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The case of Turkey

Zeynep Gülsah Çapan and Ayşe Zarakol

On January 12, 2016, a Turkish group called *Barış için Akademisyenler* (*Academics for Peace*) released a public petition signed by 1,128 Turkish and 346 foreign academics, protesting the Turkish state's conduct in South-eastern Turkey since the breakdown of the Kurdish peace process in the summer of 2015. The petition stated that:

Tayyip Erdogan
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the Turkish state has effectively condemned its citizens in Sur, Silvan, Nusaybin, Cizre, Silopi, and many other towns and neighbourhoods in the Kurdish provinces to hunger through its use of curfews that were ongoing for weeks . . . It has attacked these settlements with heavy weapons and equipment that would only be mobilised in wartime. As a result, the right to life, liberty, and security, and in particular the prohibition of torture and ill-treatment protected by the constitution and international conventions have been violated.¹

The petitioners asked the Turkish state to observe international and domestic human rights norms. The next day, the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan gave an angry speech, broadcast live on multiple channels, and accused the petition's Turkish signatories of being a 'fifth column' and displaying a colonial mentality: 'Turkey experienced betrayal [at the hands of] this mind-set 100 years ago. Then there was a group of so-called intellectuals who preferred the protectorate of a great power with the belief that only foreigners could fix the [problems] in this country'.² Since Erdoğan's speech that day, and many similar others since, hundreds of academic signatories in Turkey have lost their employment and faced criminal investigations for engaging in 'terrorist propaganda'.³

It would be one thing if Erdoğan had characterised his critics simply as 'terrorist sympathisers'. It is common enough for authoritarian rulers to use the label of terrorism to discredit dissidents (see, e.g., Lagon and Puddington 2015). What is significant for our purposes here, however, is Erdoğan's invocation of a 'post-colonial' critique to condemn his opponents who had demanded that the Turkish state observe international laws and norms in its conduct against the Kurds. Erdoğan's choice to invoke the language of resistance to colonialism to justify fascistic measures and to defy international norms is not an accident, but rather



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part of a troubling trend in Turkey (and elsewhere) where anti- and post-colonial critiques are deployed in service of authoritarian regimes. Nor is it just politicians who use this discourse.

In Turkey, there has emerged a cadre of ‘pro-government’ academics who use ‘postcolonial’ arguments to intellectually shield Erdoğan and the government from criticism. While it may be tempting to dismiss their efforts as a cynical appropriation of the ‘postcolonial’ condition for political posturing, doing so assumes that we can determine the sincerity of such academics and politicians who use such arguments. As we discuss below, for historical reasons, such as the manner in which the Ottoman Empire/Turkey joined the international society of states, many of these critiques work well in the context of Turkey, even if they do not necessarily point to the policy recommendations drawn from them by ‘pro-government’ academics. It cannot be assumed, then, at least without further exploration, that the arguments are simply distorted for political gain. In fact, academics that we are labelling as ‘pro-government’ would likely counter that they are not using ‘postcolonial’ critiques in the service of Erdoğan but rather that they support Erdoğan because of their ‘postcolonial’ positionality. In other words, the deployment of postcolonial critiques to support regimes such as that of Erdoğan raises difficult questions about the ‘rightful’ use of postcolonial critiques. Who gets to do so and how should this be decided?

As noted in Epstein’s introduction to this volume, David Scott’s notion of problem-spaces offers a productive way of thinking about this. Scott’s argues that the postcolonial *questions* also need to be interrogated, to see whether they are right for *our* postcolonial times and places. In order to probe the present we need to identify ‘the difference between the questions that animated former presents and those that animate our own’ (2004, 3). For instance, anticolonialism and postcolonialism do not have the same enquiries. Anticolonialism frames the issue with respect to political decolonization and postcolonialism as being a problem of representation. Postcolonial interventions in IR have unearthed the different trajectories in the construction of the international (Krishna 1999; Grovogui 2002, 2006; Jabri 2012). What is termed the ‘expansion’ of the international system has in fact taken many routes and the ‘postcolonial subject’ has joined the international system with differing motivations and with varying manifestations of agency (Jabri 2014, 375, also see Jabri’s contribution to this volume, and Jabri 2012). The colonial past and the postcolonial present are therefore constitutive aspects of the international. The expansion of the international system cannot be conceptualized without discussions of empire, colonialism, anticolonial struggles and decolonization (Keene 2002; Suzuki 2009). The issue then is to develop criticisms for the variety of (post)-colonial presents. Scott’s arguments, then, relate to this chapter in two ways. First, questions for our postcolonial presents have to vary because not everyone inhabits the same present and the same critical lens may not work everywhere. A postcolonial analysis of Turkey, for instance, has to deal with the fact that those in power are using the language of postcolonialism. Second, engaging with the political afterlife of postcolonial critiques is necessary precisely because it forces us to articulate responses to a present and a near

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future where postcolonial analytical lenses will increasingly have to be trained on countries such as Turkey, i.e., countries that occupy an ambivalent space between postcolonial *and* colonial agency.

