Turkish foreign policy since 2002: 
between a ‘post-Islamist’ government 
and a Kemalist state 

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Samuel Huntington famously described Turkey as ‘the classic torn country’ in his controversial book on the clash of civilizations.¹ It seemed as if this cultural wound was about to become infected when the ‘post-Islamist’ Justice and Development Party (JDP) won a sweeping victory at the 3 November 2002 general election. The consequence of the poll for governance in Turkey was a form of political cohabitation, in which a party with Islamist roots has been obliged to govern together with a state apparatus avowedly Kemalist in orientation, and with laicism a central part of its world view. While a Huntingtonian analysis would predict conflict between these two political traditions, it is the argument of this article that, in the realm of foreign policy at least, the consequences of this cohabitation have actually been rather more cooperative than discordant. Indeed, it could even be argued that Turkish foreign policy has, in some cases at least, become more effective for being the product of these two traditions, more so even than if policy had the clarity of being the output of either one alone.²

In order to evaluate this claim, this article will focus on seven areas of Turkish foreign policy covering the four and a quarter years since the JDP’s election victory. The case material selected will cover perennial priority areas of Turkish foreign relations, notably the EU and Cyprus, as well as important, controversial events, such as the lead-up to the US invasion of Iraq. It will also include issues less familiar to a mainstream readership, where one might have expected policy to be more the product of ideology, such as relations with Syria and Sudan, and Turkey’s role in the Islamic Conference Organization (ICO). These cases will be organized under four main categories: convergence, policy areas where Kemalism and post-Islamism have distinct perspectives that have turned out to be proximate to one another, and where cooperation has been possible; contained disharmony, areas of policy disagreement, but where the policy competition has been contained rather

* The author would like to thank Dr Kerem Oktem for reading an earlier draft of the article, and for his valuable comments.

² For the leading contemporary, overview works in English on the subject of this article, see William Hale, Turkish foreign policy, 1774–2000 (London: Cass, 2000); F. Stephen Larrabee and Ian O. Lesser, Turkish foreign policy in an age of uncertainty (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2003); Philip Robins, Suits and uniforms: Turkish foreign policy since the Cold War (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003).
than becoming destructively conflictual; ideological divergence, areas where perspectives have been clearly different, but where the qualitative change of foreign policy revisionism has not taken place, and Turkey’s western vocation remains intact; and neutrality, areas where neither Kemalism nor post-Islamism has yielded distinct foreign policy perspectives.

Before exploring these categories and their associated case material, which form the meat of this article, it is important to address the issue of the two traditions in Turkish foreign policy that comprise the two sides of Huntington’s civilizational tear.

Turkey’s two traditions

Martin Wight showed how useful the concept of ‘a tradition’ could be to the rigorous and comparative exploration of different aspects of international relations. Wight found it useful to analyse a western IR landscape in terms of three ideal types: the Machiavellian or realist approach; the Grotian or rationalist approach; and the Kantian or revolutionist approach. In the work that followed he used these three sets of tools to generate observations about and insights into how various aspects of international organization and conduct would work, and to contrast those ways with one another.

While Wight’s traditions have traction in terms of the world that he knew—basically, the Atlantic community, heir to the classical age—there is no reason why this should be the case with other parts of the globe, where political cultures derive from very different building blocks and experiences. It therefore makes sense, when applying the idea of competing traditions in other national and regional contexts, to allow the empirical material to modify and develop this notion of ‘tradition’. Here, it is important not to make the mistake of believing that traditions can exist only within the context of a modern state. Though territorial state-nations are little more than 50–80 years old in many parts of the world, there are strong value systems anchored in societies that predate such formations. Turkey is an example of one of those.

Though the Turkish Republic is only 83 years old, the experience of competing value systems goes back at least to the 1830s and the idea of the Tanzimat or reforms. Under the new wave of modernizing influences from outside, a battle of ideas ensued that would run through the remaining years of the Ottoman empire, and continue under the impact of the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk into the republican era. The struggle was between the adoption from Europe of a set of values and prescriptions that would transform the country in the direction of a post-Enlightenment age, and a will to retain and reinvigorate the old, indigenous ideas that had made the empire into the force that it had been during its apogee, ones closely linked to the Islamic religion and its cultural manifestations. How exactly one conceives of this cleavage—modernization v. tradition, civilization v.


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superstition, heresy v. piety, secularism (or laicism) v. Islamism—rather depends on who one is, where one stands and what one’s purpose is.

For the purposes of this article, it is the way these two long-established traditions extend into contemporary times and impact upon the operation of the political system that interests us most. Hence, ‘Kemalism’ is used as a term to describe a phenomenon that existed well before Atatürk, because of the profundity of the impact that these ideas made under his leadership, especially with respect to secularism.4 ‘Islamism’ is used to denote the tradition under which the Islamic religion is seen as being all-embracing, and hence properly the origin and inspiration of political ideas. Since 1969 a political party tradition of Islamism has existed in Turkey. The addition of the prefix ‘post’ to that of ‘Islamist’ acknowledges the rejection by the JDP of this political handle.5 However, the term ‘Islamist’ has been rejected for primarily instrumentalist reasons, notably to avoid the pejorative connotations now associated with the term ‘Islamist’, especially in the West, and has been repudiated by the leaders of the JDP only recently. The term ‘Islamist’ is still appropriate to describe the origins of these figures and their ideas.

