



The Impact of Identity on Turkey's Regional Policy in West Asia (2011–2023)

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Abstract

Identity in Turkey's foreign policy has been shaped by the complex interplay of historical, cultural, and religious factors. This evolving identity has led to significant shifts in Turkey's international relations, particularly under the leadership of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). The AKP's foreign policy in Turkey has transitioned from traditional realist-Kemalist approaches toward an emphasis on identity and constructivist concepts rooted in Turkey's historical and identity-based depth. This article examines the influence of identity frameworks on Turkey's policies in the West Asian region, especially during the post-Arab Uprisings period from 2011 to 2023.

The study focuses on identity-related concepts such as Neo-Ottomanism, an affinity for the Muslim Brotherhood, Pan-Turkism, and the recent "Century of Turkey" vision. It analyzes how these ideologies have shaped Turkey's approach to forming alliances, managing regional conflicts, and expanding its influence. The central argument of this article is that these identity frameworks and concepts have driven Turkey to pursue its regional objectives through a constructivist lens in foreign policy, fostering partnerships based on shared religious and ethnic backgrounds, and presenting itself as the modern successor of the Ottoman Empire. Using a descriptive-explanatory method, this study offers insights into Turkey's strategic choices and the beliefs that have guided its actions in West Asia.

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Introduction

The rapid transformations in West Asia following the Arab uprisings paved the way for fundamental changes in the regional policies of influential states, particularly Turkey. Turkish foreign policy, which had previously been primarily framed by traditional neorealist approaches based on economic cooperation and balance, gradually shifted after 2011 toward a more active, ideological, and identity-based policy. During this period, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), relying on new concepts such as Neo-Ottomanism, affinity with the Muslim Brotherhood, Pan-Turkism, and the "Century of Turkey" vision, sought to redefine Turkey's role in the region based on identity and cultural components.

This study, adopting the theoretical framework of constructivism and focusing on the role of identity in shaping foreign policy, aims to explain how these identity-based components influenced Turkey's regional policy in West Asia between 2011 and 2023.

Research Method

This study is qualitative, theoretical, and analytical, utilizing a descriptive-explanatory method. It analyzes scientific literature, official documents, political speeches, AKP policy statements, and reports from research centers to examine the role of identity constructs in Turkey's regional policy. The theoretical framework of the study is constructivism in international relations, which emphasizes the role of mental and identity structures in defining national interests and states' international behavior. A comparative analysis of Turkey's actions toward various regional countries—such as Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Libya, Qatar, Azerbaijan, and even Palestine—has also been used in the data analysis.

The main objective of this article is to assess the role of identity in Turkey's regional policy and to analyze how it influenced Turkey's strategic and security decisions regarding regional developments in the post-2011 period. The authors argue that Turkey's regional approach cannot be explained solely by material and geopolitical interests; rather, identity-based and discourse-driven transformations must also be considered.

Findings and Analysis

The research findings indicate that Turkey's regional policy from 2011 to 2023 has been significantly redefined by identity and discursive components. Four key identity-based constructs are identified:

Neo-Ottomanism: A return to Ottoman imperial heritage and an attempt to play a leading role in the Islamic world, especially among Sunni Muslims. This discourse led Turkish foreign policy to intervene in crises such as Syria, Libya, and Iraq.

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Affinity with the Muslim Brotherhood: Ideological closeness to the Brotherhood led Turkey to support Morsi's government in Egypt, the Syrian opposition, and groups like Hamas. This policy brought Turkey into confrontation with Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Pan-Turkism: Emphasizing ethnic solidarity among Turks led Turkey to support Turkmen minorities in Syria and Iraq and to strongly side with Azerbaijan during the Karabakh crisis. The Organization of Turkic States was also revitalized within this framework.

Century of Turkey Vision: Erdogan's strategic vision document for the 21st century emphasizes autonomy in foreign policy, increased geopolitical influence, and the promotion of Turkic-Islamic values.

These shifts in Turkish foreign policy can be seen as a clear application of constructivist theory in international relations. Unlike realist analyses that interpret state actions purely through material interests, this research shows that during the studied period, the Turkish state formulated an identity-driven role for itself in the region. Concepts such as leadership of the Sunni world, defense of the oppressed, solidarity with Turkic nations, and revival of Ottoman glory became central signifiers in Turkey's foreign policy discourse.

As a result, Ankara accepted costly military engagements, sectarian rivalries, and diplomatic tensions—regardless of their material and diplomatic burdens. Tensions with Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE can be analyzed through this identity-based and ideological discourse.

Moreover, the link between domestic and foreign policy in Turkey has been strengthened. The rise of the Islamic-nationalist discourse domestically has legitimized aggressive policies abroad. Erdogan's role as a "leader of the Ummah" has been reflected not only internally but also in the transnational Islamist discourse. Turkey's interactions with actors such as Qatar, Hamas, and the Azerbaijani government are analyzed based on shared identity, cultural, and linguistic affinities. This trend shows that identity is influential not only at the individual and elite level but also in macro-level policymaking.

Conclusion

This study shows that Turkey's foreign policy in West Asia between 2011 and 2023 has been significantly influenced by identity-based and constructivist factors. Turkey's foreign policy has moved beyond traditional Kemalist and pro-Western paradigms toward redefining its regional role through discourses such as Neo-Ottomanism, Brotherhood orientation, and Pan-Turkism. These transformations make Turkish policy intelligible as an identity project—a project in which foreign policy serves as a tool for representing and consolidating a national-Islamic identity at the regional level.

The study's findings also suggest that Turkey seeks to construct a new "identity self" in contrast to regional "others" such as Iran, the Assad regime, and conservative Arab states. Therefore, analyzing Turkish foreign policy without considering its identity and discursive dimensions would be incomplete.

Keywords:

Turkey, Justice and Development Party, Arab uprisings, structuralism, identity.

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