This chapter thus problematizes one of our postcolonial presents through the example of the AKP era in Turkey. This example works to underline the paradoxes involved in the variegated experiences of the postcolonial present. Krishna (1999, xix) defines ‘postcolonial anxiety’ as referring to the phenomenon that ‘the social construction of past, present, and future for state elites and educated middle classes in the third world are mimetic constructions of what has supposedly already happened elsewhere: namely, Europe or the West’. As a consequence, ‘Both the past and the future become an imitative and thankless quest to prove that supremely unworthy maxim: ‘We are as good as...’’ (Krishna 1999, xix). As Chowdhury’s contribution to this edited collection also illustrates, this anxiety works in differing ways because of the variegated experiences of colonialism, anti-colonial struggles, the conditions under which independence was achieved (see also Jabri 2012). Furthermore, the dominant manifestation of anxiety varies depending on the period: for example, within Kemalist Turkey it was oriented towards becoming more ‘Western-oriented’ whereas the way it manifests itself in the AKP era is through the criticism of ‘Western norms’ such as the Westphalian state system, as we discuss below.⁴

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The first section of the chapter discusses Turkey’s relationship to postcoloniality⁵ and reviews the historical background in order to explain why the Justice and Development Party (hereafter the AKP) government has come to increasingly rely on postcolonial concepts to justify its policies. The second section focuses on academic knowledge production in Turkey and how the postcolonial critique of Western norms has recently manifested itself in troubling ways in the Turkish foreign policy analysis literature: i.e., directly influencing and enabling various neocolonial strategies adopted by the AKP government of President Erdoan. In the conclusion, we speculate as to why in contexts such as Turkey postcolonial arguments are often used in service of what are in essence alternative exclusionary political exclusionary projects. Postcolonial critiques, if we are not careful, therefore may end up reproducing the hierarchies they mean to dismantle.

We do not intend this chapter as a substantive rejoinder to the postcolonial literature itself or to the rest of this volume, but rather as complementing the many arguments advanced therein. As Epstein notes in the introduction to the volume: ‘From a postcolonial perspective, the problem then becomes how to recover the tools that modern reason itself has yielded, to develop the types of epistemological critique we undertake here . . . how to use reason in order to denounce the tyranny of reason’ (x). The case of Turkey we discuss in this chapter demonstrates such dilemmas rather acutely. How do we resist what is happening in Turkey without resorting back to the language of universal norms? There are several traps here to be avoided: on the one hand, for some, the ‘real world’ use of postcolonial critiques in justifications of regimes such as Erdoan’s may increase the temptation to draw back into the ontological safety and the certainties of the supposedly universal international norms. On the other hand, the appropriation

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of postcolonial language by the Turkish government acts is intended as in-built defence mechanism to neutralise *any criticism* of the government as being universalizing or hegemonic or colonial against Turkey. Epstein's question about using reason, therefore, becomes even more pointed and significant in a case such as Turkey's: the challenge here is to rescue an ethical postcolonial positionality without resorting to the 'tyranny of reason'.

(Post)coloniality of Turkey?

Historically, the basis for the contemporary claims in Turkey to 'postcoloniality' are not straightforward. Not only was Turkey never colonized by European powers, it is the heir to an empire. At the same time, the unequal relations between the Ottoman Empire and the Europeans paralleled colonial dynamics in many ways, from the nineteenth century onwards. European powers certainly viewed Turkey as colonisable and Turkey was occupied for a brief period after WWI. There were also serious proposals for including Turkey in the League of Nations Mandate system (for an overview of this history see Zarakol 2011, 2014).

The manner in which first the Ottoman Empire and later Turkey was socialised into the international system inscribed within Turkish society a sense of ambivalence towards the idea of 'Europe' (see, e.g., Zarakol 2011; Bilgin and Bilgiç 2012). It is also that ambivalence (which has also been characterised as 'liminality' or 'hybridity'⁶) of Turkey that makes possible the use of postcolonial lenses when discussing Turkish politics. As part of its integration to the modern international order, (most in) Turkey accepted the 'norms' produced by the West as being universal and the 'European gaze' as the authoritative standard by which *one should be judged*, or alternatively, against which *one should rebel*. Turkey's anxiety with respect to the international society and the West has thus manifested itself as both 'Western-orientedness' and 'anti-Westernism'. Such attitudes therefore should not be thought of as existing in a dichotomous fashion but rather as a continuing negotiation of Turkey's ambivalence towards the international system. As such, both attitudes in differing degrees can be present at the same period (Bilgin and Bilgiç 2012).⁷

For a very brief period following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, anti-colonial arguments were used by Mustafa Kemal (later Atatürk), leader of the Turkish militia⁸ and later the founder of the Turkish Republic. At the time, Turkish forces looked to Muslims in India and the Bolsheviks for financial support, and anti-colonial as well as anti-imperialist arguments were used to fan winds of solidarity. Anti-colonial arguments were used to undermine occupying forces in Anatolia, especially Britain (Zarakol 2011, 125–135, 148). Soon after the creation of the Turkish Republic, however, anticolonial arguments were abandoned in favour of a strategy that cast Turkey and Turks as European, white and "modern", while de-emphasizing the similarities between Turkey and countries under colonial or mandate rule (Zarakol 2011, 141–159). For example, according to Turkish Republican historiography, Atatürk was allegedly motivated to create the Turkish Historical Commission (Türk Tarih Kurumu)

