



## Constructing Turkish “exceptionalism”: Discourses of liminality and hybridity in post-Cold War Turkish foreign policy<sup>☆</sup>

Lerna K. Yanik\*

Department of Political Science, Bilkent University, Bilkent, 06800 Ankara, Turkey

### 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’

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\* Tel.: +90 (312) 290 19 49; fax: +90 (312) 290 27 42.

E-mail address: [yanikl@bilkent.edu.tr](mailto:yanikl@bilkent.edu.tr).

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

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.<sup>1</sup>

### 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

geographic and historical distinctiveness as well as the impact of these factors on Turkey's polity and politics is an oft-repeated theme in Turkish politics. While countless scholars over the decades have argued that Turkey's geography determines the country's foreign and security policies (Dominian 1916: p. 286; Sander 2006: p. 79; Vali, 1971: p. 44; to cite a few), many others have underscored the importance of the "Ottoman legacy" in Turkish politics, especially in foreign and security policymaking (Heper 2000; Jung 2003; Karaosmanoğlu 2000; Walker, 2009 to cite a few). In the same vein, Turkey has been described as a country with "ambivalent ties to Europe" (Müftüler Baç, 2004: p. 31), as well as an "in-between" (Robins, 1996: pp. 65–66), and a "hybrid" (Diez, 2005: p. 633) place, which is "impossible to categorize" (Müftüler Baç, 1998: p. 248). Though all these studies highlight Turkey's historical and/or geographical "uniqueness," they take these features as given. And while it might be true that Turkey's location is a bit out of the "ordinary," to quote Tonra, "facts do not speak for themselves, they are spoken for" (Tonra, 2006: p. 3). That is, how elites imagine and discursively express those imaginings shapes the construction and objectification of reality.

Recently, however, more elaborate analyses have emerged pointing to the unsettled nature of historical and geographical features in the context of Turkish foreign policy discourse. While Aydın (2003) highlighted the "securitization of history and geography," Tank (2006: p. 464) mentioned the "manipulation of history and geography... for creating a unique image" and the JDP government's construction of a "go-between" identity via foreign policy. Bilgin (2009) has also highlighted Turkey's recent claim for "interstitiality and cosmopolitanism" (Bilgin, 2009: p. 121). All these studies are immensely informative, but though they imply the "constructedness" of the above-mentioned features, they do not analyze the ways in which this construction takes place. This paper illustrates how historical and geographical features of a country are used discursively to construct an exceptional identity that in turn justifies and rationalize foreign policy actions.

#### *Liminality and hybridity*

The term liminality originated in the work of anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep who explored rites of passage rituals in various societies. In *The Rites of Passage*, Van Gennep (1908) used the term liminality to describe the transitory period between two stages of human life. Building on Van Gennep's work, Victor Turner, another anthropologist, elaborated on the functions and attributes of liminality. According to Turner, society was a series of "structure of positions" and "the period of margin or 'liminality' was an inter-structural situation" (Turner, 1967: p. 93). In his *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Turner (1969) gave a clearer definition of liminality, arguing that "liminal entities are neither here nor there, they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arranged by law, custom, convention and ceremonial" (1969: p. 95).

According to Turner, liminality had its own pros and cons. Liminals were "inferior, submissive and silent" (1969: pp. 100–103), and liminality led to "ambiguity, paradox and confusion" (1967: pp. 96–97). Yet liminality also provided the ritual subject with the opportunity of being "neither this nor that and yet...both" (1967: p. 99) as well as the chance to be in a "stage of reflection" (1967: p. 105) allowing a "certain freedom to juggle with the factors of existence" (1967: p. 106). In his later writings, Turner distinguished liminality from marginality, arguing that in contrast to liminals, which are transitioning from one stage to another, marginals "have no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity" (1974: p. 233). In other words, while being a liminal was not something fully desirable in Turner's conception, comparatively speaking it was better than being a marginal.

The terms "liminality" and "marginality" only recently have been applied to international relations. The timing of their emergence is not a coincidence. Much of the recent literature has devoted attention to Europe's identity formation and "othering" practices and to the ability of the European "self" to shape the "other" (Diez, 2004, 2005; Neumann 1996, 1998). Yet this interaction between self and other has not always been that clear because the difference between self and other occasionally has produced forms other than the "other," i.e. liminality (Rumelili 2004: pp. 27–38).

Both liminality and marginality have been applied to countries that have unclear ties to various economic or political communities, or to countries that are in the process of becoming a part of such communities. In this regard, Australia (Higgot and Nossal 1997; Rumelili 2007: Chapter 6), Turkey (Rumelili 2003, 2004, 2007) and Estonia (Malksoo, 2009) have been referred to as liminal in the recent international relations literature. Rumelili (2003) has argued that the European Union's (EU) representation of Turkey as liminal has intensified Turkey's conflict with its neighbor Greece. Further theorizing on the community-building practices of the EU, Rumelili argued that Turkish elites actively countered the EU's efforts to portray Turkey as a liminal by presenting Turkey as a country in possession of a dual Eastern and Western, or European and Asian, identity, especially after Turkey was not included among the list of candidate countries at the Luxembourg Summit in 1997 (2007: Chapter 4). For Rumelili, it was the EU that pushed Turkey into a liminal position and it was Turkey that started "negotiating this liminality" (2007: pp. 82–97).