Dimitris Keridis observes that the Turkish reality has often been conceptualized in terms of dualities and antitheses.6 This is nowhere better illustrated than in Şerif Mardin’s seminal 1970s conceptualization of Turkish politics in terms of centre–periphery relations.7 Perhaps the fondness of Turks of a particular generation for Marxian thinking helps explain this dialectical approach to social categorization. Emerging complexities in contemporary Turkish society make the use of such dichotomies less fashionable and even less useful than in the past, and the two traditions of Kemalism and Islamism are less starkly divided today than was the case in the 1970s, let alone the 1930s. However, the case can still be made for an emphasis on the two ideal-type traditions of Kemalism and Islamism. As in the work of Martin Wight, such approaches have the advantage of being distinct and discernible, and hence of giving the analyst something to ‘bite’ on. Moreover, many of the complexities that have come to be the standard fare of the sociology of Turkey have less ready applicability in the elite-dominated world of foreign policy than in most other spheres of society.

Policy convergence cases

The two most momentous developments affecting Turkey’s external relations since November 2002 have been the EU’s December 2004 decision to commence accession negotiations with Ankara, and the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

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4 For an authoritative discussion of Kemalism in English, see Menter Şahinler, The origin, effect and currency of Kemalism (Huckelhoven: Verlag Anadolu, 1999).
5 The term ‘post-Islamist’ seems to have been coined by Ruşen Çakır, one of Turkey’s leading authorities on Islamist politics. His reasoning was to equate ‘post-Islamist’ parties with ‘post-communist’ parties in the former eastern bloc: that is to say, the term covers a multitude of sins and should be seen as a holding term until a more accurate epithet can be selected. Author’s interview with Ruşen Çakır, Istanbul, 1 July 2003.
7 Şerif Mardin, ‘Centre–periphery relations: a key to Turkish politics?’, Daedalus 102, Winter 1973, pp. 169–90.
Philip Robins

One might have expected these two issues to have polarized thinking in Turkey. In fact, with Kemalist and post-Islamist convergence on both subjects, the opposite has been true. Turkish foreign policy has been the more consistent and emphatic as a result.

EU relations

In the mid-1990s Turkey’s relationship with the EU was one of the two or three foreign policy issues that most clearly divided Kemalists and Islamists in Turkey. The former were enthusiastic supporters of full Turkish membership, most importantly because membership was perceived as ‘an anchor’ securing Turkish secularism against the ‘pre-modern’ manifestations of Islam in politics. The Islamists of the day, in the form of the Welfare Party (WP), which included all of the leading lights in the future JDP, agreed on the significance of the issue. Their discourse emphasized the culturally Christian nature of the Union, and the WP consequently saw its role as the protection of indigenous values against the EU.8

Yet it was with major European capitals in his sights that the JDP leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, conjured a diplomatic whirlwind in the six weeks after the November 2002 election. Erdoğan’s chief aim was to persuade EU leaders to name a date for the commencement of accession negotiations at the December 2002 European summit in Copenhagen. Though the attempt was unsuccessful, it paved the way for the naming of such a date at the EU summit two years later. Most importantly, it vividly established Erdoğan as a leader wedded to the idea of Turkish membership, especially in the eyes of a generation of European leaders that included Schröder, Berlusconi and Blair.

The political conversion of Erdoğan and those around him from Europhobia to Europhilia is best explained in instrumental terms. Turkey’s Islamists had suffered at the hands of the country’s secular establishment in the second half of the 1990s, with the WP and its successor party both being closed down as a result of a thinly veiled constitutional authoritarianism. It was in such a context that a younger generation of rising figures cut free from their more traditionalist superiors and established the JDP in 2001. The JDP set aside the identity politics of the past and quickly embraced the goal of EU membership. Its hope was that the Union would anchor Turkey for democracy and pluralism, thereby deterring any future military interventions. In short, the JDP had come to see the EU as ‘a shield’ behind which to shelter. Post-Islamists and Kemalists had come to face in the same direction as far as foreign policy priorities and the EU were concerned.

It was in this cooperative atmosphere of a near-complete pro-EU consensus at home that Turkey forged ahead with a radical programme of liberal reform. No fewer than seven EU harmonization packages were adopted during the year 2003 alone. Few areas of Turkish legal, constitutional and administrative life seemed to have been left unaffected. The breadth and persistence of the consensus in favour of the EU in Turkey is best illustrated by the nature of its residual opposition:

a motley alliance of otherwise ideologically disparate groups, drawn from the fringes of Islamist, leftist, Kemalist and extreme nationalist militancy.

At the level of practical politics in Turkey, the issue brought together a partnership involving post-Islamist political figures and the most Kemalist of institutions. Of the former, Erdoğan as prime minister continued to take a leading interest, supported by the JDP Foreign Minister, Abdullah Gül, and the economy minister, subsequently appointed chief negotiator with the EU, Ali Babacan. At the institutional level, it was the Foreign Ministry and the EU Secretariat-general (EUSG), headed by a succession of former ambassadors, which conducted the detailed negotiations. The legal reformism of 2003 and 2004 was mirrored at the level of high politics, with accession negotiations opening with Turkey on 3 October 2005.