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because he was “alerted” to the fact that Turks were described as belonging to the “yellow races” in the French textbooks Turkish students were using at the time. The Turkish Historical Commission was tasked with coming up with a historical narrative that demonstrated that Turks were one of the civilizations capable of self-rule, and in this narrative much was made of the fact that Turkey was never formally colonized, the many indirect interventions in Ottoman affairs by European powers especially after the nineteenth century notwithstanding.⁹

As a result of such efforts in the initial years of the Republic, whatever anti-colonial sentiments and sense of solidarity with colonised peoples that had existed prior to the founding of the Republic dissipated quickly. The Turkish ruling elite at the time wanted to distance themselves from the territories of the former Ottoman Empire that were now under League of Nations mandate arrangements, fearing the same fate. Additionally, anti-colonialism in those years was associated with communist or socialist intellectuals, who were designated as subversives after the Republic broke away from its Bolshevik alliance (see, e.g., Uzer 2002; Berkes 2005). From that point on, the official discourse had little to say about anti-colonial struggles elsewhere (and in fact at times went to the opposite extreme, flirting with Nazism in the lead up to World War II¹⁰). After World War II, Turkey sought and gained a place in the Western alliance, and generally maintained a cool distance from later solidarity efforts such as the Bandung Conference and the non-aligned movement.¹¹ From the inception of the Republic in 1923 until the twenty-first century, then, Turkish foreign policy maintained an almost singular focus on its Western alliances and ignored most developments outside of the West, including the politics of anti-colonial struggles.¹² The state was guided by principles of Kemalism, which was focused on proving that Turkey was a modern, European, Western and, by implication, *not* a ‘postcolonial’ country. Much of this would change after the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002 following the financial crisis of 2001.

The AKP, despite having been established shortly before the 2002 election as an umbrella party bringing together various elements of the Turkish political right (economic and political liberals, nationalists, etc.), had its primary roots in the political Islam movement in Turkey. Many of the original founders of the party were intellectually predisposed to be sceptical of Kemalism and its aggressive pursuit of Westernisation and modernisation. The AKP was able to form the first majoritarian government after a decade of weak coalition governments, and continued to increase its share of the popular vote in each subsequent election. Once in power, the AKP initially ushered in a period of liberalisation both in politics and intellectual life, and opened the door to challenge various orthodoxies, including the Kemalist historiography of Turkey underwriting the established patterns of Western-oriented foreign policy as well as the tutelary role of the military in Turkish politics. As we discuss below, this is what created the intellectual and political space for the rise of postcolonial approaches in Turkish academia.

However, such ‘liberal’ trends have been drastically reversed in recent years. Since the AKP narrowly escaped dissolution by the Constitutional Court in 2008 the country has been on anti-democratic trajectory, especially after the



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constitutional amendments of 2010 and the Gezi protests of 2013. Most observers agree that Erdoğan has been moving towards one-man rule and has consolidated his power over all organs of the government and the media (Esen and Gümüşcü 2016). Within the AKP itself, which had started out as an umbrella party as noted above, many of the initial coalitions have been dismantled, and the party has ideologically retreated back towards its political Islamist core.¹³ Especially important for our purposes in this chapter has been the shedding of more ‘liberal’ alliances within the party. While Turkish liberals were never a powerful group in Turkey, in the initial years of the AKP rule they played a very important ideological function in the party by formulating justifications for AKP policies that were especially palatable to international audiences. Up until the 2013 Gezi protests, the AKP and Erdoğan had very positive images in the West, especially in the US, which had partly to do with the desire in Western capitals to find a suitable ‘model’ for the post-‘Arab Spring’ Middle East (Tuğal 2016) but also much to do with Western networks of the liberal academics and public intellectuals in AKP’s camp, such as Cengiz Çandar, Ahmet Altan and Murat Belge.¹⁴ After the liberal camp started criticising Erdoğan for his repressive policies following the Gezi protests, most liberal intellectuals and academics either left the AKP or were purged. In terms of justifying Erdoğan’s policies especially in the international realm, the departure of liberals left an intellectual vacuum. It is precisely this political void onto which ‘postcolonial’ approaches to Turkish politics have been mounted.

Politics of postcolonialism in Turkey¹⁵

In 2014, the first postcolonial research centre in Turkey was established. In the section outlining the aims of the research centre, one of the aims of the centre is stated as follows: ‘to support the development of the concept of ‘New Turkey’.¹⁶ ‘New Turkey’ is an aim that is referred to with increasing frequency by the AKP. After his election to the Presidency in 2014 after three terms as Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declared that ‘today, the day the first elected President of Turkey assumes office is the day Turkey rises from the ashes and the building of new Turkey gains impetus’ (Erdoğan 2014). In a speech on 27 August, then-Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu¹⁷ also reiterated the theme of ‘new Turkey’ and underlined a program for AKP that would build ‘new Turkey’ through ‘restoration’ (Davutoğlu 2014). In that sense, the aim of the first postcolonial centre in Turkey to ‘support the development of the concept of ‘New Turkey’ situates them as developing the intellectual tools to legitimise the ‘new Turkey.’ The director of the new research institute, Merve Kavakçı,¹⁸ stated in an interview that ‘our President also talks in line with postcolonial thinking’, pointing to Erdoğan’s statement about Muslims having first discovered the continent of America, as well his argument about the need to reform the UN because ‘the world is bigger than five’, referring to the make-up of the UN Security Council. She emphasised that ‘post-colonialism is very important in understanding the new era Turkey has entered and the New Turkey’ (*Star Gazetesi* 2015). Although the concept of ‘New Turkey’ had been used intermittently for years, following these developments the concept



gained new traction and garnered a lot of intellectual debate in Turkey. In this section, we briefly look at some examples from pro-AKP academia to demonstrate how scholarship that labels itself as ‘postcolonial’ serves to legitimise and justify various hegemonic and essentialising projects of Erdoğan and the AKP.