Parker (2008) drawing on examples from countries as diverse as Denmark and Russia and Turkey and Britain, do not use the terms liminal or liminality *per se*, yet call for a theory of "positive marginality" and argue that countries considered "marginals" or in the "margins" are in reality neither, meaning that such countries have the power and the ability to shape the foreign relations of and with "center" countries (Parker, 2008). With this "theory of positive marginality" in the background, Tassinari (2008) defined Turkey as a "peculiarly marginal" country, as it is not fully "marginal," i.e., not a full EU member, but part of the Customs Union, partly within the EU's power structure, and partly modern. Tassinari argued that Turkey was trying to mitigate this "marginality" by asking for "intermediation rewards" (p. 215) or by declaring itself an "alternative center" (p. 219).

Though both Rumelili and Tassinari put a finger on Turkey's out-of-the-ordinary, even outcast status, they miss the point that Turkey's liminality, or its "in-between" status, is neither created by the EU alone nor regarded by the Turks as a bad thing. Rather, to make the claim for being Tassinari's "alternative center," and to receive "the intermediation rewards," Turkey's elites specifically imagine Turkey in a liminal position, support their claim with hybrid representations of the spatial and temporal features of Turkey and spend the utmost effort to portray their country as such and carry liminality as a badge of honor. These actions, in turn, reinforce Turkey's liminal status. After all, as Turner put it, liminality is a much-preferred status compared to marginality, and the "liminality of the strong is weakness, of the weak is strength" (Turner, 1969: p. 200).

Liminality, while potentially destabilizing, can be full of opportunities since the ritual subject exists in a state of being "neither this nor that and yet...both" (Turner, 1967: p. 99). The idea of "being both" is a major theme in post-colonial literature, where hybridity is considered a strategy of the colonized (i.e., the weak) to resist the colonizer (i.e., the strong) (Bhabha, 1996: pp. 53–60). Bhabha has argued that the "in-between spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and



contestation” (Bhabha, 1994: pp. 1–2). Again, for Bhabha “this interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (Bhabha, 1994: p. 4). In other words, hybridity is a strategy of resistance that can only take place in a liminal space. Though neither Turkey nor its precursor Ottoman Empire was ever colonized, both entities historically have had an uneasy relationship with the “West” and displayed the reflexes of a post-colonial country (Keyman, 1995: p. 96). Liminal representations grounded in hybrid constructions of geography and history not only paves the way for “exceptionalism.” Such representations also turn exceptionalism into a strategy of resistance and paradoxically, a claim of superiority against the “West” as part of the quest to become part of the West.

### The background

Since the final century of the Ottoman Empire's existence, foreign policymaking in Turkey has turned into a deliberate effort to shape Turkish identity. The founders of the Republic thought that a Western-oriented foreign policy would be an important factor in guaranteeing a “Western” component of a modern Turkish identity (Bilgin, 2009). When, after the end of World War II, Turkey was incorporated into the West through various institutions, especially within such collective security organizations as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the missing “Western” component of Turkish identity that the Turkish elites had long desired was obtained (Aybet & Müftüler Baç 2000; Müftüler Baç, 2000a: p. 22; Yılmaz & Bilgin, 2005–2006).

In the 1980s, this cozy arrangement, which provided the “Westernness” of Turkey throughout the Cold War years came to an end. Turkey's 1980 military coup, which highlighted democratic deficiencies in Turkey, led to the downgrading of Turkey's ties with the Council of Europe and to the suspension of parts of the Association Agreement between Turkey and the European Economic Community (EEC), the predecessor of the EU (Dağı, 1996: p. 134; Müftüler Baç, 2000b: p. 165). Although the United States (US) was quite supportive of the 1980 military coup and the military government that emerged in its aftermath (Ludington & Spain, 1983: pp. 150–168), Turkey's “Western” credentials were tarnished, with various European institutions distancing themselves from Turkey.