If 2003 and 2004 were the high points of Turkey’s engagement with the EU, the relationship cooled noticeably in 2005 and 2006. Several reasons contribute to an explanation of this. These include the EU’s internalization of the Cyprus issue through Cypriot accession in May 2004; the popular realization in Turkey that membership was impossible before 2011 and unlikely before 2014, therefore making a short- to medium-term prosperity fix unlikely; and the passing of certain key leaders in the Schröder/Berlusconi generation, who had been more sympathetic to Turkey’s membership aspirations than their successors. What is particularly important to note is that within Turkey this waning commitment was not lop-sided, and did not lead to policy-related conflict. Remarkably perhaps, Euro-enthusiasm waned at around the same time among Kemalists and post-Islamists alike. For the former, especially parts of the military, confidence in the EU membership goal was shaken in no small part by their growing unease at the nature of their fellow advocates in the shape of the Turkish government. For the latter, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), though not actually an EU institution, had unexpectedly rejected an appeal to permit women to wear the headscarf (türban) in public institutions, an issue of significant symbolic value to the religious camp. This ruling dented the post-Islamists’ faith in European institutions to deliver pluralism across the political spectrum. Among most Turks from both persuasions, successive bruising encounters with the EU had worn away the upbeat mood of the early 2000s. In short, there had been a serious dip in trust towards the policy-making institutions of the EU across the broad range of Turkish politics.

The US and the war of regime change in Iraq

If the EU issue had clearly divided Kemalists and Islamists in the 1990s, the same was not quite the case with regard to Turkish–US relations, at least not when seen within the wider alliance context. After all, Islamists in Turkey too had opposed the spread of both communist ideas and the territorial expansionism

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10 For example, the WP sent its MPs to participate in the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.
Philip Robins

of the communist bloc. If by the mid-1990s Turkish Islamists were worried at
the growing tendency of senior NATO figures to perceive Islam as a comparable
threat, the alliance was still not dismissed out of hand. Moreover, in a post-Cold
War context, with the United States the world’s sole hyperpower, the costs and
benefits of future relations with Washington were well understood, at least by
Turkey’s more pragmatic Islamists.

It was against this backdrop that the lead-up to the US-headed invasion of Iraq
and the war of regime change took place in 2002–2003. There was apparently
little difference among Kemalists and post-Islamists in their view of the unfolding
drama. Neither wanted a military outcome to the emerging stand-off. For Kemal-
lst, this was consistent with established strategy, which de-linked regional issues
from broad alliance cooperation. For Turkey’s post-Islamists, war against a
country populated overwhelmingly by fellow Muslims was additionally problem-
atic. Hence, Turkey was generally united in welcoming US tactics in September
2002 when it determined to work within the UN on the issue of Iraq’s alleged
weapons of mass destruction. By the end of 2002, with war becoming more likely,
both Kemalists and post-Islamists were resigned to the growing inevitability of
Turkish support for their long-time ally in a future conflict. Turkey, it was widely
assumed, simply did not have the luxury of an independent decision.

Within this policy convergence there were differences of style and approach,
but these differences were not defined by the Kemalist/post-Islamist divide.
For example, one of the most effective public critics of the looming war was
the Turkish President, Ahmet Necdet Sezer. Though clearly a Kemalist, from a
Kemalist institutional background in the judiciary, whose presidency was in many
ways defined by a mission to prevent the JDP government’s widespread misuse
of patronage, Sezer ambushed the pro-US parliamentary motion by labelling it
unconstitutional.11 The Turkish military, by contrast, though also demonstrably
alarmed at the move towards war, was much more circumspect in expressing its
reservations.12 Nor was the JDP leadership vociferous in criticizing the trend
towards war. Initially distracted by the EU issue and the wider topic of its own
future survival prospects, the JDP was keen to point out Washington’s willingness
to work with it as the party of democratic power in Turkey. A key moment came
with Erdoğan’s visit to the White House just prior to the Copenhagen summit.
While an exchange of warm but sweeping generalities probably allowed both sides
to take what they wanted from the meeting, Erdoğan was certainly not unambig-
uous on the Iraq issue.

Detailed negotiations on the basis that Turkey would assist the US invasion
of Iraq began in early January. They dragged on for two months, with only one