A ‘new subjectivity’ and a ‘post-Westphalian order’

The postcolonial research centre is one among several centres the Erdoğan regime uses for generating intellectual capital for the regime, a realm long monopolised by secularists. SETA (Siyaset, Ekonomi ve Toplum Araştırmalar Vakfı – Foundation for Political Economic and Social Research) is another non-profit research institute that is known for its close ties to the Justice and Development Party. For example, Talip Küçükcan, who was the Coordinator of Social and Economic Research and the Director of Foreign Policy Research at the foundation and Editor-in-Chief of *Insight Turkey* (a policy journal published by SETA), is now elected as an AKP Member of Parliament.¹⁹ Other academics and analysts associated with SETA, such as Nuh Yılmaz and İbrahim Kalın, have served as official advisors and spokesman for the regime. In other words, there is a great deal of symbiosis between centres such as SETA and the government bureaucracy.

Elaborating on the concept of ‘New Turkey’, a position analysis from SETA written by Nebi Mis²⁰ and Ali Aslan²¹ describes the aim of ‘New Turkey’ primarily as creating ‘a new subjectivity’ that will ‘transform the present political structures’. This transformation according to the writers has three pillars: ‘it is post-Kemalist with its aim of democratization’; ‘post-Western with its aim of independence, and post-Westphalian with its aim of a new political unit and institutionalization’ (Mis and Aslan 2014, 26). Thus, ‘aiming to transform itself and its region by way of creating a new body politic and a new political unit, Turkey is also working towards transforming the global politics’ which will be ‘multi-civilizational and democratic-pluralistic’ (Mis and Aslan 2014, 26). What is noteworthy about Mis and Aslan’s analysis, however, is what it omits: the critical lens is reserved only for the West and Kemalism, which is in stark contrast to the essentialising and jingoistic lens adopted in the discourse on Turkey, the AKP and President Erdoğan.

The notion of a ‘new’ subjectivity is present again another article by Ali Aslan, ‘Problematizing Modernity in Turkish Foreign Policy: Identity, Sovereignty and Beyond’, where he argues that ‘the most striking aspect of *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* [AKP]’s foreign policy is its search for a “new subjectivity”’ (Aslan 2013, 28). This search includes not only redefining Turkey’s place in the world (the identity dimension) but also attempts to weaken Turkey’s attachment to the Westphalian polity (the sovereignty dimension)’ (Aslan 2013, 28). Aslan’s article does not deviate from the examples in the previous section as he compares two subjectivities – Kemalists and the AKP – and argues that AKP aims to produce a ‘conservative-democratic “nation”, a regional order transcending the Westphalian polity, and the production of world order based on the plurality of civilizations’ (Aslan 2013, 41). Aslan locates the causes of the decline of Kemalist subjectivity



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and rise of AKP subjectivity ‘in the dislocation of the Westphalian foundations in Europe and the transformations in modern Western identity’.

The narratives of overcoming an alien Westphalian order as well as the borders that were established through Sykes-Picot and the necessity for a post-Westphalian and post-Western global order are also the main tenets of the ‘New Turkey’ project in the international arena. Defending that project, Murat Yeşiltaş²² argues that:

Before the [AKP], Turkey’s foreign policy was determined through a secular-nationalist identity with the purpose of reproducing a Westphalian political unit at the regional level. This meant the acceptance of the universality of modern Western civilization and the establishment of Turkey as an integral part of the universal civilization.

(Yeşiltaş 2014, 43)

This argumentative strategy works to impose a clear separation between the (Kemalist) period before the AKP and the post-AKP period, underlining that *before* AKP the subjectivity of Turkey was premised upon ‘reproducing a Westphalian political unit’ and hence dependent upon the norms and ideas ‘imposed’ by the West. According to Yeşiltaş, only with the AKP did the search for a new ‘political subjectivity’ begin, which ‘succeeded in *decentering* the historical construction of Turkey as an integral part of the Western civilization’ (Yeşiltaş 2014, 43). Yeşiltaş further argues that the orientation towards the ‘Western-oriented nation-state political unit’ is now being replaced by a supra-national and civilizational political understanding in Turkish foreign policy (Yeşiltaş 2014, 44). The article elaborates on the concept of ‘New Turkey’ and advances the theme of ‘restoration’, focusing on the writings of Davutoğlu and his arguments with respect to civilisational analysis.²³ The conclusion states that ‘the “New Turkey” discourse reproduced the civilisational identity part of Turkey’s international order narrative by blending it with an anti-hegemonic “dissident” discourse’ (Yeşiltaş 2014, 69).

