

Article

Civilizational Populism in Domestic and Foreign Policy: The Case of Turkey

Ihsan Yilmaz  and Nicholas Morieson * 

Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, Deakin University, Melbourne, VIC 3217, Australia

* Correspondence: nicholas.morieson@deakin.edu.au

Abstract: This article investigates whether Turkish populism has undergone a ‘civilizational turn’ akin to what Brubaker, Haynes, Yilmaz, and Morieson have described occurring among populist parties in Europe and North America. The article applies Yilmaz and Morieson’s definition of ‘civilizational populism’ to Turkey under the rule of the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) in order to determine whether the party conforms to this definition. The article investigates how the AKP, an Islamist and populist political party lead by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has increasingly incorporated what we term ‘civilizational populism’ into its discourse. The article shows the impact of civilizational populism on Turkey’s domestic and foreign policy under the AKP rule. The article finds that the AKP has increasingly, and especially since the 2013 Gezi Park protests and the mysterious coup attempt in 2016, construed opposition between the Turkish ‘self’ and the ‘other’ not in primarily nationalist terms, but in religious and civilizational terms, and as a conflict between the Ottoman-Islamic ‘self’ and ‘Western’ other. Furthermore, the article finds that the AKP’s domestic and foreign policies reflect its civilizational populist division of Turkish society insofar as the party is attempting to raise a ‘pious generation’ that supports its Islamizing of Turkey society, and its nostalgic neo-Ottomanist power projections in the Middle East. Finally, the paper discusses how the AKP’s civilizational populism has become a transnational populist phenomenon due to the party’s ability to produce successful television shows that reflect its anti-Western worldview and justify its neo-Ottoman imperialism in the Middle East.

Keywords: Islam; Islamism; populism; transnational populism; civilizationism; foreign policy; international relations



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1. Introduction

Since its victory in the 2002 general elections, Turkey’s Justice Development Party (AKP) has established itself as the nation’s dominant ruling party. The AKP first won office running as ‘Muslim democrats’ and promising to liberate the nation from authoritarian secular nationalism (Özel 2003; Nasr 2005; Yilmaz 2009). However, the party became progressively intolerant of dissent and populist over its two decades in power (Çınar 2018; Yilmaz 2021). Following a failed mysterious coup attempt in 2016, the party turned more authoritarian, jailing its enemies and marginalizing opposition in the name of protecting ‘the people’ from threats foreign and domestic. A key element of the AKP’s populist discourse is the claim that the party, and in particular its leader and Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan, are pious Sunni Muslims proud of Turkey’s Ottoman past, and represent the voice of ‘the people’. The AKP’s turn away from ‘Muslim democracy’ in the 2010s saw the party embrace a form of Islamist nationalism in which Turkey is portrayed as the “continuation of the Ottoman Empire” and the core state of Islamic civilization (Moudouros 2022, p. 175). Cognizant of the AKP’s Islamist and neo-Ottomanist turn, scholars describe the party increasingly defining Turkish identity not in a narrowly nationalist or ethnonationalist manner, but in religious and civilizational terms (Hazır 2022; Uzer 2020; Yilmaz and Morieson 2022). Language describing a clash between civilizations is

frequently evident in Erdoğan's discourse. For example, Erdoğan claims that there exists a conflict between "Islamic civilization" and "Western civilization", which is the result of the former emphasizing "help for all who need it, treating everyone, even stray animals with compassion", and "Western civilization directly focus[ing] on the individual" (Hazır 2022). Erdoğan also claims that racism was unknown during the Ottoman period and that its Sultans ruled according to the unique values of Islamic civilization: "justice", "toleration", and "compassion" (Hazır 2022). On the other hand, he claims, contrasting the two civilizations, that Western civilization has only ever ruled through racism and violent force (Hazır 2022). Turkey, according to Erdoğan, is "heir" to Islamic civilization, and calls upon Turkish Muslims to rejuvenate Islamic culture, claiming that this is the duty not merely of government but also of general "society, the business world, NGOs, universities, people of arts and culture" (Erdoğan 2017).

There is evidence, then, of a civilizational turn in Turkish politics analogous to the civilizational turn in European and American populism identified by Brubaker (2017) Haynes (2017, 2020), Morieson (2023), and Yilmaz and Morieson (2022, 2023). Brubaker, for example, describes how right-wing populist parties in north-western Europe are increasingly constructing "the opposition between self and other not in narrowly national but in broader civilizational terms" (Brubaker 2017, p. 1191) (i.e., between the Western and Judeo-Christian 'self' and the Islamic 'other'). Haynes (2017, 2020) finds that a similar present in populist discourses in the United States, particularly within the Trump Administration and its supporters. According to Yilmaz and Morieson (2022) "In the 21st century, across a variety of democratic political contexts, 'civilizationism', a political discourse that uses a largely religious classification of peoples in order to define national identity, has become a significant component of populist political rhetoric". Yilmaz and Morieson (2022), drawing on Mudde's definition of populism (2004) argue that "civilizational populism" is "a group of ideas that together considers that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people and society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite' who collaborate with the dangerous others belonging to other civilizations that are hostile and present a clear and present danger to the civilization and way of life of the pure people."

Is there, then, evidence of this 'civilizational populism' in Turkey, in the form of the AKP-led government? This paper tests this conception of civilizational populism in the context of Turkey, and the discourse and policies of the AKP-led Turkish government. To do this the paper asks two key questions: What role does civilizationism play in AKP discourse? And is civilizationism evident in Turkish domestic and foreign policy?

The article begins with a brief discussion of Turkish politics in the 20th century and describes how following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his supporters won power and attempted to refashion Turkish identity in order to facilitate secular nationalism, and as a result, downplayed the history and importance of the Ottoman Empire and Islam. At the same time, the article explains, while the Kemalist governments allowed Muslims to practice their religion, it also attempted to control Islam and its practice through the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet). The article then describes the AKP's rise in the 1990s and 2000s as a reaction to the Kemalists' failure to construct the Republic of Turkey as a democratic, secular nationalist nation. The AKP, the article shows, provided an alternative to secular nationalism, 'Muslim democracy', which they promised would make Turkey more pluralist, democratic, and free, and help integrate the nation into the European Union. Following its election victory in 2002, however, the AKP became increasingly authoritarian and Islamist. The 2013 Gezi Park protests and the 2016 failed coup led the AKP to turn populist and to increasingly portray Turkish Muslims as facing existential threats from internal and external anti-Muslim enemies (Destradi et al. 2022). During the post-2016 period in particular, the AKP and its leader and Erdoğan increasingly portrayed Turkey as the modern embodiment of the Ottoman Empire and a leading nation within Islamic civilization, while at the same time downplaying the importance of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk to Turkey's history.

The second part of the article examines AKP discourse on civilization in the post-2016 period in order to understand how it is employed and for what purpose. It shows that AKP leader and Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan combines populism and its division of society into two opposing groups (the pure people and corrupt elite), with neo-Ottomanism and Islamism. The result of this combining is a civilizational populism in which Turkish society is divided between the ‘pure people’, defined as Sunni Muslim ethnic Turks, corrupt secular ‘elites’, and dangerous ‘others’ who collaborate with foreigners to corrupt and injure the pious Muslim people of Turkey. It then describes the impact of the AKP’s civilizational populism on Turkish domestic and foreign policy. It first focuses on how Diyanet has been repurposed by the AKP as an arm of the party and used to help perpetuate the party’s rule by portraying the AKP as defenders of Islam and the Turkish people, and the party’s enemies (Gülenists, secularists, Kurds, ‘the west’) as anti-Islam.