Since it found itself not fully desired by Europe, Turkey focused attention on the Islamic countries in the greater Middle East area (Dağı, 1996: p. 136). Obviously, this was not the first time that Turkey “had turned to East,” so to speak. In the mid-1950s, and then again in the 1960s, Turkish politicians had placed the Middle East on their maps at different times, in order to “diversify” Turkish foreign policy (Benli Altunışık and Tür 2005: p. 108; Mango 1968). Yet in the aftermath of the 1980 military coup, the favoring of Islamic and Middle Eastern countries grew to such an extent that in 1984, for the first time since the inception of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), Turkey was represented at the OIC's annual meeting at the presidential level – by Kenan Evren the military coup leader turned president (Aykan, 1993: p. 102). The junta government's “eastward-looking” Turkish foreign policy was perpetuated by Turgut Özal, who became the head of the first civilian government after the coup (Sayarı, 1990: pp. 395–401). However, more importantly, it was against this Middle Eastern backdrop that Turkey tried to prove its use to the West to regain its “Western” credentials. While to Europe and for European audiences Turkey maintained the rhetoric that Turkey was a European country; it began to employ a liminality discourse with Middle Eastern countries, pointing to the fact that Turkey could play the middleman between the Middle East and Europe, and the Middle

East and the West in general (Yanik, 2009b: pp. 10–12). On a more practical level, however, Turkey (or, to be more precise, Özal, who by then had become the president of the country) pushed for involvement in the Gulf War of 1990–1991, again trying to please its Western allies as well to polish Turkey's Western credentials (Hale, 1992: pp. 679–692).

After the transition to civilian rule, Turkey normalized ties with the Council of Europe and the Association Agreement was reinitiated in 1988. But these moves, for several reasons, were not enough to secure the niche that Turkey had occupied during the post-World War II years. First of all, problems with Turkey's human rights record and democracy persisted, which meant Turkey's regime was not on par with the European countries. The second blow to Turkey's Europeanness/Westernness came when the European Community (EC) rejected Turkey's membership application in 1989, telling Turkey it would not be part of that exclusive club in the foreseeable future. Finally, Turkey's strategy of maintaining its European/Western credentials through membership in transatlantic security establishments fell apart when the Soviet “enemy” disappeared in 1991, leading to more questioning of Turkey's role in the various security and non-security institutions of the “West,” and thus of Turkey's place within and its identity as part of the “West” (Müftüler Baç 1998: p. 243). Yet these occasions, which brought Turkey's Europeanness/Westernness was under scrutiny also provided Turkish foreign policymakers with the opportunity to pursue “alternatives” to Europe. Özal's activism, combined with that of Süleyman Demirel's, reached a new level with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the Turkic republics, as Turkey now not only had to redefine its role with regard to Europe and the West, but also had to justify rhetorically its activist policy toward these Turkic states.

### Constructing hybrid representational practices

#### *Metaphors and “multiculturalism”*

Referring to Turkey's “unique” history and geography is one way of creating a claim to exceptionalism. But metaphors also come in handy while constructing exceptionalism because as linguistic instruments they play a crucial role in shaping reality (or more correctly, what people believe is real, as they generate “new meanings” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980: pp. 156, 211)). Though today “bridge” has become the metaphor describing contemporary Turkey, the Turkish political elite used “door,” “latch and key,” “crossroads,” and “gate” to describe not only Turkey's hybrid location and past, but also the role or the function to which it aspired internationally (Yanik 2009a: pp. 536–537). Be it a bridge, door, gate, crossroads or a latch-key, these metaphors denote or highlight Turkey's middleman/broker function and imply that Turkey's territory sits in a zone of transition, where different continents and pasts mix, match and overlap. With these metaphors Turkey was portrayed as a merchant who would profit from the riches of the Middle East, as a facilitator for the newly independent states in Eurasia, and as a peacemaker in the Balkans and the Middle East. For example, before the “bridge” metaphor came to dominate the discourse, Süleyman Demirel, the prime minister at the time, argued that “in this part of the world, Turkey has an exceptional importance of being a gate from East to West and from West to East (Demirel, 1992: p. 33). In 1992, Özal described Turkey in these terms:

Our country is located between developed Western countries and Islamic countries that have rich oil resources. Our location has advantages and certain difficulties. Like a bridge that connects two people, we must connect these two cultures differing in their

main orientations and at the same time we should not cause any conflict within us. In other words, we should synthesize West's science and technology and Middle East's belief and value system and present it for the use of humanity. Turkey that can construct a bridge in this regard will do great service for regional and world peace (Özal, 1992a: p. 25).

What is interesting in Turkey's case is that the bridge metaphor, which has become the dominant metaphor, is based on the visual representations of the two bridges that connect the two continents of Asia and Europe as well as the two sides of Istanbul. While visual and discursive representations of a bridge connecting two continents provide the basis for geographical hybridization, the historical hybridization, in contrast, rests on representations of Istanbul as "cosmopolitan" and "multicultural," especially through references to its Ottoman past.

The claim to the Ottoman past is regarded as a matter of competition between different groups trying to shape Turkish identity (Çolak, 2006; Fisher Onar, 2009; Walker, 2009; Yavuz, 1998). Istanbul, in this context, plays an important role as Islamist parties and conservative groups in Turkey have used Istanbul as a tool to reframe their own Ottoman-Islamist version of history, challenging Turkey's official history at the domestic level (Çınar, 2001; Öncü, 2007). These groups imagine and try to portray Istanbul under Ottoman hegemony as the epitome of "multiculturalism" and "peaceful coexistence" and thus as an illustration of Ottoman justice (Bora, 1999: p. 49; Öncü, 2007: p. 241). In other words, Istanbul with its presumed "multicultural" past, became a microcosm of "pax-Ottomana" (Çetinsaya, 2003: p. 371) as well as a case of the hybridization of history.