Yeşiltaş’s article is part of a trend in Turkish academia. Articles that celebrate the advent of the ‘new Turkey’ through references to the Westphalian international order and the establishment of a new subjectivity present certain commonalities. First, they argue that a new subjectivity is necessary because changing international structures have brought the Westphalian foundations of the international system into question. This line of reasoning still problematically situates the beginning of all developments *in* Europe and interprets the changes in Turkey as being derivative of dynamics there (see Barkawi and Laffey 2006 for a general criticism of such narratives). Furthermore, it takes both the Westphalian origins of the international system and the idea that a Westphalian nation-state was established in Turkey as unproblematic until the 1990s (cf. Osiander 2001; Branch 2012; Hobson 2009). Second, the new subjectivity is characterized as being post-Kemalist: a clear demarcation is made between the problematic Kemalist subjectivity (as Western or colonial) and the new subjectivity being established by the AKP (as postcolonial). Such a rendering of events overlooks the postcolonial

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anxieties at work in Kemalist Turkey and the reasons for its ‘Western-orientedness’ (Bilgin 2009).

Challenging western narratives?

The narrative of a post-Westphalian subjectivity is also extended into analyses of the ‘Arab Spring’ and ISIL. For example, in a recent article Murat Yeşiltaş and Tuncay Kardaş declare that ‘the new Middle East’ is undergoing a new ‘revolt against the West’ that is challenging ‘the dominant Western values of statehood and personhood’ and through and analysis of the Arab Spring and ISIL the paper aims to ‘go beyond the confines of narrow, ethnocentric accounts’ (Yeşiltaş and Kardaş 2015, 65–66). They argue that the Westphalian model was ‘transferred to the Middle Eastern society of states’ and that ‘Western international society upholds its hegemonic view of international order and membership criteria for being accepted into the Western society of states’. Thus, the article draws from the English school literature on socialisation into the international system literature and discusses uncritically the idea of the norm of ‘sovereignty’ expanding from Europe outwards (cf. Epstein, this volume; Vogl, this volume, Epstein 2014, Zarakol 2014). The authors then underline the different hierarchies and exclusionary practices at work in the Western international system by stating that ‘the modern society of states has, over time, grown able to make certain forms of state acts either legitimate or illegitimate, as in the case of global disgust with apartheid or of ISIL’s woman and child slavery or publicized beheadings of civilians’ (Yeşiltaş and Kardaş 2015, 73). The authors argue that dissent to the international order is labelled as ‘barbarism’ in opposition to ‘western secular humanism’ (Yeşiltaş and Kardaş 2015, 73).

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Thus, the authors argue, ISIL challenges the Western society of states because ‘its vision of international relations is outside the institutions and purview of the Western society of states’ (Yeşiltaş and Kardaş 2015, 73). Furthermore, they maintain that unlike previous revolts against the West ‘this is not an elite undertaking, a top-down initiative, but one involving a different subjectivity – namely that of the *Ummah* community of believers as a whole, a new multi-national subjectivity of inhabitants’ (Yeşiltaş and Kardaş 2015, 77). As such, ISIL is a challenge and presents a new ‘revolt’ against the West because it questions ‘almost all of the “primary institutions” of international society that incorporate the classical “Westphalian set” such as sovereignty, territoriality, war, international law and great power management, nationalism and human equality’ (Yeşiltaş and Kardaş 2015, 78). We can see the political echoes of this academic analysis in the AKP’s general softer stance to Islamist rebels in Syria, including ISIS and al-Nusra (as compared to its aggressive towards the Syrian Kurdish rebel group PYD). It should also not be forgotten that Turkey has shown its eagerness to intervene in the civil war in Syria both to topple Assad and to counter the Syrian Kurdish groups, and there are many allegations that it has actively meddled in the war by supporting various Islamist rebel groups, if not ISIL directly (Cockburn 2014; Coughlin 2015; Hersh 2016).





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From the academy to politics

The brief overview of the academic discussions in the previous sections reveals two interlinked themes that also reverberate in the speeches by politicians such as the former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu (who himself came from an academic background) and President Tayyip Erdoğan. On the one hand, we have the claim that a (postcolonial) ‘new subjectivity’ is being created through ‘new Turkey’, and on the other, we have the strident criticisms of the Eurocentric Westphalian international order and its ‘universal’ norms. For example, in a speech given in 2013 entitled ‘Transformation of World Politics’ then Prime Minister Davutoğlu argued (in English) that:

There is no – like [the] Cold War – a Eurocentric or Euroatlantic plus Soviet Union center of world politics any more. There are new rising powers, the language of politics have [sic] changed, the structures of politics have changed and there is a need for a new response to this. For example, as a question, as a global order, [the] UN system based on 5 permanent members who are able to decide for the entire political issues of humanity, do they? [sic] What is the legitimacy of having this structure? In the 1950s, 60s, 70s they [sic] had a legitimacy because of being winners of the Second World War.

(Davutoğlu 2013, errors in the original)

The present international system is criticised because of the power differentials in the workings of international institutions. In recent years, Turkish politicians such as Davutoğlu and Erdoğan have started attacking the structure of the United Nations and arguing that international institutions should reflect the changes in the international system. This echoes the arguments of the academics as discussed in the previous section whereby the changes in the international system necessitated a change in subjectivity. It also suffers from the same problems as the academic analyses, as such a rendering continues to situate Europe as the centre of history, reproducing Eurocentric ‘historical geographies and periodisations’ (Barkawi and Laffey 2006, 334). The ‘Cold War’ is still accepted as a correct periodisation and events in Turkey are still conceptualised as ‘derivative of European developments and driven by great-power competition and the definition of European ideas and institutions’ (335).