The section then discusses foreign policy and shows how the AKP portrays Turkey as the core state of Islamic Civilization and successor to the Ottoman Empire, and thus as the key force defending the rights of Muslims the world over, but particularly within the lands controlled by the Ottomans. It further discusses how Ottomanism and a desire to defend the *ummah* and Islamic civilization defined Turkey’s foreign policy rhetoric in the AKP era, but that the party’s efforts to re-establish the glory of Pax Ottomana have been foiled by regional powers, forcing the party to adopt a pragmatic stance somewhat at odds with its fiery anti-Western rhetoric. Following this, the article discusses the AKP’s use of state institutions and television series to disseminate its ideology into the Turkish diaspora, and to Sunni Muslims across the world.

The article concludes by drawing together the data and arguing that the AKP has turned toward civilizationism and populism since coming to power in 2002, and especially since the failed coup in 2016. The AKP conforms to the definition of a civilizational populist movement, first, due to its rhetorical division of Turkish society via civilizational identity, and into the groups “the pure people” (Sunni Muslims) and ‘dangerous others’ including the old secular nationalist Kemalist ‘elite’, and Gülenists, Kurds, Alevis, and other groups perceived to oppose AKP rule or policies. Second, because the AKP incorporates civilizationism into its domestic and foreign policies, where its claims of a clash of civilizations between the West and Islamic civilization are used to justify Turkey’s military intervention in Syria, its oppression of minority groups within Turkey, its empowering of the Diyanet, and the party’s marginalization of dissidents and opposition. Finally, the article discusses the particular civilizationism of the AKP and its leader, Erdoğan, and describes how it is fundamentally nationalist and portrays Turkey as threatened by Western interference due to Turkey’s position as heir to the Ottoman Empire and leading nation of Islamic civilization.

2. The Fall of Secular Nationalism and Rise of Islamism and Neo-Ottomanism in Turkey

The Ottoman Empire’s defeat in the First World War, and its subsequent dismemberment by Western allied powers, continues to cast a dark shadow over Turkish politics. Turkish secular nationalists, who had long viewed Ottoman government society as backward and requiring reform, emerged from the Ottoman defeat in the First World War in a strong position and established Turkey as a European-style nation-state. In 1924 the Caliphate was abolished by the Turkish Republic, and the last Caliph, Abdülmecid II, exiled to France. New Turkish president Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his Republican People’s Party (CHP) initiated sweeping reforms that Westernized Turkey, banning forms of traditional dress, replacing Ottoman Arabic script with Latin script, replacing Islamic law with a new secular law code based on Swiss law, and attempting to control Islam within Turkey via the Diyanet (Mardin 1981). “Abandoning the chimera of empire,” Harris (1970, p. 438) observed of this period, “new Turkey grew and formed within modest boundaries. In place of attachment to the sultan-caliph, the shadow of God on earth, Atatürk put allegiance to the nation-state”. To encourage ethnonationalism, Atatürk promoted the “Turkish history thesis” which argued Turks had “contributed to a civilization long before they had been

incorporated into the Ottoman empire” (Mardin 1981). The thesis claimed that Turks “Originated an urban civilization in Central Asia from which many other civilizations had sprung” and “had maintained their cultural identity even after becoming a minority in a multinational empire” (Mardin 1981).

To facilitate the secularization of Turkey, the Kemalists sought to construct a new desired Turkish citizen, “Homo LASTus (the Laicist, Atatürkist, Sunni and Turkish people)” (Yilmaz 2021, p. 23). However, recognizing that it would be impossible to convince the majority of Turkish citizens, especially those living outside major urban areas, to embrace secular nationalism, the Kemalists constructed a tolerated Muslim citizen or “Homo Diyanetus” (Yilmaz 2021, p. 23). ‘Diyanet man’ was moderate, pro-regime and nationalist in his beliefs and habits, and did not challenge the Kemalist hegemony, or call for a return to sharia law (Yilmaz 2021, p. 23). The Kemalist CHP thus “relied heavily on secular nationalist education to create their own version of the modern pro-Western secular homogenous Turkish nation” (Yilmaz 2022a). Students were taught a version of Turkish history intended to disconnect them “from Ottoman history and religion, and thus the European-inspired Kemalist education system attempted to fashion young Turkish people into strong supporters of the nationalist and secular regime and to view the Ottoman past and Islam as retrograde forces or irrelevant” (Yilmaz 2022a). However, suspicion of Western intentions—a product of the Western-led dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire and British support for Greece in the Greco-Turkish War—continued to influence Turkish foreign relations throughout the entire Kemalist period (Yilmaz 2021, pp. 1–7). Moreover, because the Kemalists were reluctant to allow free elections to take place or to permit non-secularist parties from holding power at a national level, Turkey did not transform into a Western-style democracy. Rather, the Kemalists ruled Turkey as a one-party state throughout almost the entirety of the 1923–1946 period, and in the following five decades intervened—staging military coups on four occasions and regularly shutting down Kurdish, leftist and Islamist political parties through the Constitutional Court—in Turkish politics in order to maintain their hegemony (Gunn 2015; Harris 1970).

The rise of Islamism in Turkey in the 1970s, especially in the form of Necmettin Erbakan’s Millî Görüş movement and its associated parties, provoked a strong reaction from the Kemalists. Erbakan’s National Order Party was banned in 1971 for violating Turkey’s secular constitution (Narli 1999, p. 39). His National Salvation Party, formed in 1972, governed as a junior member of a coalition led by the CHP, before being forcibly shut down following another military coup in 1980 (Kucukcan 2003, p. 492). However, Erbakan again founded a new Islamist party, the Welfare Party, in 1983 (Narli 1999, p. 50) which grew in popularity throughout the following decade, becoming the largest party in 1996 and installing Erbakan himself as Prime Minister (Narli 1999, p. 51). The growing power of Islamism in Turkey again precipitated a military coup intended to prevent the de-secularization of the state, and Erbakan was removed from power along with his party in the 1997 ‘postmodern coup’. During the same period, Welfare Party mayor of Istanbul Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was jailed and banned from politics after reciting a poem perceived to attack secularism and the Turkish constitution (Cagaptay 2020, p. 4). However, these actions would not discourage the growth of Islamism in Turkey or prevent the political rise of Erdoğan. Following his release, Erdoğan founded the Virtue Party, and after it was banned in 2001, co-founded the Justice and Development Party (AKP) (Narli 1999, p. 51). The AKP did not present itself as an Islamist party. Rather, it portrayed itself as a pluralist, democratic, and pro-Western yet conservative Muslim alternative to authoritarian secular nationalism (Yilmaz and Bashirov 2018). This self-portrayal was vital if the party was to survive politically during a period of military domination and aggressive secularization. The AKP grew in popularity during this period of secular authoritarianism that followed the 1997 coup, and its success was due in part to Erdoğan’s ability to present himself and his party as the voice of deprived real people and the champion of their interests against old elites (Yilmaz 2018, pp. 54–55; 2021). In 2002, the AKP won government for the first time, and in subsequent elections established itself as the ruling party of