11 President Sezer intervened on the basis that there was no international legitimacy behind the US position.
12 For an authoritative view of the Turkish general staff, see the communiqué of the then military-dominated
National Security Council on 31 Jan. 2003. It advocated the continued pursuit of peaceful means to resolve the
Iraq issue (implying that it was against an invasion), and a second UN Security Council resolution on the use of
force, in order to imbue a possible operation with ‘international legitimacy’ (implying that Turkey should not
participate on any other basis). It should be noted that the military-inspired statement was one with which the
JDP government could in substance agree, resulting in ‘surprising unity’ between Kemalists and post-Islamists.
agreement, on the upgrading of Turkish ports with the heavy-lifting in mind, the sole success. If the JDP leadership, notably Abdullah Gül, was visibly lukewarm on the prospect of progress, the distinctly Kemalist Foreign Ministry was as responsible as any institution for the slow pace of negotiations. The ministry’s legal expert, Deniz Bolükbaşı, fought a vigorous rearguard action, with, for example, protracted negotiations surrounding the nature of the insignia that US troops would be required to wear while in Turkey. For Kemalists as well as post-Islamists, the collective memory of the occupation of Istanbul by British and French troops in 1918 was still fresh in the mind. In spite of the painstaking nature of the negotiations, the American embassy remained unrealistically optimistic that an agreement was only a matter of time. This misleading view resulted from an overreliance on a small number of unrepresentative and even maverick opinion-formers. The majority of elite and mass opinion was deeply unenthusiastic about the increasingly proximate invasion.

The issue of support for the US war strategy came to a head with the vote in the Turkish parliament of 1 March 2003. The immediate backdrop to the decision was characterized by narrowly focused manoeuvring on the part of the Turkish military and the JDP government. This was not, however, a function of policy difference. In reality, both the military and the Turkish government seemed resigned to the same outcome. The object of their tussle was the public perception of ultimate responsibility, indeed culpability, for the pro-US outcome. In the event, they need not have been so concerned. Though the vote itself was nominally in favour, the motion fell on a technicality, with the Kemalist parliamentary opposition, the Republican People’s Party, being joined by some 90 JDP rebels in voting against. All Ankara was relieved and embarrassed in equal measure.

Managing Syria

For Turkey, eleven difficult years of trying to manage Syria diplomatically came to an end in 1998. Its patience exhausted, Ankara effectively threatened to invade Syria if Damascus did not rescind its support for the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK),13 the spearhead of the Kurdish nationalist insurgency in south-east Turkey. Faced with the prospect of a war it did not want, and with President Hafez al-Assad, his health failing, driven by the strategic goal of organizing a dynastic succession, the Syrian side capitulated. The leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, was expelled, and subsequently ended up in court in Turkey. Having realized its objective, Ankara, with Kemalists in control of government and state, avoided the temptation to overplay its hand and moved to stabilize bilateral relations, a process successfully concluded in the Adana Agreement of 1998.

13 This was the message delivered publicly to Syria by Turkey’s top brass. For example, the commander of the land forces, Gen. Atilla Ateş, told military units near the Syrian border in late September 1998 that ‘Syria should know that our patience has limits’: see AFP report in Jordan Times, 29 Sept. 1998. Turkish chief of staff Gen. Hüseyin Kivrıkoğlu was quoted a few days later as saying that ‘There is a state of undeclared war between us and Syria. We are trying to be patient but that has a limit’: Reuters, quoted from Sabah and reprinted in Jordan Times, 3 Oct. 1998.
In the aftermath of the PKK crisis, both parties sought to thicken relations, the Syrians to mitigate their wider international isolation, the Turks to ensure there would be no backsliding by Damascus over the vexed issue of terrorism. This consolidation was pursued through a range of means, notably cross-border trade and high-level visits, the latter including a first ever visit to Turkey by a Syrian president. Such activities were regarded by the Foreign Ministry in Ankara as having ‘made great strides’. This process continued under the early period of the JDP government, as Damascus assumed that it would receive a more sympathetic hearing from post-Islamists than from what it perceived as pro-American Kemalists. For example, following the twin terrorist bombings of Istanbul in November 2003, Syria ostentatiously handed over 22 people allegedly connected to the outrages. In fact, there was little difference in policy perspectives between Turkey’s Kemalists and post-Islamists over Syria policy.

In making a post-Öcalan settlement with Syria, Turkey’s Kemalist state had again shown itself willing to de-link its regional policies from its pro-US, NATO-oriented global strategy. Though Washington generally favoured a more combative approach towards Syria, this policy mismatch mattered little while President Clinton was still trying to broker an Israeli–Syrian peace in spring 2000, or even after 9/11, when Damascus adopted a more cooperative posture towards the United States on terrorism. Instructively, Syria was omitted from the list of states identified by President Bush in his January 2002 State of the Union address as comprising ‘an axis of evil’.

The general environment for Turkish–Syrian relations became much less benign, however, after February 2005 and the assassination of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, generally perceived to have been ordered by the Syrian regime. Though the United States campaigned vigorously for the isolation of Syria, Turkey was loath to jeopardize its hard-won improvement in bilateral relations. Both Kemalists and post-Islamists jointly defended such a position on the grounds of ‘engagement’. The continuation of high-level contacts, it was argued, would enable Turkey to deliver the international message on Lebanon more effectively. Though the public justification was lame, the convergence of Kemalist and post-Islamist positions over Syria helped to deflect US pressure for a break with Damascus.

The high point in American–Turkish friction over Syria came in March 2005, when the serving US ambassador, Eric Edelman, publicly tried to cajole President Sezer into cancelling an official visit to Syria already announced for the following month. Faced with such an undiplomatic démarche, Sezer, backed by Erdoğan, insisted on undertaking the visit, a decision that was not seriously opposed anywhere in the country. Edelman subsequently and unexpectedly announced a premature departure from his ambassadorial post.