Explaining how the transformation of the international system has impacted the Middle East and Turkey’s vision Davutoğlu stated that:

There will be many more challenges in the region, but at the end of the day the new regional order in the Middle East should be based on – like in Europe, what I told [sic] in Europe – high level political dialogue, a common security zone, an economic interdependency and a cultural inclusivity of city life. We are looking at and we are working for a new Middle East run by the people of the Middle East, not imposed by outsiders. We will respect borders, we will respect all nations. But like Europe, European Union, we have to make these

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borders meaningless [sic]. Because all the borders in the Middle East are artificially drawn. We have to see this fact. Tribes were divided, families were divided, cities, towns were divided between Turkey and Syria. Who divided? [sic] The natural connections were lost. Now this will be restored.

(Davutoğlu 2013, errors in the original)

Thus Davutoğlu stresses the Eurocentricism of international order, as well as the artificial imposition of the borders in the Middle East. Once again, what is significant about the speech is not so much what it argues but rather what it omits. Davutoğlu's remarks about borders take on a different light when contrasted both with the Turkey's interventionist policy vis-à-vis Syria as discussed above (which was many years in the making by the time this speech is delivered) and its continuous efforts to thwart any kind of communication let alone merger between the Kurdish populations and armed groups on either sides of the Turkish-Syrian border.

In another speech delivered on February 2016, where he outlined his action plan to deal with terrorism, then Prime Minister Davutoğlu also presented his views on the history of Anatolia and the borders of the Middle East. In that speech, Davutoğlu discussed the history of a 'unifying spirit' in Anatolia and the different ways in which it was challenged and regained throughout history. He contended that 'we stood unbendable (*dimdik*) with the same unifying spirit until the colonialists came. When Napoleon entered Egypt in 1798 the first dagger had been thrust' (Davutoğlu 2016, translation ours). He then went on to discuss the Siege of Kut al-Amara²⁴ and underlined how it is generally forgotten even though 'in this war the peoples of the Middle East won the last battle against the imperialist forces moving towards Baghdad'. He then referenced the Sykes-Picot agreement and stated that 'either Kut al-Amara will win or Sykes Picot'. According to Davutoğlu, the unifying and anti-colonial spirit of Anatolian history, which had resisted valiantly against imperialist forces as demonstrated in the siege of Kut al-Amara, is being sought again through the AKP against the contemporary 'forces of Sykes-Picot'. The implication here is that the AKP is a postcolonial saviour not only of Turkey, but of the entire Middle East.

President Erdoğan also gave a speech in 2014 underlining what according to him is the anti-Western and postcolonial leadership potential of Turkey by drawing comparisons between the World War I battles of Gallipoli,²⁵ Sarıkamış²⁶ and Kut al-Amara. In that speech, then-Prime Minister Erdoğan argued that 'when borders were being drawn in this geography, these borders were also drawn within the minds of our academics, artists and writers'. As such, the 'status quo in Turkey was established with the First World War' and 'Sykes-Picot did not only intend to draw geographic boundaries but it also aimed to draw boundaries in minds, and unfortunately it has been successful' (Erdoğan 2014, translation ours). Foreshadowing his 2016 'fifth column' accusations against academics discussed in the introduction, Erdoğan went on to underline that there are presently 'voluntary Lawrences', who through the guise of freedom of speech and press freedom, continue to implement Skyes-Picot. As in the more recent accusations

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against academic signatories of the peace petition, the speech casts anyone who criticises Erdogan as a tool of Western colonialism and as suffering from a colonial mentality. Erdogan concluded that speech by stating that ‘100 years ago Ottoman Empire could keep this geography in peace. The hope of the people in the region is Turkey, they are awaiting Turkey’. In other words, the solution for the problems created by Western colonialism is for Turkey to be more like the Ottoman Empire.

On April 29, 2016, for the first time in a century, the anniversary of Kut al-Amara was officially commemorated by the Turkish government,²⁷ with Erdogan declaring that ‘he rejects the sensibility that starts Turkish history in 1919’²⁸ and adding that the name ‘Turk stands for all Muslims in the West’ (Erdogan 2016). What is omitted from this new discourse of Turkish-Muslim anti-colonial victory surrounding the siege of Kut al-Amara is the fact that the 13,000 British soldiers defeated and taken as prisoners of war at the time inconveniently consisted mostly of Indian battalions, many of who were also Muslims. Some of these Indian troops later fought under the Ottoman banner, commanded by German military officers who were overseeing much of the Ottoman war effort. In that sense, Kut al-Amara was not at all the much-vaunted victory of anti-/de-/post-colonial forces over a colonial army; it was rather the (very short-lived) victory of one type of colonialism over another. For that reason, and rather ironically, it is indeed the perfect symbol of Erdogan and the AKP’s self-proclaimed postcolonial leadership plans in the post-Western world.

Conclusion: how do we find a balance?