Turkey, consolidating power over Turkish institutions including the military. Over time, however, the AKP abandoned its commitments to cultural and religious pluralism, its pro-Western orientation, and its support for Human Rights, and became increasingly populist, Islamist, and authoritarian. Conforming to the pattern set by previous Turkish governments, the AKP government grew increasingly intolerant of dissent and sought to marginalize opposition parties and movements. In its initial ‘Muslim democrat’ phase the party did at times incorporate the idea of civilization into its discourse. For example, Çınar (2018) observes that in the first decade of its rule the AKP framed “Turkey’s integration with the EU in terms of a ‘reconciliation of civilizations’”, suggesting that the party “had from the very beginning identified Turkey with an unnamed non-Western civilization, but without explicitly rejecting the liberal political norms of European democracy”. Çınar (2018) argues that the AKP’s use of this discourse “represented the possibility of rendering Western political norms with the norms of ‘our civilization’”. However, over time this civilizational discourse changed as the AKP began to disavow Western-style democracy and European Union membership. For example, the party ceased attempting to solve the Kurdish issue, began to use anti-Western rhetoric, and when young people began to protest against a development planned for Gezi Park in Istanbul, crushed the protests with violent force and demonized the protestors as anti-Muslim. Following a failed military coup in 2016, the AKP and its leader—and now the nation’s President—Tayyip Erdoğan, gained greater control of the nation’s politics and institutions.

The 2016 failed coup was a major turning point in modern Turkish history (Bashirov and Lancaster 2018). It differed from previous coups insofar as although it saw the military attempt to remove the governing party from power, it was not led by Kemalists but apparently by members within the military of the professed democratic Muslim movement known as the Gülen Movement and led by Fetullah Gülen (Bashirov and Lancaster 2018; Esen and Gumuscu 2017). The Gülenists—former AKP allies who broke with the party following a 2013 scandal in which AKP members were found to be breaking sanctions on Iran and trading gold for Iranian oil—did not oppose the AKP’s marginalization of the Kemalists, but rather the increasing authoritarianism and corruption (Taş 2018). However, following their break with the AKP they found themselves increasingly demonized by the AKP (Taş 2018).

Purging the nation of alleged 2016 coup leaders and anyone associated with the Gülen movement—particularly people associated with Fethullah Gülen, who was claimed to have orchestrated the coup—Erdoğan and the AKP set about de-secularizing and Islamizing Turkey, and essentially attempting to remake the nation and its people in their preferred image (Yilmaz et al. 2020). With the AKP’s turn toward Islamism and authoritarian populism in the early 2010s, and particularly after 2016, “Erdoğan began invoking the ‘our civilization’ discourse as a means of rejecting Western democracy as a reference point” (Çınar 2018). For example, Erdoğan claimed that “The core of democracy is cohabitation of differences and it is rooted in our civilization”, and that “contemporary universal values and principles were strongly defended and practiced by the Ottoman and Seldjuki states” (Çınar 2018). Çınar (2018), moreover, argues that Erdoğan’s civilizational discourse, which was “coupled with the explicit rejection of liberal democratic principles such as the separation of powers, delegitimization of all critics as Eurocentric, Islamophobic and non-national, and rejection of all Western criticisms as colonialist or Orientalist exercises” was designed to free the AKP of the burden of complying with democratic norms and allow the party to demonize opponents as anti-Islamic.

With the Kemalists marginalized and the Gülenists vanquished, the AKP and Erdoğan began implementing their new ideology, which consists of “electoral authoritarianism as the electoral system, neopatrimonialism as the economic system, populism as the political strategy, and Islamism as the political ideology” (Yilmaz and Bashirov 2018, p. 1812) alongside the portrayal of Turkey as “the legitimate inheritor of Ottoman legacies and power, the leader of the Islamic world, and the protector of Palestine” (Hintz 2018, pp. 37, 113). The implementation of this ideology, which may be called Erdoğanism, involved

bringing the Diyanet, a body created by Kemalists to control Islam and orient Turkish Muslims toward secular nationalism, under the control of the AKP. The AKP greatly expanded Diyanet's budget and, through Diyanet's written Friday sermons (which are read in Diyanet-affiliated Turkish mosques across the nation) sought to perpetuate the AKP's populist Islamist ideology (Yilmaz and Barry 2020).

The AKP, with the assistance of Diyanet, has since the failed 2016 coup attempted to construct a new 'desired citizen' to replace the Kemalist "Homo LASTus". This new desired citizen, which Yilmaz (2021, p. 165) has termed "Homo Erdoğanistus" but which the AKP itself calls "Dindar Nesil, the pious generation" (Lüküslü 2016; Kandiyoti and Emanet 2017) is best described as "a practicing Sunni Muslim, believes in absolute authority, sees the Ottoman rule as the greatest era, believes their social purpose is to spread Islam in the public sphere, to provide aid to and deepen ties with Muslim and former Ottoman peoples and to regain Ottoman glory" (Yilmaz 2021, p. 165; Hintz 2018, pp. 37, 113).

Thus, an important part of the AKP's de-secularizing of Turkey has been its turn away from secular nationalism and toward neo-Ottomanism and Islamism. Where the Kemalists downplayed Turkey's Ottoman heritage, the AKP seeks to portray modern Turkey as a continuation of the Ottoman Empire, with the same alleged mission of the Empire: to act as the leading Muslim power in the world and defend Islam from its perceived enemies. This does not mean that the AKP wish to literally revive the Ottoman Empire. Rather, the AKP's conception of Turkish identity integrates "nationalism rooted in Turkic glorification and the Ottoman pride" (Yilmaz and Morieson 2023, p. 62), but with an added element of *ummahism* (Pan-Islamism), "a postnational, political identity" based on the idea that Muslims across the world ought to bind themselves together as a transnational body of believers (Saunders 2008, p. 303). Pan-Islamism emerged as an increasingly important element in Erdoğan's domestic and foreign policy rhetoric (Yabancı 2020) during AKP rule, especially following the failed 2016 coup and Turkey's 2017 constitutional referendum, "which gave Erdoğan unprecedented power to re-make Turkey in an image of his choosing" (Yilmaz and Morieson 2023, p. 62). Following the 2017 referendum, which successfully changed Turkey's system of government from a parliamentary system to an executive Presidency system, Erdoğan—who was previously Prime Minister—became president of Turkey, making him both head of government and head of state. Newly empowered, Erdoğan portrayed himself as the key leader of the Muslim World and the chief hope of the *ummah* (Yilmaz 2018). Moreover, Erdoğan portrays the world as divided between "two antagonistic blocs of the Muslim World and its enemies to legitimize his authoritarianism" (Yilmaz and Demir 2022; Castaldo 2018; Sawae 2020). Portraying himself as the leader of the Islamic world, and with the AKP entrenched in power and dominating Turkish institutions, Erdoğan now moves his Islamist and populist ideology beyond Turkey's borders, turning it into an Islamist transnational populism.