14 Author’s non-attributable interview with senior member of Turkish Foreign Ministry, Ankara, 26 Sept. 2006.
Turkish foreign policy since 2002

**Contained disharmony cases**

Even where perspective and interest have differed between Kemalists and post-Islamists, the outcome has not always been policy dissonance, let alone open conflict or foreign policy revisionism. This reality bears witness to the inner strengths of both traditions in Turkey, but also to their shared realization that cooperation is possible and open competition can be costly to both sides. The fact that one can illustrate this phenomenon with such weighty and emotive cases as Cyprus and Israeli–Palestinian relations speaks volumes.

**Cyprus and the Annan Plan**

Cyprus has long been a foreign policy ‘holy cow’ for the Kemalist establishment in Turkey, support for the Turkish Cypriots of the north an unquestioned ‘given’. It has routinely received a degree of attention disproportionate to its importance in the overall national interest. In its origins, an exaggerated engagement could be justified by the Greek majority’s revisionist attitude towards the implementation of the 1960 political settlement, and the consequent spasmodic insecurity of the island’s minority Turkish community. More recently, the privileging of a Cyprus policy can best be explained by less edifying factors, such as the prestige of the armed forces, which continue to occupy the north of the island; the preservation of political reputation, notably that of Bülent Ecevit, the prime minister who sent Turkish troops into Cyprus in 1975; the military’s use of the island to bargain for a greater share of resources within the Turkish budgeting process; the personal vested interest of some Kemalist establishment figures, for example through their ownership of luxury homes in the north; and the usefulness of northern Cyprus’s unregulated economy for criminal interests in Turkey, especially for money-laundering. Added to this brew were the well-honed political skills of the longstanding leader of the Turkish Cypriots, Rauf Denktaş, who had over many years refined the ability to manipulate Kemalist party and institutional politics within Turkey to the benefit of the rejectionist camp on the island.

By contrast, Turkey’s post-Islamist counter-elite has been unconnected to these latter factors. When it formed a government, at a time when Turkey’s enmity with Greece was dwindling, the JDP’s attitude towards Cyprus was bare of sentimentality and vested interest. It knew of Cyprus in only one real respect: as an obstacle to closer relations with the EU, its ultimate foreign policy goal. It was in this context that the JDP government attempted to solve the Cyprus problem at the December 2002 EU summit. It did so not merely as a matter of political opportunism, but on the basis of a complete change of approach to the matter. The strategic decision of the new government was that never again should the Turkish side be couched as the obstructionist party *vis-à-vis* peace negotiations. In future, the Turks would embrace new changes in peace proposals and throw the matter back into the court of the Greek side. Gül has been quoted as saying, ‘We will always be one step ahead. We will not walk away.’

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In adopting this new stance, the government was flying in the face of deep reservations on the part of the Turkish military, much of the Foreign Ministry, the presidency and prominent individuals such as Ecevit. That the JDP government was able even to contemplate the pursuit of such a goal is attributable to two factors. First was its overwhelming parliamentary mandate, which helped to deter the military from applying the sort of pressure that had brought down the WP-led government in 1997. Second was the involvement of leading foreign governments, notably the UK (one of the island’s guarantor powers), in encouraging the JDP to act creatively and incisively on Cyprus.

The December 2002 summit proved to be too ambitious in terms of solving Cyprus at a stroke. Erdoğan and Gül subsequently retreated in the face of collective patronizing by the Kemalist establishment, which labelled the government naive and inexperienced. However, the retreat proved to be only tactical. A second opportunity opened up in February 2004, with the revision and re-energizing of the Annan Plan for Cyprus. The Kemalist establishment still opposed constructive concessions, but again their opposition had been blunted. While leading international actors were again involved, as in December 2002, there had also been a change of government in northern Cyprus, as a result of the democratic elections of February 2005. The arch-rejectionist Derviş Eroğlu had been replaced as prime minister by the more flexible Mehmet Ali Talat. Though the JDP government was still taking a great risk in revising policy on an issue of core importance to its ideological rivals, its calculations had been adroitly made.

In the end, there was no solution to the Cyprus problem based on the Annan Plan. The JDP government and its allies led by Talat duly delivered northern Cyprus with 65 per cent of the vote in the peace plan referendum held on 24 April 2004. It could do no more. The process failed owing to an obstructionist regime in Nicosia and a sceptical public. The 75 per cent ‘no’ vote in the south of the island effectively killed the plan. With the Turkish establishment’s vested interests saved from the implementation of the JDP’s notional concessions, the Cyprus issue ceased to be divisive. Both sides could manage the Cyprus question on shared ground, through such methods as vilifying Greek Prime Minister Papadopoulous’s obstructionism; using every forum to seek to end the isolation of the north (for the post-Islamists in government this has presented additional opportunities for diplomatic engagement with the Islamic Conference Organization and even the Arab League); and agreeing on the pusillanimous nature of the EU response, which failed adequately to reward the northern Cypriots for their cooperation over the Annan Plan.