#### *The "neo-Ottomanism" debate*

This yearning for a hybrid past took place at the international level as well. The term "neo-Ottomanism" first became fashionable in academic and non-academic discourse in the early 1990s and then again in the 2000s, especially after the advance of the JDP to power. In the first wave, Turgut Özal was credited as the architect of neo-Ottomanism in Turkish foreign policy, while Ahmet Davutoğlu, an academic turned minister of foreign affairs, was considered the architect of the second wave. Though the term became en vogue after the end of the Cold War, David Barchard in *Turkey and the West*, (published in 1985) uses it to describe Turkey's turn to Middle East (Barchard 1985: p. 91). Graham Fuller of Rand Corporation, one of the early proponents of the idea in academia, defined neo-Ottomanism in 1992 as "a renewed interest in the former territories and people of the Empire, which includes Muslims who were part of that Empire," that arose due to the disappearance of Cold War conditions and that helped Turks "to see themselves once again at the center of a world reemerging around them on all sides rather than at the tail-end of a European world" (Fuller, 1992: p. 13). While other Rand Corporation publications (see for example Fuller, Lesser, Henze, & Brown, 1993) stressed this idea on the international academic/think tank scene, in Turkey Cengiz Çandar, a journalist and adviser to Turgut Özal is usually credited with coining the term neo-Ottomanism and acting as an early proponent of a foreign policy based on the concept (Çetinsaya, 2003: p. 378; Çolak, 2006: p. 592). Not surprisingly, Çandar and Fuller eventually penned an article together in 2001, titled "Grand Geopolitics for a New Turkey," full of references praising the Ottoman Empire and underscoring how Turkey should make use of this imperial grandeur (Çandar & Fuller, 2001).

Yet in both instances when the term neo-Ottomanism became common currency in the media and academia, Turkish leaders themselves never used the term. Indeed, afraid of sounding too

imperialistic, policymakers strongly rejected the neo-Ottoman label along with claims of "expansionism" (Demirel 2002b: pp. 685; Haber10, 2010). Turkish elites' rejection of neo-Ottomanism as a term, however, did not mean that Turkish leaders discontinued references to Turkey's liminal state and hybrid geography and history. The Özal years were a milestone in the way Turkish history was hybridized to shape Turkish exceptionalism, as Turkish elites revised "multiethnic" and "multireligious" to mean "multicultural." This claim to multiculturalism rested on a much-romanticized version of the Ottoman millet system (which itself is a controversial subject) (Braude, 1982) as well as on an equally controversial pax-Ottomana argument (Forbes, Toynbee, Mitrany, & Hogarth 1915: p. 47; Todorova, 2000), which assumes that the Ottoman Empire brought peace and stability to the lands that it conquered.

However, through a "selective reading" (Yavuz, 1998: p. 24) of Ottoman history, Özal and later various other politician preferred to equate the presence and the governance of various different ethnic groups in the Ottoman Empire with the ideas of "pluralism" and "harmony" and thus with "multiculturalism," the ability to "govern" these groups as "good governance," and "stability" and "order" as "peace." These selective readings were then translated into a rhetoric implying that the qualifications of the Ottoman Empire as a "peacemaker" bestowed contemporary Turkey with the credentials to provide peace and stability domestically and regionally. Özal and Turkish politicians who followed him tried to construct the convoluted argument that since the Ottoman millet system worked for the Ottoman Empire in the past, Turkey, as the present-day heir of that Empire, also automatically inherited the practice of Muslim groups of different ethnicities to live together.

This hybridized image of the past that contained a romanticized picture of coexistence, had a dual use. First, it targeted Kurds, or more precisely it targeted the Kurdish separatism in Turkey that flared up in the early 1980s. Now that non-Muslims in Turkey were reduced to almost insignificant numbers, Islam was neatly extracted from this hybrid romanticized "multicultural" past to provide an overarching identity that served as an antidote to rising Kurdish separatism (Çetinsaya 2003: p. 379; Çolak, 2006: p. 598). Second, on an international scale because states adjacent to Turkey were once part of the Ottoman Empire, Turkish elites viewed them as part of the romanticized Ottoman coexistence experience. This line of thinking enabled Turkish foreign policymakers, as the heirs of the Ottoman Empire, to claim to hold first hand experience in coexistence and consequently to claim for Turkey, first in the Balkans and then in some of the Turkic republics of the former Soviet Union, the role of a regional leader capable of providing stability, economic development and peace (Tulander 1995; Yavuz 1998: p. 40). Because Turkic communities were part of the first wave of neo-Ottomanism (and despite Turkish elites' rejection of the term), some observers argued that not only was Turkey reviving the Ottoman Empire (Constantinides, 1996; Waever, 1996), it also, because its foreign policy extended geographically beyond the former Ottoman lands into the Turkic speaking countries of the former Soviet Union, was reviving the pan-Turkist ideals of the final years of the Ottoman Empire (Landau, 1995: p. 221).