3. Civilizationism in Turkish Domestic Politics

Civilizationism is manifested in AKP discourse in a variety of ways. In this section we first discuss the role of civilizationism in the AKP's ideology, Erdoğanism, and its populist division of society. Following this we describe the role of civilizationism in the AKP's domestic politics and the manner in which the AKP frames its repression and authoritarianism as a defense not merely of the Turkish nation, but of Islamic civilization and the *ummah*. Finally, we discuss the role of civilizationism in the AKP's foreign policy discourse and discuss how the party justifies its military intervention in Syria and its attempts to increase cooperation between majority Sunni Muslim nations as part of its responsibility as the core state of Islamic civilization and heir to the Ottoman Empire.

Civilizationism is an important element of Erdoğanism, manifesting in its glorification of the Ottoman Empire. In this way, Erdoğanism combines Turkish nationalism with Islamism and neo-Ottomanism, and the result is an eclectic ideology that draws on the notion that the majority Muslim nations ought to come together, for mutual protection against an aggressive West, as a civilizational bloc led by Turkey and its President, Tayyip

Erdoğan. The notion that a ‘clash of civilizations’ is occurring between the West and Islam is a critical component in the AKP’s construction of ingroups and outgroups in Turkey. The AKP portrays itself as defending pious Turkish Sunni Muslims (or the *ummah*) from their enemies: morally corrupt secular ‘elites’ and dangerous non-Muslim ‘others’ alleged to be working with Western powers to injure Turkey and destroy Islam.

The AKP constructs a distinction between ‘the people’ (*ummah*, the global community of Muslims) and their enemies (non-*ummah*), and portrays themselves as protectors of *ummah*, in a variety of ways. The failed coup provided the AKP with an opportunity to ‘prove’ that its opponents were dangerous enemies of the Turkish people and Islam. For example, the AKP blamed the attempted coup squarely on Fetullah Gülen and tens of thousands of members of the Gülen movement and used the failure of their alleged attempt to remove the AKP from power to purge them entirely from all positions of authority in government and business. The Gülenists were subsequently branded terrorists by the government, which claimed that they were working with ‘Crusader’ Western powers to destroy the leader of the Muslim World, Turkey (Taş 2018). For example, shortly after the coup attempt Erdoğan remarked “This coup attempt has actors inside Turkey, but its script was written outside . . . unfortunately the West is supporting terrorism and stands by coup plotters” (Reuters 2016). Erdoğan furthermore claimed that the coup was a “gift from God” that allowed him to expose all of Islam’s and the Turkish people’s enemies within the country (Şik 2016; Ak 2022). Thus, the AKP portrayed the coup as part of a wider conflict between Islam and its enemies: perverters of Islam within Turkey (particularly Gülenists) and the West, especially the United States. Equally, Erdoğan portrayed himself as acting in the name of God to protect the Turkish people from their enemies.

The AKP’s response to the coup included increasing attempts to re-educate the Turkish people, and to entirely replace the Kemalist secular desired citizen with a new Islamist ‘pious generation’ (Yilmaz 2018, 2021). This ‘pious generation’ is instructed in newly Islamized schools and state-controlled mosques, in which the key ideas of Erdoğanism, including the glorification of the Ottoman Empire and people who died defending the AKP government during the 2016 coup, and conservative Islamic values, are taught (Lüküslü 2016). The AKP’s pious generation is taught in schools “infused with social conservatism and religious discourse, including an Islamized version of Turkish nationalism, which creates the image of a unified Turkey, where religious identity trumps class and ethnicity”. The ‘pious generation’ of youth is given “a new national identity based on Islamic symbols and an Islamized historical narrative with symbolic dates and events that are untainted by the Kemalist history narrative”. The ultimate purpose of this indoctrination is to create a large, young Islamist supporter base for the AKP. However, the success of the ‘pious generation’ project is uncertain. There is evidence that it may be backfiring. According to Bilici (2018, p. 44) the AKP’s “dream of creating a ‘pious generation’ seems to be slipping from their grasp with the turn to deism among young people from pious families”. Whether or not the ‘pious generation’ project succeeds, as Bilici notes, the AKP’s project “reveals a deeper set of transformations, most notably the emergence of a new and organic secularization and the transition from a cemaat (community)-centric religious culture to a politically administered one” (Bilici 2018, p. 44). In other words, the ‘pious generations’ project has reversed the traditional paradigm in which Islam was community-based and secularization came about via a top-down government-led effort.

Erdoğan and his party also encourage wider Turkish society to perceive “non-Turkish Muslims, such as Kurds and Lazs, . . . and non-Muslims, such as Christians and Jews” as enemies (Yilmaz 2021, p. 58). In the Turkey Erdoğan set about constructing following the 2016 attempted coup, these minority groups are now part of the AKP’s unwanted citizens, a group consisting of people involved in the Gülen Movement, journalists critical of the government, human rights activists, and opposition political parties critical of AKP regime (Yilmaz 2018, 2021). These groups and individuals are increasingly portrayed by the AKP as “traitors” who do the bidding of foreign “dark forces” trying to “destabilize Turkey” (Yilmaz 2018).

As part of his efforts to construct a pious generation, Erdoğan has himself called for the revival of “Islamic civilization” in Turkey. According to Erdoğan, Turkey is “heir to a civilization which, having flourished with various cultures, has left its mark on the history of humanity” (Erdoğan 2017). He argues that Turkish “society, the business world, NGOs, universities, people of arts and culture” have a duty to “make efforts to build and revive the civilization while thinking over the culture” (Erdoğan 2017). Islamic civilizations such as the Ottoman Empire, Erdoğan claims, governed without resorting to violence and racism, and were bastions of “justice”, “toleration”, and “compassion” in which people and even “stray animals” were treated “with compassion” (Hazır 2022). Erdoğan argues that the revival of Islamic Civilization in Turkey ought to involve a rejection of Western-style building techniques and architecture, and admonishes the Turkish people to “keep in mind that every civilization produces its own technology and every technology its own culture and value. Our ancestors constructed mosques with the aim of building the finest houses of prayer. The techniques and technologies, employed in the construction of those mosques, reflect our civilization. Similarly, inns, caravansaries, and bridges on trade routes are heritages of our civilization. If you do not produce your own technology and science, you cannot be determinative of its culture and value” (Erdoğan 2017). In an attempt to encourage the Turkish people to identify more closely with their Ottoman past and with their fellow Muslims across the world, Erdoğan opened, in 2022, a “Museum of Islamic Civilizations” inside a mosque in Istanbul, which he said represented “the thousand-year accumulation of Islamic civilization, which brought a brand new face to these lands” (Daily Sabah 2022). Moudouros (2022, p. 157) argues that the AKP’s successful campaign to change the Turkish political system from a parliamentary system to a Presidential system was itself part of an “Imperial civilizational restoration” project involving the “centralization of executive power . . . as a natural result of the restoration of the Ottoman imperial legacy”.