In this chapter, we have discussed how postcolonial concepts have been used in recent years by both political leadership and the pro-government academics in Turkey to justify a range of very questionable policies by the Turkish government, from interventionist and neocolonial foreign policy approaches towards Syria and the Middle East (and elsewhere, especially North Africa) to all manners of domestic repression, including internal colonialism, especially of Kurds. Another telling discourse surrounds the academic advocacy of ‘Turkish Style Presidency’ (*Türk Tipi Başkanlığı*), which combines a ‘postcolonial’ criticism of the ‘universal’ norms of democracy and checks-and-balances with an extremely essentialising discourse about a unique Turkish national identity, which is argued to need its own special regime.²⁹ Such developments are not unique to Turkey either; Putin in Russia has deployed similar criticisms to justify interventions in the Caucuses or to advocate for homophobia domestically. Modi in India also displays similar tendencies with his divisive rhetoric within India and the manner in which he underlines India’s civilizational role and the greatness of India (Ghosh 2014; Mishra 2015). In the hands of such politicians and their intellectual enablers, postcolonial critiques of universal norms seem to become tools of reasserting essentialist, particularist and nationalistic policies of new imperialisms. However, as we stated in the introduction, it is a mistake to dismiss these moves as purely utilitarian; at least in some of these cases, such moves could also be seen as genuine efforts

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to deal with the anxieties created by the postcolonial legacy of the international system. This possibility makes it difficult to formulate an appropriate response to such arguments.

When confronted by this current reality of world politics, there is a tendency to react one of several ways, which are equally problematic. One is to dismiss such discourse simply as pragmatic manoeuvring by politicians. However, while utilitarian motivations must certainly play a role in these situations, we cannot dismiss all such efforts as cynical ploys. Even in the case of career politicians but certainly in the case of academics, there is no way to prove that their postcolonial analyses of the international system do not start from a position of sincerity, especially given the fact that the critical starting points of their analyses are well-conversant with the established postcolonial academic literature. Furthermore, even if it could be proven that politicians were taking up postcolonial discourses simply as a tactic, it would still need to be asked why their audience, e.g., Erdogan's Turkish base, responded enthusiastically to such arguments. Another tendency is to retreat back into the ontological security of upholding 'universal' norms as a criticism against such regimes, but this is also a dead end. Postcolonial criticisms have demonstrated time and time again that what are upheld as 'universal' norms have their own history and origins, and therefore inevitably create their own social hierarchies. Pretending that they do not only adds fuel to the fire of the inevitable backlash. In fact, the aforementioned audience for Erdogan (and other politicians like him) may not exist but for the historical 'tyranny of reason' imposed on Turkey by the Kemalist modernizers and their quest to conform to the 'universal' norms of the Western civilisation. Yet another problematic reaction is to welcome behaviour such as that displayed by Erdogan and the AKP in Turkey as discussed in this chapter as a necessary corrective for the last two centuries of imbalance between the West and the rest. Yet this is also very fraught; even if successful (which is unlikely), such a strategy merely replaces one essentialist hegemonic discourse with another, and one which has not yet developed its own internal post-colonial critique at that. This is as an empty victory as that of the Ottoman army in the aforementioned Battle of Kut-al-Amara: substituting one type of colonialism with yet another.

The case of Turkey demonstrates that questioning of the colonial past of the international system and its (post)colonial present could also enable discourses that reproduce hierarchies and contribute to the continuation of exclusionary practices in the international system. The impulse should not be to succumb to the reproduction of differences but to question 'what failure of form, what failure of the postcolonial lies here?' (Muppudi 2014, 38). The only way out of this bind, we suggest, is to take the insights of postcolonialism seriously: just as postcolonialism can be used to explain the condition of countries such as Turkey that were never formally colonised (as well as their internal colonies), the critical tools offered to us by such analysis can and should also be used to dismantle hegemonic and would-be hegemonic discourses outside of the West, such as that of Turkey's. It is only then that we can really transition to a genuinely postcolonial and post-Western world.