In its 1992 summer issue, the journal *Türkiye Günüğü* (*The Diary of Turkey*) published an interview with Turgut Özal, the president of Turkey at the time, titled "Türkiye'nin Önünde Hacet Kapıları Açıldı," (a title which can be translated roughly as "Turkey's Wishes are Granted"), which is considered the official proclamation of neo-Ottomanism (Çolak, 2006: p. 592). In that interview Özal, without pronouncing the word neo-Ottomanism, talks about the ways in which Turkey had inherited the governing practices of the Ottoman Empire as well as an "exceptional" geography. The combination of the two Özal argued, could become the solution to regional instability and resolve Turkey's Kurdish "problem." According to Özal,

We need to identify and properly analyze several points regarding the geopolitical region that extends from Central Asia to the Balkans, which forms the target area of our leadership role. To a large degree, this region contains Turkish communities [sic] and with this aspect, at the same time, it also harbors the cultural belt that we call Turkish World [sic]. Yet, this region, again to a large extent, contains communities and states that are Muslim but not Turkish, which lived as Ottoman subjects. So, in this region that extends from the Adriatic to Central Asia, we can talk about several different nestled rings that have features in common but are located separate from each other. We should see these rings as areas with large intersection points (Özal 1992b: p. 14).

In the same interview, Özal compared and contrasted the multiethnic and multireligious Ottoman Empire with multiethnic Yugoslavia, claiming that separatism in Yugoslavia in the 1990s was a result of a “nonconsensual union” of different ethnic groups. By labeling Yugoslavia as a “nonconsensual union” and contrasting it with the Ottoman Empire – as if the Ottoman Empire did not also dissolve at the end of the World War I – Özal placed the Ottoman Empire in a separate category:

When it comes to Turkey the situation is very different. Maybe it is the impact of religion, or the effect of Islam that made [us] mingle with each other and maintain a consensual union for centuries. As a country and a society descending from an Empire, we were able to maintain a cultural and a political identity that transcends ethnic differences. Just like in the days of the Empire, I believe that Islam is the most important factor forming that identity (Özal, 1992b: p. 17).

To summarize, references to the Ottoman Empire or claims to be the heir of the Ottoman Empire helped the Turkish elite to achieve two goals simultaneously. At the domestic level, the multiethnic nature of the Ottoman Empire was mobilized to help “solve” Turkey’s Kurdish “problem”; internationally, the fact that Turkey’s present-day neighbors were once part of the Ottoman Empire helped construct the argument that Turkey can establish order, stability and peace in the surrounding region. Though neither Özal nor his successors ever pronounced the word neo-Ottomanism, the idea of neo-Ottomanism was a hybridization of history, *par excellence*, mixed with some low doses of geographical hybridization.

#### *From Eurasia to multi-civilizational Turkey*

As the Soviet Union was dissolving, the emergence of the Turkic Republics in the post-Soviet space prompted the Turkish foreign policy elite to “discover Eurasia” (Yanık 2009a: p. 537). The desire of Turkish foreign policymakers to associate Turkey with these republics as part of an attempt to make Turkey into a regional power, led them to place Turkey in the “center” or “hub” of Eurasia. This depiction sustained the discourse that located Turkey where Europe and Asia mixed and met, and consequently highlighted Turkey’s geographical hybridity yet again.

Demirel described the post-Cold War situation in the region in the following fashion: “new Turkish states have emerged onto the world scene. That is, sibling countries’ flags are standing next to Turkey’s star and crescent flag. This is something only two years old, something that belongs to Eurasia. Eurasia is a geographical name, but in reality, it is an event that belongs to Turkish [sic] community (Demirel, 2002a: p. 218). Meanwhile, as the Soviet Union collapsed and Turkey simultaneously sought admittance to the EU, Turkish leaders did not see any problems in declaring Turkey a “Eurasian power” along with Russia in one of the early agreements signed with the latter (Tellal, 2005: pp. 546–547). The

idea of Eurasia did not remain at the state level, as the disappearance of the Soviet threat and the emergence of “Eurasia” prepared the ground for certain nationalist circles in Turkey. These nationalists following in the footsteps of their Russian counterparts, offered Eurasianism as a foreign policy alternative, prescribing that Turkey minimize relations with the EU (which, after all these years, was still reluctant to accept Turkey as a member) and develop and intensify ties at different levels with countries to Turkey’s east (Akçalı and Perinçek 2009; Bilgin 2007: p. 753).