Part of the AKP’s civilizational rejuvenation project is to encourage large families among Turkish Muslims. To facilitate this Erdoğan has attacked feminism as a foreign idea contrary to the teachings of Islam. According to Erdoğan, “Allah entrusted women to men. These feminists say ‘How is that? It is an insult.’ Then you have nothing to do with our religion and civilization” (Yılmaz 2022b, p. 122). Erdoğan calls upon Turkish Muslims “multiply our descendants” by avoiding contraception, claiming that while secularists, influenced by Western ideas, “talk about population planning, birth control . . . no Muslim family can have such an approach. Nobody can interfere in God’s work. The first duty here belongs to mothers” (Tharoor 2016).

Another key element in the AKP’s attempt to raise a ‘pious generation’ and revive Islamic civilization has been its use of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet). Under AKP rule, Diyanet has been transformed into an instrument of the AKP itself. Following the 2013 Gezi Park protests, Diyanet was given a new mission and a greatly enlarged budget (Yılmaz and Barry 2020). This new mission was to Islamize Turkey and encourage the Turkish people to perceive themselves not only as part of the wider *ummah* but as the leading nation within the *ummah* and responsible for protecting Muslims globally.

Two successive Islamist and pro-AKP Diyanet leaders, Ali Erbaş and Mehmet Görmez, were installed by the AKP in order to perpetuate Erdoğanism and help the AKP create a ‘pious generation’ of youth. Görmez, for example, involved himself in the demonization of the West and the celebration of Islamic civilization by declaring that Muslims should not enjoin ‘Western’ traditions such as celebrating the New Year. According to Görmez, “No one can say it is right for the pagan culture and consumer culture, converging with hedonism, to create a corrupt culture over our children and teens, especially if all those are joined by things such as Christmas, pine tree, gambling, drinking, lottery and such forth, that will move a human away from himself and his God to create a tradition that will corrupt the society” (Korkmaz 2014).

This notion was echoed by another Diyanet official who instructed the faithful to, refrain from “celebration of new year in our schools and institutions”, and to “not use any ritual belongs to Christianity such as Christmas, Santa Clause, decorating a Christmas

Tree, etc. You shall stay away any social and cultural activity that are not associated with our national and religious values” (Korkmaz 2014). In these statements, Diyanet officials are not merely attempting to prevent Muslims from partaking in Christian rituals, but are attempting to frame both Christian religious rituals and entirely secular activities such as celebrating New Year’s Eve and playing the lottery as “corrupt” and inherently Western and therefore as a foreign threat to the Turkish *ummah*. Erbaş, Görmez’s successor, in his inaugural address called for Turkish people to “work harder than ever to deliver the eternal and everlasting messages of the God and his Prophet to the humanity which flounder into the clasp of secularism and valuelessness” (Parlamento Haber 2017). Later, during a sermon upon the conversion of the Hagia Sophia museum into a mosque, Erbaş held a sword and spoke from the minbar in imitation of an Ottoman Sultan, and in what was likely a deliberate affront to Christians and Turkish secularists (BBC 2020).

Friday sermons in Diyanet mosques are also used to perpetuate Erdoğanism, especially insofar as the sermons portray Turkish Sunni Muslims as part of the global *ummah* forever threatened by non-Muslim enemies, and by Gülenists and other ‘false’ Muslims who pervert the religion, and whose corrupt activities are ultimately the product of the West attempting to create conflict among Muslims. These efforts have become increasingly pronounced since the 2016 attempted coup. For example, the Friday sermon on 15 April 2016 contained the phrase “... Today, as the *ummah* of Islam, let’s work together to turn the lands of Islam back into a land of knowledge, wisdom, and ingenuity.” Similarly, in November 2016 the Diyanet Friday sermon urged “believers” to “rebuild the awareness of *ummah* today” (Yilmaz et al. 2021). Later, on 21 July 2017, the Diyanet Friday sermon claimed that Muslims are without “inhumane practices such as violations of rights, cruelty, and savagery that will embarrass us in our history”, and that by uniting and returning to the Islamic values that made the Ottoman Empire great Muslims today will likely become a “great nation again” (Yilmaz et al. 2021).

In January 2018 a Diyanet Friday sermon alleged that “Those who want to weaken us and to pit Muslims against Muslims are coming at us with the weapons of sedition, terror, and treachery. They are trying to pull our country into the pits of fire they opened in all corners of the Islamic geography. Our independence and future are targeted through various tricks and plots, plans, and traps. They are trying to drive the Islamic *ummah* to despair by threatening our unity and peace” (Yilmaz et al. 2021). A later sermon, read on 11 October 2019, claimed the world is “full of dark and evil traps. Those who claimed to bring so-called independence to some places have rather invaded those places... Those who plan to dig pits of fire all around the Islamic world have used weapons of sedition, terrorism, and betrayal to cause brothers to hit one another. Using various plots, plans, tricks, and traps, they have targeted our existence and future survival, as well as our freedom and future. They have attempted to bring us, our noble nation to have been the flagbearer of the Muslim *ummah* for hundreds of years, to our knees” (Yilmaz et al. 2021).

These sermons, although they name no specific enemy, imply that the West is attacking the Muslim *ummah*, and attempting to destroy Turkey “the flagbearer of the Muslim *Ummah*” (Yilmaz et al. 2021). Diyanet sermons attempt to frame Muslims as innocent victims of Western-constructed violence. Even when Muslims attack other Muslims Diyanet—reflecting AKP ideology—frames the conflict as the result of Western attempts to divide the *ummah*. For example, a Friday sermon delivered on 4 October 2014 claimed that “By looking at the conditions the believers live in, it should be known how the power centers [i.e., the West] gather strength through the blood of the believers and how the brotherhood of faith that makes believers closer to each other is attacked and damaged and turned into fighting, violence and hostility” (Yilmaz et al. 2021).

Each of these sermons re-enforces the AKP’s ideology of Erdoğanism insofar as they portray the world as riven by a clash of civilizations in which the Muslim *ummah* is forever threatened by the West, and in which Turkey—as the leading nation of Islamic civilization and heir to the Ottoman Empire—is the particular target of Western attacks on Islam. Equally, the sermons portray conflicts between Muslims as the product of Western attempts

to weaken Islam, rather than the result of political, economic, and cultural differences between Muslims themselves.

Erdoğan has also attempted to portray the damage caused by his party's unorthodox economic strategies, which have brought the nation close to economic ruin in the 2020s, as part of an economic war waged on Turkey by the West, which he claimed was attempting to bring "Turkey and its people to their knees" ([Voice of America 2018](#)). Contrasting the pious Muslim values supposedly shared by his followers with Western consumerism, and in an effort to rally support for his economic policies following the dramatic decline of the value of the Turkish lira, Erdoğan told the Turkish people to remember that "if they [the West] have their dollars, we have our people, our God" ([CNBC 2018](#)).

