division of labour in the academic world of IR assigns a central role to those who are interested in theorizing about world politics and expects others to provide empirical data. Scholars working in/on the developing world are often assigned the role of ‘area experts’. They are expected to adopt concepts and theories fashioned in and for the developed world, but not always encouraged to question the relevance of concepts and theories in their scholarly analyses. For it is widely accepted that disciplinary generalists produce ‘universal’ social knowledge and area specialists provide data and/or apply these theories and models to their ‘particular’ regions. Over the years, Turkey’s IR scholars have also found for themselves a place in this disciplinary division of labour (Bilgin 2005). Given the aforementioned structure of demand and supply, there have been important incentives for scholars (such as invitations to international conferences, opportunities to get published) to become a part of this division of labour as opposed to standing outside and reflecting on its make-up — and risking losing opportunities to get published. It was partly as a consequence of the choices made to become a part of the global structure — the rules of which are set elsewhere — that the potential for producing studies reflecting upon the bigger picture of which they are a part remained dormant (Bilgin 2008).

**International politics:** The dearth of scholarly reflection on Turkey’s apparently ‘unique’ qualities and the mismatch between the world of IR and ‘the international’ as perceived locally could also be viewed as an effect of the Cold War context. For Turkey’s claim to belong to the ‘West’ might not have allowed scholars to acknowledge its concerns stemming from its character as a developing country or the inadequacy of ‘Western’ concepts in accounting for such concerns. What is more, scholars might have presented their efforts in lieu of contributions toward addressing Turkey’s insecurities. For, during this period, scholarly study of Turkey’s concerns in general and relations with NATO in particular did not merely describe Ankara’s Cold War foreign policy but also contributed to the production and reproduction of its state identity as ‘Western’ (Bağcı 1991; Yılmaz and Bilgin 2005).

### **Post-1980s and the ‘Internationalization’ of Turkey’s IR — Duality Redux?**

In the early 1980s, a turning point was reached. Political and economic liberalization of the 1980s re-integrated Turkey into the international



community following its near isolation as a consequence of Turkey's Cyprus operation and the subsequent US arms embargo in 1974, the domestic turmoil of the 1970s and politics under military tutelage during 1980–1983. At around the same time, the project of accession to European integration was also revived. Coupled with the increase in the number of scholarships provided to students to pursue degrees abroad and the establishment of separate IR departments in English-medium universities (such as Middle East Technical University in 1984 and Bilkent University in 1985), this has meant the beginning of the 'internationalization' of Turkey's IR.

In an attempt to entrench IR as a separate discipline, new IR departments discouraged inter-disciplinarity in both teaching and research. On the one hand, this contributed to IR being recognized as a separate academic discipline in Turkey as opposed to engagement with 'the international' being considered as a mere 'job track' preparing students for employment in the diplomatic service. On the other hand, the resulting autonomy of IR from Political Science and other Social Sciences, when coupled with disciplinary IR's propensity towards insulating the study of 'the international' from 'domestic' dynamics, and the age-old division between politics and economics, eventually led to the impoverishment of the study of IR.

That said, new IR departments helped remedy the aforementioned duality. For, they modelled their curricula after their US counterparts and disseminated an understanding of knowledge about the world as a whole. Still, while Law and History no longer dominated the curriculum of the new departments, interest in 'theory' (pure and applied) remained scarce outside a few institutions; international theory remained a subject that had to be studied but not necessarily internalized.

Currently International Relations is popular with students (undergraduate and postgraduate). As of 2008, 42 universities offered undergraduate degrees in IR (17 in İstanbul, 10 in Ankara, the others are in the provincial cities, including Adana, Antalya, Aydın, Bolu, İçel, İzmir, Kayseri, Kırıkkale, Kocaeli, Konya, Sakarya and Trabzon). The more established of these universities offer Master's and Ph.D. degrees as well. There is apparently a link between the concentration of interest groups in these major urban centres and the curricula of the departments in these cities. The curricula of the IR departments in the capital city of Ankara focus more on History, Law and Security, whereas those in İstanbul, the industrial and financial centre of Turkey, tend to focus on Political Economy (see the respective curricula of IR departments at Ankara University (<http://www.politics.ankara.edu.tr>) and Gazi University (<http://www.gazi.edu.tr>) of Ankara with Bilgi University of İstanbul (<http://www.bilgi.edu.tr>)). IR departments in provincial cities, in turn, have developed their curricula depending on the availability of the academic staff, as these departments are understaffed.