The “discovery” of Eurasia went hand-in-hand with the claim of “Eurasianization,” which underscored Turkish nation’s “hybrid” character. The following quote from Bülent Ecevit exemplifies first, how the Turkish elite in the 2000s, were willing to highlight the continuity between the Ottoman Empire and present-day Turkey, and second, how positively Turkish elites remembered the multiethnic/multireligious character of the Ottoman Empire. Finally, the quote points out how inseparable are historical and geographical hybridity. One can regard Eurasianism and the selective remembering of the “multiethnic/multireligious” nature of the Ottoman Empire as two sides of the same coin and as parts of the same hybridization process. While neo-Ottomanism represented the historical hybridization phase of this process, the call for Eurasia or Eurasianization represented the geographical phase.

For 600 years Turks have been Europe’s most effective element. Some parts of Europe have been subject to Ottoman-Turkish hegemony for centuries. Those societies that lived under the Ottoman rule have maintained their religions, sects and languages without any pressure being exerted on them. During the Republican era, on the other hand, the changes that were made in its political, social and cultural character have helped us in depth in terms of institutional integration with Europe. ... Yet the Turkish nation is not only European; at the same time, it is Central Asian, Middle Eastern, Caucasian; it is from the Black Sea, from the Eastern Mediterranean. The mixed identity of the Turkish nation is not a defect but an asset for Europe. This special mixed identity of the Turkish nation has gained a special importance, especially when Europe and Asia are integrating during the process of Eurasianization. Turkey has become the key country that impacts the whole world and civilization [sic] (Ecevit, 2000: p. 147).

The process of “Eurasianization” also involved claims to being a multi-civilizational country, claims that were frequently made by Turkish politicians in the post-Cold War period. For example, Turgut Özal, with Gündüz Aktan as his ghost writer, published *Turkey in Europe and Europe in Turkey*, in which he argued, very much in line with the Turkish History Thesis, argued that the roots of Western countries go back to the ancient civilizations that once lived in Anatolia. Therefore, Özal’s argument went, Turkey was entitled to be considered part of the West (Özal, 1991). Similarly, Tansu Çiller, first as prime minister and then as minister of foreign affairs, claimed that Turkey was a country that “synthesized” different empires and civilizations. In a speech to the European Media Union, Çiller described Turkey as a country

of tolerance and understanding as well as a refuge for those fleeing from persecution. This is where the continents meet and it historically has been the meeting point for civilizations. Today Turkey looks like a mosaic. We are proud to be the heir to Roman, Greek, Ottoman and other cultures. All these past civilizations have enriched our cultural understanding. The bridge over Istanbul [sic] does not only connect Asia and Europe physically, but also literally (Çiller 1993: p. 362).

İsmail Cem, too, became one of the most important proponents of this civilizational discourse. As minister of culture and then



foreign affairs minister from 1995 until 2002, he called Turkey a “geography of civilizations” (Cem, 2004: pp. 33–34) and reclaimed the Ottoman heritage in a positive manner and denounced “Turkey” (but without getting too specific as to who in Turkey) for forgetting the Ottoman Empire. In his 2004 book *Türkiye, Avrupa, Avrasya (Turkey, Europe, Eurasia)*, Cem argued that, as minister of foreign affairs, he tried to overcome a “traditional” foreign policy that disregarded “geography” and especially “history,” and which “overlooked centuries of accumulation of civilizational factors, relations and living experience” (Cem, 2004: pp. 11–13). Cem further criticized “traditional Turkish foreign policy” for unnaturally imposing an “either East or West” or “Europe or Asia” dichotomy on Turkey, rather than looking for ways of forming a “synthesis” and a “reconciliation” between “East and West,” and “Europe and Asia,” respectively (Cem, 2004: p. 30). By claiming that Turkey was “European thus Western and at the same time Asian and thus Eastern” (Cem, 2004: p. 43) and by devoting a section to “Ottoman tolerance” in this book, he defined his approach to foreign policy:

This approach aims to reconcile all civilizations that existed in our geography and history with each other and also with present-day Turkey. We can summarize Turkey’s Ottoman past, which is symbolized by tolerance and the secular Turkish Revolution as follows: in order to reflect a culture free from all complexes on to our domestic and foreign policy, we need to reconcile all civilizations with each other, with the past, with today and tomorrow, and internalized by us. The starting point of this approach is tolerance (Cem, 2004: p. 33).

Cem strove to reconcile East and West throughout the post-Cold War period. However, it was only after the 9/11 attacks that Cem had the opportunity better to showcase Turkey’s “reconciler” role as a “multi-civilizational country.” Turkey, as a candidate for EU membership and a member of the OIC, hosted in February 2002 “The Meeting of Civilizations,” a forum for EU members and candidate countries and OIC members. With the 9/11 attacks setting Christianity and Islam at loggerheads, Turkey had a chance to display its “exceptional” identity rooted in a mix of civilizations by hosting a “multi-civilizational” conference.