4. Civilizationism in Turkish Foreign Policy Discourse

Turkey's foreign policy, since the end of the First World War, has been formulated under heavy constraints put in place by foreign powers. Following the Ottoman collapse and with the Middle East now under Western control, Turkey was no longer able to intervene in Middle East affairs, and so embraced a policy of "moderate isolationism" ([Danforth 2008](#), p. 85). During the Cold War, Turkey aligned itself with the West and anti-communism and joined NATO. According to [Danforth \(2008, p. 87\)](#) "Turkey's NATO membership provided the framework for the close relationship it developed with the United States. Conceptually, it helped give Turkey a new geographic position inside Europe. After centuries of being seen as 'barbarians at the gates', the Turkish army took on the role of 'gatekeeper', defending Europe's southeastern flank" ([Danforth 2008](#), p. 87). Turkey's involvement with NATO and alignment with the West reflected the nation's Westernization programme and detachment from the Ottoman Empire's role in the Muslim-majority world as the seat of the Caliph. However, Turkish foreign policy was also, throughout the 20th century, a product of the constraints put upon it by Western powers and the Soviet Union.

The collapse of the Soviet Union gave Turkey new opportunities to increase its sphere of influence in central Asia and the Middle East ([Danforth 2008](#)). However, despite the diminishing of Russian power in Europe and Asia, Turkey did not end its association with NATO. Rather, the Turkish government "sought to demonstrate Turkey's continued value to the U.S. and NATO" [Danforth \(2008, p. 89\)](#) and maintained its overall pro-Western orientation. Following the AKP's election victory in 2002, Turkey—if anything—drew itself closer to the West by attempting to join the European Union. At the same time, Erdoğan's Islamist foreign policy advisor and later foreign minister and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, sought to put Turkey on a new foreign policy path in which it would "rediscover its historic and geographic identity" in order to achieve the AKP's goal of harmonizing "Turkey's European and Islamic identities" ([Danforth 2008](#), p. 90).

The AKP government's Islamist and populist ideology appears to have had an impact on Turkish foreign policy, particularly following the Arab Spring, which brought about yet further opportunities for Turkey to increase its influence in the Middle East. Throughout the 2010s and beyond, the AKP "politicized Turkish foreign policy by constructing foreign threats" ([Destradi et al. 2022](#), p. 488). Importantly, these constructed foreign threats to the Turkish people are often portrayed by the AKP in civilizational terms, and as part of an American or Zionist-led conspiracy to oppress Muslims ([Destradi et al. 2022](#), p. 488; [Yilmaz and Morieson 2023](#)). The tendency to politicize foreign policy may be common to populists globally. [Löffmann \(2022, p. 411\)](#), for example, argues that "populists across the political spectrum can use insecurity as an ideational resource to construct the 'people vs. elite' struggle as a relationship whereby the existence of the former is threatened by the latter in a variety of ways". This elite need not be domestic, especially in cases where a populist party is governing. Rather, populism may perhaps be externalized and internationalized, with new threats to 'the people' constructed out of foreign policy problems, and new elites constructed out of hostile foreign nations, organizations, and individuals.

The AKP often presents foreign conflicts to their domestic audience as part of a 'clash of civilizations' between Islam and the West, in which Turkey is targeted by Western powers

because it is the leading nation within Islamic civilization. In this way, the AKP is able to use its foreign policy struggles as “an ideational resource” through which they construct a characteristically populist “‘people vs. elite’ struggle” or bottom vs. top conflict [Löffmann \(2022, p. 411\)](#), although in their case the struggle is occurring between Islam and the West. However, we cannot entirely separate Turkey’s rational self-interest in increasing its influence in the Middle East and Central Asia via emphasizing the common Muslim values it shares with the Sunni Muslim nations of the Middle East from the AKP’s Islamist and populist ideology, which emphasizes Turkey’s role as heir to the Ottoman Empire and core state of Islamic civilization. Turkish foreign policy under the AKP gives the appearance at times of being “devoid of instrumental rationality”, or of being “a captive of [Erdoğan’s] ideological convictions”, convictions which have led some to “question the mental condition of Turkey’s “Islamist” strongman and project him as the nearest approximation of a mad king pursuing over-ambitious foreign policy activism in the region” ([Taş 2022](#)).

How does the AKP see the world, and how does it portray Turkey’s foreign relations to its domestic audience? Moreover, how does it politicize foreign policy in order to construct a people vs. elite struggle? As a result of the belief in the inevitable decline of American power and Western civilization, “the AKP had desired to pursue a more ‘independent’ foreign policy as a regional hegemonic power and demoted its foreign policy with the West to transactionalism” ([Bashirov and Yilmaz 2020](#)). Thus, the AKP, especially since its rule was threatened by the Gezi Park protests in 2013 and the 2016 failed coup, has attempted to maintain transactional relationships with Western countries while also using a discourse in which the West is portrayed “as the ‘other’ of Turkey” ([Kaliber and Kaliber 2019](#)). According to [Kaliber and Kaliber \(2019\)](#), “vehement anti-Westernism” has replaced, post-2013, the already “de-Europeanising dynamics in Turkish foreign policy discourse”.

“Invoking the glories of the Ottoman period”, [Taş \(2022\)](#) explains the AKP has engaged in a (neo)imperial project” which has seen Turkey become highly invested in the Middle East region. Turkey’s involvement in the Middle East is “unmatched” in the Republic’s history, and “along with the country’s drift away from its Western orientation in the 2010s” demonstrates how the AKP’s ideological divergence from Kemalism has altered both its domestic and international politics” ([Taş 2022](#)). Following the Arab Spring, and in order to achieve its ideological aim of restoring the glory of the Ottoman Empire and “reinvigorating Pax Ottomana”, Turkey “pursued a maximalist, regional-hegemony-seeking” foreign policy in the Middle East, calculating “that the authoritarian regimes in the region would sooner or later crumble through the Arab Uprisings, paving the way for the rise of Ikhwan [Muslim Brotherhood] offshoots across the region” ([Taş 2022](#)). Yet when the Muslim Brotherhood and its associated political parties were banned or marginalized following the failure of democracy across much of the Middle East and the re-establishing of secular authoritarianism, the AKP continued its neo-Ottoman foreign policy with an even “more hawkish tone after the siege of Kobani in 2015 and, more pronouncedly, the 2016 abortive coup” ([Taş 2022](#)). For example, Turkey has since 2016 pursued “largely unilateral involvements” in the region “such as oil and gas drilling in the Eastern Mediterranean basin or preemptive cross-border military operations in Northern Iraq and Syria,” and competes with other regional military powers for leverage, “particularly through its involvement in the Libyan conflict, but also extended its direct presence from the Eastern Mediterranean basin to the Horn of Africa” ([Taş 2022](#)). Turkey’s actions in the international realm suggest that, even when the AKP’s initial hopes for a new Middle East ruled by friendly Islamist powers were foiled by the Arab Quartet (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt), a bloc that sought to end the democratic experiment in the region on the grounds that it was empowering Islamists, the party continued to seek regional hegemony, albeit under constraints placed upon Turkey by foreign powers ([Taş 2022](#)).