Israel and the Palestinians

Like relations with the EU, the Israeli–Palestinian issue was a major foreign policy fault-line between Kemalists and Islamists in the 1990s. The best illustration of

17 Sencer Ayata refers to this as a period of ‘psychological combat’. See his ‘Changes in domestic politics and the foreign policy orientation of the AK Party’, in Martin and Keridis, eds, The future of Turkish foreign policy, p. 245.
Turkish foreign policy since 2002

This deep divide could be seen in 1996, the year of the three military agreements between Turkey and Israel, when the general staff obliged the WP prime minister, Necmettin Erbakan, personally to sign off on the accords. The nature of relations with Israel became a benchmark of the increasingly hard-edged struggle between the Kemalist military and the Islamists who dominated the coalition government. The presentational even-handedness on the Israeli–Palestinian issue that followed the ousting of the WP masked a substantive tilt in the direction of Israel. For Turkey’s Kemalists, the value of the Israeli relationship far outweighed anything the Palestinians could deliver. This was underpinned by identity empathy. The feeling among Kemalists was that in many ways the Israelis were just like them: modern; westward-looking; having a shared Arab ‘other’; fellow victims of terror. No less importantly, the Israelis, or at least their lobby organizations, could solidify relations with the United States.

The return to strife between the Israelis and the Palestinians with the so-called al-Aqsa intifada of 2000 onwards had an unexpected impact on the Turkish body politic. Sympathy among the Turkish public with the Palestinians was more instinctive and more heartfelt than had been anticipated. Official appeals for an end to the violence, a return to the peace process and the creation of a Palestinian state increased as a result, and the more ostentatious aspects of the relationship with Israel were toned down. At times of particularly serious bouts of violence, florid rhetoric sometimes got the better of Turkish politicians. The then prime minister, Bülent Ecevit, famously got carried away in reacting to his Israeli counterpart’s decision to send tanks back into the West Bank towns in April 2002. His description of the act as ‘committing [sic] genocide before the eyes of the world’ proved to be a costly slip for which he was obliged to make a humiliatingly public retraction.18

When the post-Islamist JDP formed its government in November 2002 it faced a dilemma. Should its leadership have the courage of its convictions from the days of the WP and criticize Israeli conduct in the Palestinian territories, or should it re-evaluate its position in light of the responsibilities of power, as it had done more swiftly over relations with the EU? The difficulty of resolving this fundamental choice helps to explain the erratic behaviour of the JDP and its leaders towards the Israeli–Palestinian issue and related matters. On the one hand, Erdoğan and some of the party’s senior figures have at times literally been unable to contain themselves when confronted with displays of disproportionate Israeli violence against the predominantly Muslim Palestinians. Erdoğan’s outburst against Israeli ‘state terrorism’ in April 2004, in response to the Israeli military’s actions in the Gaza Strip, was the most arresting example. On the other, Erdoğan has come to understand that persistent and harsh criticism of Israel will sooner or later incur a cost in terms of relations with the United States.19 Erdoğan’s official visit to Israel

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19 US Ambassador Eric Edelman saw the ‘unacceptable rhetoric’ of Erdoğan and others, the availability of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion for sale at a Turkish international airport, and the wide availability of Hitler’s Mein Kampf as symptoms of an anti-Semitism beginning to take hold in Turkey, which would be viewed in a disproportionately negative way by Turkey’s most solid supporters in the United States including Washington’s neo-conservatives; author’s interview with Ambassador Edelman, Ankara, 15 March 2005.
in May 2005, when he shook the hand of the Israeli prime minister, Ariel Sharon, a man whom many JDP supporters regard as a war criminal, showed that at times he was willing to act pragmatically to minimize that cost.

As the JDP has struggled to establish a stable policy on Israel and the Palestinians in public, the Kemalist establishment has largely stood aside in favour of tangible but less visible action, working quietly to keep the relationship with Israel firmly on track. So, for example, cooperation in such areas as military affairs and intelligence-sharing has continued more or less without interruption. Underpinning this approach has been a realistic appreciation that maintaining ties with both Israel and the Arab world is ‘a fragile balance’. Turkey needs a voice like that of the post-Islamists, issuing periodically sharp criticisms of the conduct of Israel, if the Kemalist security state is to continue to cooperate with it. There is a hard-headed admission that the JDP is best placed to undertake such a task. As one senior Foreign Ministry source observed, the ‘JDP is closer to the region, closer to the public sentiment [in Turkey] and a tool to represent the larger public sensitivity’.

I ideological divergence cases

The JDP government has striven hard to maintain its commitment to two principles in the application of its foreign policy: do not challenge existing ‘state strategies’; and keep Islamic references and symbols out of Turkey’s public diplomacy. The government has been largely effective in pursuing both of these aims. However, there have clearly been areas of foreign policy activism that sit far more comfortably with a post-Islamist approach to foreign relations than with a Kemalist one. In addition to the two examples below, the initial welcome given to Hamas after its election victory in Palestine in January 2006 serves as another illustration.