#### “Neo-Ottomanism” redux

In 2004, two years after the JDP’s rise to power, “The Meeting of Civilizations” was renamed the “Alliance of Civilizations.” After organizing several conferences, Prime Minister Erdoğan declared that the “Alliance of Civilizations,” now co-chaired by Spain and sponsored by the United Nations (UN), was “a candidate for becoming the 21st century’s peace project” (Today’s Zaman, 2008). In reality, the “Alliance of Civilizations” ended up introducing a religious twist to Turkish exceptionalism because in this “alliance” Turkey claimed to “bridge Islam and the West,” thus stepping forward as a representative of Islam (Yanik 2009a: p. 542). In other words, while the JDP maintained the civilizational discourse that emerged in Turkey in the early 1990s, JDP’s understanding of civilization was a more religious in tone, unlike its predecessor governments whose understanding of civilization was more cultural and historical, and less religiously defined.

This discursive turn did not mean that other hybridization practices such as seeing Turkey as “both European and Asian,” or in the “core of Europe and Asia” or emphasizing Turkey’s special or unique geography and history through metaphors were discontinued. Nor was the idea discarded of reaching out to Kurds on the grounds that both Kurds and Turks shared a common history. As recently as 2010, President Abdullah Gül, (a former minister of foreign affairs), speaking in Diyarbakır – a city that is

overwhelmingly Kurdish – stated that “we are a large nation with a deep past, that has lived together for years, sharing a common culture, common sociological realities and a common history, and more importantly, a ‘common empire.’ This nation will carry these common feelings, this coexistence forward, [because] we are a continuation of a big empire” (Gül 2010).

Overall the former representational practices continued, though the media preferred to emphasize Turkey’s role as a peacemaker mostly in the Middle East (and to lesser extent in the Caucasus and elsewhere), based on Turkey’s “exceptional” geography and history. This caused Turkish foreign policy to be labeled neo-Ottoman for the second time in less than 20 years. Erdoğan’s quote below makes the Turkish elite’s aspirations and imaginations very clear.

Our records of peaceful solution of the problems and of terminating conflict sources that threat international peace will be useful in providing common goods such as establishment of peace and stability in Balkans, Caucasses [sic] and large Middle East regions. Turkey has a great potential to make a bridge between Europe and Middle East and Far East. Let me comprehend [sic] the situation as a bridge between civilizations and cultures not as a bridge geographically. Turkey is an example country, which can undertake the duty of a bridge either at the Middle East or at the Far East points (Erdoğan 2005).

This shift, promulgated by the JDP as well as by the second wave of neo-Ottomanism is attributed to Ahmet Davutoğlu, who, after a career in academia, and stint as an ambassador-at-large, was appointed as the Minister of Foreign Affairs in May 2009. In his book *Strategic Depth* (which has run through close to 40 printings), Turkey is envisioned as a future great power that first must assume a mediator/peacemaker’s role, using its “exceptional” geography and history. “The current struggle,” as Davutoğlu has neatly summarized his position “is not a war of liberation, but is to turn Turkey into one of the largest powers in the world” (Milliyet, 2009).

While Davutoğlu’s “strategic depth” doctrine is fleshed out in his book of the same name, one can also see its underlying arguments in a series of interviews that Davutoğlu gave after the 9/11 attacks. During these interviews, Davutoğlu is very critical of Samuel Huntington and Francis Fukuyama’s theses that have shaped the post-Cold War world order. While Davutoğlu criticizes Huntington for labeling Turkey as a “torn country,” which Davutoğlu thinks is something that should be perceived as positive not negative (Davutoğlu 2002: p. 193). Similarly, Fukuyama is criticized for being Western-centric and prematurely declaring “the end of history” (Davutoğlu 2002: p. 8). At these interviews Davutoğlu’s criticism about the West and Western scholarship are taken to another level when he argues that the current state of crisis is a “crisis of not of Islamic Civilization, but a crisis of Western Civilization” (Davutoğlu 2002: p. 97) because “as Western Civilization globalized,” Davutoğlu argues, “it started to curtail the historical areas of other civilizations” (Davutoğlu 2002: p. 91). While the “Chinese and Indian civilizations could never become global,” the Ottoman Empire, according to Davutoğlu, “was able to globalize in a limited sense,” which created a different heritage and thus opportunities for present-day Turkey (Davutoğlu, 2002: p. 196).

In terms of “multiculturalism,” Davutoğlu states that “cities like Paris, London and Berlin have just started to contain different cultures in the past thirty years; a phenomenon which the Ottoman Empire has lived through, is only now being experienced by the West” (Davutoğlu 2002: p. 112). By comparing the Ottoman “expansion” into Europe, the Middle East and Africa to “globalization,” Davutoğlu tries to eliminate one of the most controversial topics in the historiography of the Ottoman Empire: whether the Ottoman conquests meant colonialism and/or imperialism. Overall, with Ottoman conquests being equated to “Ottoman globalization”

and the Ottoman Empire being declared as a unique source of multiculturalism, Davutoğlu indirectly refers to pax-Ottomana as well as to an infallible Ottoman Empire.