However, Erdoğan’s fiery rhetoric did not always match his political reality. On the one hand, Erdoğan and the AKP portray themselves as fighting against the West and defending the *ummah*. For example, Erdoğan told delegates at a 2019 foreign summit that

“Unfortunately, the Islamic *ummah* lost the grounds of coming together, doing common business, and producing common solutions to their problems. Even today, we see this deficiency in many of our issues, including Jerusalem, Palestine, anti-Islamism, anti-terrorism, justice, and human rights [. . .] Muslims look for solutions in the Western capitals for their problems, instead of reaching out to their Muslim brothers and sisters for help” (Daily Sabah 2019). Erdoğan’s anti-Western ‘clash of civilizations’ rhetoric is sometimes echoed in Diyanet Friday sermons. For example, a sermon delivered on 9 December 2016, argued “Because of the ambitions and power struggles of the hegemonic powers in our region, the Islamic lands are falling into ruins” (Yilmaz et al. 2021). A Friday sermon read in January 2018 asked listeners the rhetorical question: “Isn’t the greed of global powers the cause of the bloodshed and suffering in our geography?” (Yilmaz et al. 2021). Another told listeners that “What happened in the Islamic geography today clearly shows the point reached by those who try to destroy our women, children, lives, values, history, culture and civilization. In Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, and Egypt, the unity of the *ummah*, the honor of the nation, and the respect of the country has been trampled” (Yilmaz et al. 2021). Although the names of the foreign nations allegedly attacking Muslims are not mentioned, the purpose of these remarks and questions is to suggest to the listener that Western powers are conspiring to divide Muslims and destroy their civilization, and to echo anti-Western remarks by Erdoğan and other AKP officials. Diyanet sermons have, at times, encouraged the faithful to believe that Turkey is the defender of all people who suffer oppression. For example, on 11 October 2019, a sermon told listeners that “Just as in the past, today, too, our nation will continue to be the remedy for the remediless people, be there for those people who has nobody by their side, and be the hope and safe haven for the victimized and the refugees” (Yilmaz et al. 2021).

On the other hand, political realities and national self-interest force the party into working directly with its supposed enemies including Israel and the United States. For example, in August 2022 Israel and Turkey re-established full diplomatic relations after a period of poor relations caused chiefly by an incident in 2010 in which a Turkish-led flotilla attempting to enter the Gaza Strip and break an Israeli blockade was raided by Israeli military forces (The New York Times 2022). Despite portraying himself and his party as a defender of the *ummah* worldwide, “the Turkish government and pro-government media carefully refrained from any public criticism of Trump’s Islamophobic statements or travel ban on Muslims” (Akkoyunlu 2021). Nor has the Turkish government taking a stand against China’s brutal treatment of Muslims in Xinjiang province, but instead sought to please China by signing “an extradition treaty opening the way for Uighurs in Turkey to be deported to China” (Akkoyunlu 2021). Turkey’s friendly relationship with Hungary—which is governed by a right-wing populist party that claims that Muslim immigration to Europe is destroying Christian civilization (Ádám and Bozóki 2016)—and Erdoğan’s “close friendship” (Daily Sabah 2022) with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, also demonstrate that, at times, political pragmatism and national self-interest are ultimately more important to the AKP than protecting the *ummah* at every opportunity.

5. Civilizationism within the AKP’s Transnational Populism

The AKP is attempting to win support from, and perpetuate Erdoğanism within, the 3.1 million strong Turkish diaspora and among the wider European Muslim population (Yilmaz and Demir 2022). Similar to their Kemalist predecessors, the AKP has “also tried to use the Turkish diaspora to foster a positive image of Turkey while trying to prevent undesired ideologies spreading among them and thus influencing Turkey’s domestic politics” (Yilmaz and Demir 2022). However, rather than encourage secular nationalism within the diaspora, the AKP has “reengineered the position of ideologically proximate conservative-nationalist diaspora Turks, as loyal allies that would help Turkey extend its legitimacy and soft power beyond its borders and to produce a new state-centric identity” (Arkilic 2021, p. 591). Furthermore, the party “has tried to mobilise its loyal diaspora against the dissidents abroad. It has also invested heavily in its diaspora policies and has

created new institutions to reach out to the transnational diasporic spaces occupied by Turkish-speaking communities, especially in the West, and to proactively engage with the Turkish diaspora" (Yilmaz and Demir 2022).

Yilmaz and Demir (2022) observe that "This policy shift has also been reflected in the state's diaspora definition", in which "YTB (Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı—Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities), in its Strategic Plan 2019–2023, included members of non-Turkish Muslim communities who are not from Turkey in its diaspora definition as 'related communities'" (YTB 2019, p. 7). Adar and Yenigün (2019) suggest that the AKP is using a variety of institutional tools, including Diyanet and Turkish media, to 'validate Turkey [as the] leader of the Muslim world and patron of the Muslim masses worldwide'. These include "formal institutions such as the Diyanet's overseas oliticizati (DITIB, Diyanet İşleri Türk İslam Birliği—The Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs) and its mosques", but also Turkish embassies and consulates and other "state institutions that work with Turks abroad and related communities (YTB, Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, Maarif, and others)". The AKP also operates or funds "country-specific organisations operating in Western Europe" including the Union of European Turkish Democrats (UETD) and the Turken Foundation, which "was established jointly by the pro-AKP TÜRGEV (Türkiye Gençlik ve Eğitime Hizmet Vakfı—the Turkey Youth and Education Service Foundation)", and also the "Ensar Foundation in the USA and the UK operate for the purpose of transnational populism" (Yilmaz and Demir 2022). Diyanet plays an important role transnationally, as it does domestically, in reproducing the AKP's ideology. An analysis of Diyanet Friday sermons under AKP rule concludes that "the interests of Turkey are weaved in by using identity-creating elements" (Carol and Hofheinz 2022, p. 18), suggesting that promoting Sunni Muslim unity under Turkish leadership is a core element of Diyanet's messaging. Indeed, in order to spread the message of Sunni Muslim unity under Turkish leadership, Diyanet disseminates the Islamist populist narrative of the AKP through events like the First World Muslim Minorities' Summit in Istanbul in April 2018 (Yilmaz and Demir 2022).

Finally, the AKP has also sought to perpetuate Erdoğanism (Yilmaz 2021), especially the beliefs that the West is attacking Muslims and that Muslims worldwide must unite under Turkish leadership, to a worldwide audience of Muslims via television (Yilmaz and Demir 2022). Pan-Islamism and the glorification of the Ottoman Empire have become important elements in popular Turkish television programs during AKP's rule over Turkey (Özçetin 2019a, p. 247; Çevik 2020). According to Çetin (2014, p. 2477), the AKP politicizes television dramas by using them as a means of: "(1) dealing with contemporary political issues, (2) settling accounts with the past, (3) neo-Ottomanism, and (4) piety and the Islamic worldview". Thus, Turkish dramas are intended to "disseminate the AKP's narrative of historical and contemporary in-groups and out-groups" both within Turkey and across the Muslim world (Yilmaz and Demir 2022; Çevik 2020, p. 177). For example, *Dirilis* (Resurrection) and *Payitaht* (Abdulhamid, the Last Sultan) are historical dramas that attempt, at times, to find parallels between the Ottoman past, in which the Ottoman Empire came into conflict with the Christian West and other non-Muslim civilizations, and Turkey's present (Yilmaz and Demir 2022). Within these dramas, Muslims are portrayed as threatened by "Crusaders, the Templars, the Mongols, Byzantium and their contemporary successors such as the EU, the USA and the Jewish lobby" (Yilmaz and Demir 2022). At the same time, the dramas frequently present opponents of Islamism and the AKP within Turkey as "collaborators and pawns of these external enemies" (Yilmaz and Demir 2022; Özçetin 2019b, p. 947). Throughout these series, Muslims who act as guardians of Islamic lands from Christians and Jews—and against false Muslims who secretly collaborate with Muslims' enemies—are portrayed as heroes (Yilmaz and Demir 2022). Thus, within these television dramas, as in Diyanet's sermons to a domestic and transnational audience, the AKP—to borrow a phrase from Brubaker (2017)—construes opposition between 'self' and the 'other' not in primarily nationalist terms, but in civilizational terms, and as a conflict between the Ottoman-Islamic 'self' and 'Western' other.