The Islamic Conference Organization

Turkey was a reluctant and cautious participant in the ICO when it was established under the leadership of Saudi Arabia in 1969. On the one hand, Ankara did not want to snub the new body, which had been set up as a multilateral counterweight to the Egypt-dominated Arab League. Moreover, with Turkish foreign policy after 1964–5 driven by the goal of mobilizing support at the UN on Cyprus, turning its back on the organization, with its large membership of UN member states, would have been counterproductive for Ankara. On the other hand, however, the Kemalist establishment in Turkey intuitively recoiled from an initiative aimed at entrenching what were widely regarded as backward, underdeveloped ideas and values. Hence Turkey was part of the original membership group, but very much as a sleeping partner.
This began to change after the 1980 military coup, when the junta sought to co-opt religion into a Turkish–Islamic synthesis as a bulwark against the spread of communism during a period of renewed frigidity in the Cold War. This recalibration extended to Turkey’s involvement within the ICO, with Ankara busying itself in the organization’s Standing Committee for Economic and Commercial Cooperation (COMCEC), deemed a more culturally acceptable area for Kemalist activism.22 ‘Mission creep’ within the organization followed for Ankara, resulting in the high point of Turkish diplomacy: a rearguard action within the ICO ‘Contact Group’ on conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina to help prevent a ‘civilizational’ cleavage within the international community. By 1993 Turkey’s involvement was such that a leading Turkish foreign policy commentator, Cengiz Çandar, could label the country (admittedly with characteristic exaggeration) as the ‘éminence grise’ of the organization.23

It is against such a background of growing and substantive diplomatic engagement that the JDP government has further raised the profile of Turkey’s involvement with the ICO. This is partly explained by a desire to express Turkish society’s Islamic identity through the medium of foreign policy. It is also no doubt partly an expression of Abdullah Gül’s personal outlook, the JDP Foreign Minister having spent a number of years working in Jedda for the Islamic Development Bank, one of the four specialized institutions of the ICO.24 The high-water mark of this involvement came with Ankara’s decision to bid for the vacant position of secretary general of the organization. After a secret, competitive vote, the first in the history of the organization, a former Turkish academic, Professor Ekmeleddin İhsanoglu, became the head of the organization’s secretariat. Gül pointed to this development as evidence that Turkey intended to revitalize the organization.

The JDP government’s bid to run the ICO was undoubtedly useful on a number of different levels. At a national level, it enabled the government to show its core supporters that it was growing closer to the Islamic world, even at a time when its foreign policy was rather conservative and EU-oriented in other respects. At a regional, diplomatic level it enabled the JDP to argue that it was pursuing a more rounded foreign policy which takes the Middle East and the Islamic world seriously, and is not simply dominated by a westwards orientation. More tangibly, the JDP was successful in boosting the ICO’s relationship with northern Cyprus, a concession that would have attracted notice in Kemalist circles.25 At an international level, an enhanced ICO involvement enabled Turkey’s post-Islamists to adopt a platform on Islam, good governance and terrorism with audiences from

22 Turkey holds the permanent presidency of the COMCEC, which was established in 1986.
23 What is interesting about Çandar is that over an involvement spanning three decades he has consistently taken the Middle East and the Islamic world seriously as a field of study. With good contacts in the Arab world and Iran, Çandar is well placed to come to such a conclusion. See Turkish Daily News, 11 Jan. 1993.
25 In April 2006 the Parliamentary Union of the ICO followed the 2004 decision of the OIC foreign ministers to change its formal designation of northern Cyprus from ‘The Cyprus Muslim Turkish Society’ to the ‘Cyprus Turkish State’, a formulation used in the 2004 Annan Plan. Though Ankara would like formal recognition of the north as the ‘Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus’, given that Turkey is the only state that confers full recognition even such a measured outcome is a useful victory.
both worlds. To the West they presented themselves as the proselytizers of democratization among the membership of the ICO; to the Islamic world their posture was that of an acceptable and effective voice for Islamic piety within the West. It was a well-judged pitch. While some of Turkey’s more sceptical Kemalists are deeply suspicious of the JDP government’s activities within the ICO, it has not generally been regarded as a revolutionary change in foreign policy.

Sudan and Darfur

The JDP’s silky words about democratization and good governance in the Islamic world were put into perspective by Erdoğan’s visit to Khartoum in April 2006 for an Arab League summit, and thence to Darfur, the scene of an emerging genocide. The set-piece occasion for the visit was the delivery of a speech on the ‘Alliance of Civilizations’, following that made by Erdoğan’s co-chairman in the ‘Alliance of Civilizations’ project, the Spanish premier, the previous year. In content, the speech was more or less a continuation of the sort of thing that Erdoğan and Gül had been saying over the previous three years. With opportunities for elite schmoozing restricted by the Arab summit’s indifferent attendance, the reason for the trip was largely symbolic, enabling the post-Islamists to argue that Turkish foreign policy was now more inclusive. It also reflected Turkey’s recently acquired status of ‘permanent guest’ at the Arab League, concluded earlier by the JDP, and increased interest in Sudan as a venue for Turkish investment.