In terms of research, the post-1980 period witnessed efforts to put Turkey 'on the map' of Social Science production worldwide. Towards this end a new set of criteria was adopted to 'measure' academic excellence. Turkey's Board of Higher Education (better known in its acronym, *YÖK*), which centrally monitors academic promotions, and individual elite institutions, which introduced their own rules for tenure and promotion, have encouraged publishing 'internationally' — that is, in international peer-reviewed journals covered by the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI). While this has succeeded in putting Turkey 'on the map' in terms of publication and citation statistics, such integration has had the unintended consequence of reinforcing both the aforementioned disciplinary division of labour in IR worldwide and the duality of IR in Turkey. That said there is still room for hope. For the previous decades' efforts have also produced a new academic Turkish-medium IR journal, *Uluslararası İlişkiler* (International Relations), issued by the 'Uluslararası İlişkiler Konseyi' (Council on International Relations). This journal has been a success in terms of abiding by 'universal' standards of peer review as demonstrated in its inclusion in the SSCI since 2008.

As IR teaching was prevailed upon by English-medium universities and publishing internationally was encouraged, Turkey's IR emerged as a 'field' with limited 'internal' dialogue. While those who sought to publish internationally sought to integrate themselves into international academic debates, others assumed the role of 'area experts' focused on influencing policy in Turkey and internationally. The dearth of scholarly debates within Turkey in IR and Political Science was pointed to in a report by Turkey's Academy of the Sciences (TÜBA), which maintained that there is, as yet, no epistemic community (TÜBA 2007). This should not, however, be taken to mean that there are no rules and norms that govern the community of scholars; nor should it be taken to suggest that it is easy to enter the field, get accepted, tenured and promoted. Rather, it is to point to the absence of scholarly debates among Turkey's IR scholars.

Amidst all this, there emerged a new generation of researchers that slowly but surely began to produce theoretically grounded analyses of Turkey's international relations. While some began to produce significant results, others are still trying their hand at elaborating on the epistemological bases and/or limitations of the approaches they use. In terms of getting integrated into international scholarly debates, there is still a long way to go. For, until recently, the so-called 'theory debates' in Turkey were limited to taking sides between the competing positions in the grand debates of disciplinary IR. A relatively silent majority, in turn, maintained an ostensibly atheoretical stance and presented the products of their research as 'objective' and 'value-free' accounts of the 'realities' of world politics. Since the late 1990s, the latter group



has increasingly sought excellence in the realm of policy advice as opposed to academic publishing.

Indeed, the late 1990s witnessed the mushrooming industry of think-tanks and policy magazines, which led to a broadening of the field of IR in Turkey. As the policy agendas of multiple actors began to clash, aforementioned representation of IR as ‘objective’ and ‘value-free’ knowledge about the world was questioned. While exposing the atheoretical (and apolitical) pretensions of some writings was a welcome development, the broadening of the field did little to remedy the duality in Turkey’s IR. On the contrary, it was further reinforced in the attempt to serve competing conceptions of ‘national interest’.

The immediate catalyst behind the broadening of the field of IR was the 1999 decision of the European Council to recognize Turkey as a candidate country for full EU membership. Since then, the Europeanization process has divided the scholars of IR into ‘Eurosceptics’ and ‘liberals’ (see Öniş 2007). As the field has been politicized, the end-result has resembled more a ‘dialogue of the deaf’ than scholarly debate. While the ‘liberals’ sought to locate the ‘real’ ‘European’ self of Turkey, the ‘Eurosceptics’ produced critiques of the Europeanization process as if it was imposed by a monolithic ‘Europe’ viewed as an/the historical ‘other’ of Turkey. Such politics of representation served little to further academic debates but to reinforce the existing mindsets and stereotypes, thereby leaving little room for moving beyond the duality that has characterized Turkey’s IR so far.

## Conclusion

The dualistic development pattern of Turkey’s IR produced striking differences from the study of IR in the United States. While the study of IR in the United States was also shaped by the pursuit of US national interests, the methods through which such interests were pursued were different: through deepening scholarly understanding of world dynamics, which was understood to be a whole. In turn, Turkey’s scholars emphasized the ‘uniqueness’ of their own dynamics. This is not to suggest that US IR did not suffer from parochialism. On the contrary, disciplinary IR in the United States made universalistic claims about the workings of the ‘whole’ based on its own parochialisms. That said, in the United States, parochialism emerged as part of the effort to produce knowledge about the world, which was understood to be a whole. Such disparity between knowledge of the world as offered by disciplinary IR and local dynamics offered by Turkey’s IR contributed little to the production of a unified body of thought about ‘the international’ in Turkey (and elsewhere).