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Notes

- 1 For the full text of the petition in English as well as other languages, please see <http://internationalsolidarity4academic.tumblr.com> as well as <https://barisicinakademisyenler.net>.
- 2 'Erdoğan accuses academics of being a fifth column', Cihan News Agency, January 12, 2016. www.cihan.com.tr/en/erdogan-accuses-academics-of-being-fifth-column-1985203.htm
- 3 The Academics for Peace website (<https://barisicinakademisyenler.net>) keeps an up-to-date tally of firings and other investigations, civil and criminal. Last accessed August 25, 2016. See <http://bianet.org/english/human-rights/173521-academic-meral-camci-arrested> or www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/case-history-academics-peace (Both last accessed August 25, 2016). Many other academics have also faced prosecution since the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016.
- 4 See e.g. Bilgin 2015, 2016. For a different but concurring theoretical take on this issue, see Zarakol 2010, 2011, 2014.
- 5 For the purposes of this article postcoloniality refers to the postcolonial condition and postcolonialism to the study of this condition. Thus postcolonialism 'designates the perspective of tricontinental theories which analyse the material and epistemological conditions of postcoloniality' (Young 2001, 58)
- 6 For uses of these characterizations in analysing Turkey see e.g. Yanık 2011; Morozov and Rumelili 2012. The 'critical IR' stances and writings in Turkey are few and far between especially ones that focus on postcolonial thought, the notable exception being the work of Pınar Bilgin, for further see Bilgin 2012, 2015, 2016.
- 7 For a discussion of the mechanisms behind a particular attitude dominating during a given period see Zarakol 2011.
- 8 During the Greco-Turkish War of 1919–1922 ('Independence War' in Turkish historiography)
- 9 For more on the 'Turkish History Thesis' see Çağatay 2002, 2004; Uzer 2002.
- 10 For more on Turkey's relationship with Germany during World War II see Çalış 1997; Güçlü 2000.
- 11 Turkey was one of the participants of the 1955 Afro-Asian Conference held in Bandung, Indonesia. The Turkish delegation at the Conference had disagreements with the Indian delegation mainly on the issue of how to define colonialism and the concept of non-alignment. There is very little literature that specifically focuses on Turkey's attendance in the conference and its meaning for Bandung and the future of the non-aligned movement. For some works that do mention Turkey's involvement in Bandung see Bağcı 2001; Abraham 2008.
- 12 For example, Turkey abstained in the United Nations on a vote for a resolution calling for negotiations between France and the *Gouvernement Provisoire de la République Algérienne* in December 1958. For further on this see, Ersoy 2012.
- 13 Given the developments since the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016, the trend towards authoritarianism is unlikely to be reversed. For more on the coup attempt of July 15 see Zarakol 2016a. The response to the coup attempt has also intensified Turkey's ambivalence towards the international system and the West focusing primarily on why Western powers' reaction or lack of reaction to the coup attempt. See e.g. Idiz 2016, Mert 2016, also Zarakol 2016b.
- 14 Somewhat ironically, the overwhelming Western support and sympathy for the AKP in those years could also deployed as a political weapon in domestic politics against AKP's secular Kemalist critics who, for reasons discussed above, were especially sensitive to the judgments of the Western gaze. Such dynamics were very much at play during the 2010 constitutional referendum, for instance. With American and EU support on their side, most liberals campaigned in favour of the constitutional changes proposed by the AKP with the slogan "Not Enough, but Yes". Since 2010, the AKP

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has used some the reforms to bring the judiciary more firmly under its control. The Kemalist critics of AKP still hold the ‘Not Enough, but Yes’ camp responsible for this outcome. Given that liberals were (and are) a very small group voters to begin with, we can only speculate that the lingering resentment has something to do with the fact that liberals were using against the critics of the constitutional changes, which appealed to the Western sympathies of the Kemalists.

- 15 Authors discussed in this section were selected based on their association with the government and/or centres associated with the government. They are all well-known in Turkish academia. The material that is covered is not exhaustive but meant to be a relatively representative sample.
- 16 See www.uskudar.edu.tr/tr/sayfa/185/postkolonyal-calismalar-uygulama-ve-arastirma-merkezi-pamer-hakkinda (last accessed August 25, 2016).
- 17 Davutoğlu resigned from this post during the first week of May 2016. There are strong indicators that his decision came at the urging of Erdoğan.
- 18 Merve Kavakçı is an important figure not only in Turkish politics but also in understanding postcolonial feminism. She was elected as a member of parliament in April 18, 1999, but was prevented from serving due to headscarf. In 2007 European Court of Human Rights ruled that her expulsion was a violation of human rights. The many injustices that she had to endure has become one of the symbols of the subaltern position of the head-scarfed women in Turkey. For more on these events see Peres 2013. Kavakçı herself has written a book about the postcoloniality of Turkey and the politics of headscarf: see Kavakçı Islam 2010.
- 19 There is not a lot of work being done with respect to the intellectual production of think tanks close to AKP, but there have been some op-eds written about the subject. For further discussion see www.birgun.net/haber-detay/dis-politikada-entelektuel-koza-ya-hapsolmak-84496.html (last accessed August 25, 2016)
- 20 Nebi Mis is an Associate Professor of International Relations currently teaching at the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at Sakarya University.
- 21 Ali Aslan is a researcher at Foreign Policy desk at SETA.
- 22 Murat Yeşiltaş is an Associate Professor of International Relations currently teaching at the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at Sakarya University.
- 23 The article draws as its main sources the articles of Davutoğlu but does not engage with criticisms directed against civilizational analysis in general or the way it is employed in Davutoğlu’s works specifically. For these criticisms, see Bilgin 2012; Buck-Morss 2014; Dirlük 2015.
- 24 The siege of Kut al-Amara was the siege of an British-Indian garrison by the Ottoman army during the First World War. For more on the historical background, see Rogan 2015, 243–274.
- 25 Gallipoli campaign (the Battle of Canakkale) was a battle during World War I. It ended with Ottoman victories against the allies. It has occupied a central place in the imaginations of Turkey’s national identity. The way the commemorations have worked to resignify a national identity have changed over the years. In recent years it has been instrumentalized to signify an identity that ‘contains Islam and depicts the First World War, and Gallipoli in particular, as a war fought by common people’ (Demirci 2016: 25).
- 26 The Battle of Sarıkamış was a battle between Ottoman and Russian forces during WWI.
- 27 www.dailysabah.com/nation/2016/04/30/kut-al-amara-last-ottoman-victory-remembered (last accessed August 25, 2016).
- 28 He is referring here to Kemalist historiography that dates the beginning of the Turkish ‘Independence War’ to 1919, when Mustafa Kemal travelled to Anatolia to head militia forces.
- 29 See, e.g., ‘Başkanlık sistemi Türkiye’ye çağ atlatır’, *Aksam* 26 November 2015. www.aksam.com.tr/siyaset/baskanlik-sistemi-turkiyeye-cag-atlatir/haber-465160 (last accessed August 25, 2016).



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