While other members of the JDP insist on highlighting Turkey's bridge role Davutoğlu seems undecided. In *Strategic Depth*, he divides "bridge countries" into two: "those whose bridge role is built on a strong identity and self-confidence and those without any self-confidence that realize this bridge role in a pragmatic way." Accordingly, while those "without any self-confidence" experience identity crises, those with "self-confidence," such as the Ottoman Empire "under the Islamic paradigm"... [and]... "located in one of the most heterogeneous regions of civilizational history accept this plurality as a source of richness" and thus create an exceptional order (Davutoğlu 2004: p. 92). In a 2008 interview, Davutoğlu argues that Turkey "should be seen neither as a bridge country, which only connects two points, nor a frontier country, nor indeed as an ordinary country, that sits at the edge of the Muslim world or the West," but rather as a "central" country (Davutoğlu 2008: p. 78), and so again he describes Turkey's location and role with a metaphor. Overall, the hybridization or the exceptional identity that is being produced by Turkey's JDP government is more Islam and Ottoman Empire-heavy than previous versions, with continued emphasis on the romanticized multicultural coexistence model. Yet what Davutoğlu and the members of the JDP miss is that by criticizing "Western Civilization" and upholding an Islam-dominant Ottoman Empire in their discourse, they too become as "essentialist" as their "Western" counterparts whom they criticize (Bilgin, 2009: p. 59–60).

## Conclusion

This article examines the practices within Turkish foreign policy discourse that have helped construct Turkish exceptionalism. Its main argument is that Turkish elites' hybrid representations of Turkey's history and geography empower them not only to claim a peacemaker/mediator role for their country but also to portray Turkey as a rising power with a liminal status and thus to present Turkey as exceptional in the realm of international relations.

Turkish exceptionalism is constituted in several ways. First, various metaphors were used that highlighted Turkey's location as a meeting place of different continents. In the early 1990s, different metaphors such as door, gate, latch and key, and crossroad were utilized, and finally the "bridge" metaphor was embraced by the Turkish foreign policy elite. Second, the hybridization of geography was also maintained through geographical constructs that denoted a combination of two continents such as frequent references to Eurasia as well as to "Eurasianization." Third, history was hybridized when Turkish elites claimed that their present-day mediator role was derived from the Ottoman Empire. The millet system and the presence of multiethnic and multireligious groups in the Ottoman Empire were portrayed by the Turkish elite as a signs of "good governance" and evidence for the Ottoman Empire's ability to establish "peace and order." This selective remembrance of history was labeled as neo-Ottomanism especially by the media but also by some scholars. Yet, unlike other discursive practices, the term neo-Ottomanism was not verbalized by the foreign policy elites themselves but was simply implied through selective remembering of the hybrid or multiethnic and multireligious nature of the Ottoman Empire as "multicultural".

Neither politics based on Turkey's location nor critical analysis of the construction of Turkey's importance in terms of geography is new. Bilgin's (2007) paper provides an important critical engagement with claims about Turkey's "geopolitical importance." Bilgin illustrates that by upholding *jeopolitik* as a science, first Turkey's military elite and then its civilian elite have only rationalized not

only foreign policymaking, but also certain types of domestic decision making. In other words, Bilgin implicitly talks about a geographical exceptionalism that infuses Turkish politics. This paper, on the other hand, expands on Bilgin's findings in three ways. First, it argues that geographical exceptionalism does not take place only by explicit references to *jeopolitik*. Analyzing the discursive practices related to geography is another way to read and reveal geographical exceptionalism. Second, this paper holds that it is almost impossible to separate geographical from historical imagination. It illustrates by analyzing the discursive practices that construct a hybridized geography and history for Turkey, that Turkish elites construct an exceptional identity for Turkey which then helps them constitute liminal representations of the country. Third, the paper, follows in the footsteps of Bhabha (who argued that hybridity could only emerge in the state of liminality) in elaborating on the sources and conditions of liminality, this time in international relations.

Can exceptionalism be a viable political strategy? Benli Altunışık argues that, first Özal, and then Erdoğan were criticized for bringing the Ottoman Empire and Islam back into the Turkish identity and polity. This shift meant the reversal of Kemalist nation making, which not only expelled the Ottoman Empire and Islam from Turkish history, but preferred to direct its attention to the West, as "Westernized" foreign policy was seen as part of the nation-building effort (Benli Altunışık, 2009: p. 178). More importantly, an exceptional identity based on the hybridization of Turkey's geography and history runs counter to the Kemalist nation-building project on another count, because the Kemalist project was based on the idea of "purity," not hybridity (which signifies impurity). In this context, Turkish exceptionalism forms a layer of identity at the international level that contradicts the identity at the domestic level. Given this basis for Turkey's national identity as well as current practices regarding diversity and plurality in present-day Turkey, Turkish exceptionalism is destined to remain yet another paradox of Turkish polity.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> A note on methodology: While analyzing the discursive formation of exceptionalism, I generally utilized the published speeches of Turkish foreign policymakers and/or material from their published books. When published books and speeches were not available, I consulted media reports.

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