The choice of venue, with Sudan’s poor human rights record, was seen as invalidating the regime’s brave words about good governance. It was also a flawed decision in its own terms, in view of the JDP’s fears of military interference in Turkish politics—Sudan’s president, Omar al-Bashir, a military man, having seized power in a putsch in 1989. Erdoğan’s insistence on visiting Darfur immediately after the summit in order to deny international charges against Sudan appeared to be gratuitously apologetic. While such a gesture can hardly be described as amounting to a policy, it did make commentators question Erdoğan’s political instincts and sincerity alike. It is unlikely that Sudan would have featured as a destination of priority if the Kemalist Foreign Ministry had been setting the agenda for Turkey’s external affairs. Indeed, there were echoes in the visit of Erbakan’s forays to Libya

26 A good example of JDP rhetorical diplomacy in action at the ICO is Abdullah Gül’s ‘Statement’ at the 31st Session of the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers in Istanbul, 14 June 2004, when he referred to ‘the Islamic heritage of justice, tolerance, affection and solidarity’. He said that it should ‘strengthen our inspiration for more democratic, transparent, open societies’ and that ‘only well-governed and functioning societies can ensure efficient and fair distribution of resources and economic-social stability’. He warned that ‘unless we take the initiative to put our own house in order, outer pressure would be felt’. See www.mfa.gov.tr, accessed 15 Nov. 2006.

27 Turkey and the Arab League concluded a memorandum of understanding in Sept. 2004, in the margins of the UN General Assembly, to develop political, cultural and economic relations. ‘Permanent guest’ status was designated because the Arab League does not have the formal ‘observer’ status that the JDP government had sought.

28 Subsequently, for example, the Turkish airline, THY, established three scheduled flights a week to Khartoum.
and Nigeria in 1996, though with less contentious consequences. Still, the fact that Erdoğan would rather spend his time with a military dictator, even one with Islamist connections, did not amount to the beginnings of a revisionist foreign policy, even if it was ill-advised.

**Neutrality cases**

Most of the cases that fall under this heading are low-priority, single-issue, relatively dormant or uncontroversial areas of Turkish foreign policy. A good example of the last would be Turkish–Australian relations. In December 2005 Erdoğan visited Australia. Subsequently, Canberra decided to open a consulate in Çanakkale, close to the Gallipoli peninsula, the main reason for such an initiative being to support the growing numbers of Australians coming to Turkey for the annual Anzac commemorations.

Both Erdoğan and Gül paid a number of comparable visits during the second half of the JDP term in office, when there was a period of relative inactivity on priority issue areas such as Turkey–EU relations. Erdoğan’s travels took him to such curious destinations as Ethiopia and Mongolia. Gül visited more mainstream countries in Asia, Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa, as part of a deliberate strategy to revitalize previously neglected relationships. There is nothing to suggest that these fleeting attentions on the part of the leading post-Islamist political figures created any ideological disharmony back in Ankara.

**Conclusion**

The election victory of the post-Islamist JDP in November 2002 was expected to usher in a period of pronounced tension with the Kemalist-dominated state in Turkey. The ensuing four years have certainly not been free from tensions between the two traditions in Turkey; and a stress spike is anticipated in the run-up to parliament’s election of a new head of state in May 2007. However, these tensions have not been as acute as many had feared, or as a Huntingtonian approach that sees Turkey as a ‘torn country’ would tend to suggest. Certainly this has not been the case in the realm of foreign affairs.

The experience of Turkey’s two traditions in case-studies of external relations since November 2002 tends to fall into four types: areas where policies have converged; areas where disharmony has been contained; areas where distinct ideological differences have existed, but have not resulted in foreign policy revisionism away from an essentially West-oriented vocation; and neutral areas, without distinct policy consequences. If these are the headline conclusions of

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In October 1996 Prime Minister Erbakan insisted on making a trip to Egypt, Libya and Nigeria, all three countries ruled by regimes that were military in origin, in spite of warnings from the Turkish Foreign Ministry. The latter two had been identified as potential members of a group of eight predominantly Islamic developing countries, which subsequently joined together in the D-8, an organization that has met intermittently over the last decade, and which the JDP government has sought to revive. For Erbakan, the trip was a disaster, mainly because of Colonel Qadhafi’s insistence on embarrassing his visitor by publicly criticizing Turkey for its handling of the Kurdish issue.

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this article, a concentration on specific issues has produced even more interesting results. In the first category of ‘convergent issues’, the EU has gone from being a policy fault-line a decade ago to an area of near-consensus since 2002, while over the invasion of Iraq Turkish policy was more resilient in fending off American pressure for cooperation because both Kemalists and post-Islamists backed the same basic stance. In the second category of ‘disharmonious issues contained’, Cyprus did not become the conflictual policy battleground for the radically divergent views and interests of the two traditions that might have been expected, and Kemalist and post-Islamist approaches towards the Israeli–Palestinian issue have been characterized at least as much by a division of labour as by emotive division. In the third category of ‘ideological divergence’ the JDP has cleverly used the values of good governance associated with the EU to justify a deeper exchange with the ICO, the multilateral organization of the Islamic world.

Over 180 years, Turkey’s two traditions have been at odds with one another more often than they have been in harmony. The cohabitation that has characterized the relationship between Kemalism and post-Islamism since 2002 has bucked this trend, especially in the area of foreign policy. As long as an institutionalized, rule-based system remains the framework for the practice of Turkish politics, there is no reason why Huntington’s civilizational tear should not continue to mend beyond 2007, and the country’s next parliamentary election.