6. Discussion

If civilizational populism is “a group of ideas that together considers that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people, and society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’ who collaborate with the dangerous others belonging to other civilizations” (Yilmaz and Morieson 2022), then it is possible to describe the AKP as a civilizational populist party. We surmise that a ‘civilization turn’ occurred within Turkish populism throughout the 2010s and 2020s, a period in which the governing AKP has increasingly sought to construe the Turkish ‘self’ and ‘other’ in civilizational terms rather than primarily national terms. This reconfiguring of Turkish identity under AKP rule does not indicate, of course, that the party is fundamentally opposed to nationalism. Rather, the AKP’s ‘civilizational turn’ is congruent with Turkish nationalism, albeit a variety of nationalism entirely at odds with the once-dominant secular nationalism of the Kemalists. Whereas the Kemalists, following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, sought to refashion Turkey as a European-style nation-state, the AKP has attempted to refashion Turkey as the successor to the Ottoman Empire and therefore as the leader of the *ummah*. For both the Kemalists and the AKP, this refashioning involved a social engineering programme in which the Turkish people were ‘re-educated’ and given new identities. The Kemalists wished for Turkish people to identify first as Turkish nationalists and, if need be, secondarily as Muslims, and in this way to give up their previous Ottoman identity. The AKP, on the other hand, has revived Ottoman identity within Turkish nationalism and sought to raise a ‘pious generation’ that identifies themselves as part of the Muslim *ummah*, and Turkey as the natural leader of the *ummah* and thus of Islamic civilization, and which will go out and rejuvenate Islamic civilization in Turkey. A curious aspect of Erdoğan’s presidency is that despite praising the Ottoman Empire’s alleged lack of racism and bigotry, and his glorification of the Empire’s long domination of the Middle East, Anatolia, and parts of Eastern and Southern Europe, his own plan for Turkey little resembles Ottoman forms of government such as the decentralized millet system (Barkey and Gavrilis 2016). Rather, with a top down authoritarian social engineering process, Erdoğan is attempting to construct a centralized society in his image (Tansel 2020; Öztürk and Reilly 2022; Bayulgen et al. 2018), and is intolerant of ethnic and religious minorities if they show dissent.

Civilization-based identity is a core element within Erdoğanism, the ideology of the AKP, where it takes the form of neo-Ottomanism, or the identification of modern Turkey as the successor state to the Ottoman Empire, and the belief that Islamic civilization is superior to Western civilization and ought to be rejuvenated in Turkey. Civilizationism manifested in AKP discourse as the party transitioned from Muslim democrats supportive of religious and cultural pluralism and Turkish membership of the European Union into authoritarian Islamist populists. As this transition occurred in the 2010s, and especially after the key events of the 2013 Gezi Park protest movement and the 2016 coup attempt, the AKP increasingly sought to perpetuate their rule via a populist reconstruction of Turkish society. Despite the AKP having ruled Turkey since 2002, the party does not present itself as an ‘elite’ governing class. Rather, it portrays itself—and in particular, portrays President Erdoğan—as being of ‘the people’ and an opponent of the secular nationalist elite that had dominated Turkish politics since the founding of the Republic. Yet without a genuine ‘elite’ governing class to contrast itself against and demonize, and with even the once secular nationalist Turkish military controlled by pro-AKP forces, the AKP appears to increasingly find itself reliant on “the politicization of Turkish foreign policy by constructing foreign threats”, and particularly on the portrayal of ‘the West’ as the nation’s ultimate ‘other’ (Destradi et al. 2022). Thus, the AKP and its institutional allies including Diyanet advance a narrative in which ‘the pure people’ (Turkish Sunni Muslims) are threatened by dangerous ‘others’ within Turkey, including the Gülen Movement, secular nationalists in the CHP (the old Turkish ‘elite’), Kurds, Alevis, and other non-Sunni Muslims, who they alleged are working with foreign powers (i.e., the West) to destroy Turkey and divide the *ummah*. Indeed, the AKP works closely with its ally, Diyanet, to portray the world as riven by

civilizational conflict between Islam and the West. Erdoğan himself claims that Islamic civilization was superior insofar as it sought to care for all members of society, was more compassionate, and even showed kindness toward stray animals. In contrast, Erdoğan portrays the West as inherently violent and individualistic. Moreover, the AKP increasingly blamed many of Turkey's social and economic problems, including the 2013 Gezi Park protests and the 2016 attempted coup, on internal enemies working with foreign forces to destroy Turkey and keep the *ummah* divided. These foreign forces, often left unnamed by the AKP, were said to be the same forces that successfully dismembered the Ottoman Empire and ended the period of Muslim unity under the Turkish caliphate, leaving no question as to their Western identity. The role of civilizationism in AKP discourse is thus the use of the idea of a clash of civilizations between Islam and the West to define ingroups and outgroups within Turkish society and to define Turkey's role in the world as the protector of the *ummah*.

The AKP's civilizationism, this article has shown, impacts Turkish domestic and foreign policy in a variety of ways. Domestically, the AKP has attempted to perpetuate their rule by raising a 'pious generation' who glorify the Ottoman Empire and wish to rejuvenate Islamic civilization within Turkey. As part of this project, the AKP has not only altered the school and university curriculum to reflect their ideology, but has greatly enlarged the budget, scope, and direction of Diyanet to encourage Turkish Sunni Muslims to believe that the AKP is protecting them from internal and external enemies who hate Islam and wish to destroy Turkey. The AKP and Diyanet portray Western culture and Christianity as corrupting influences on Turkish Muslims and admonish believers to cease celebrating so-called Christian holidays including New Year's Eve. Equally, the AKP has moved to eliminate traces of Christianity and secularism from Turkey by converting the Hagia Sophia into a mosque, and seeking to encourage Turkish Muslims to think of themselves as part of a great Islamic civilization through their opening of a museum glorifying Islamic civilizations and through his call for everyone in Turkey to "make efforts to build and revive the civilization while thinking over the culture" (Erdoğan 2017).

The AKP's civilizational turn has also impacted Turkey's foreign policy. Erdoğanism, as an ideology, defines Turkey's role in the world as leader of the *ummah* and successor to the Ottoman Empire, and as possessing many of Empire's responsibilities to the *ummah*. As a result of this ideology, Turkey has played a more active role in Middle East politics and sought to remove itself from the American sphere of power and carve out a more independent role in regional politics. After the Arab Spring, Turkey began to attempt to achieve the AKP's goal of reinvigorating Pax Ottomana, and pursued a maximalist, regional-hegemony-seeking foreign policy, believing that American power was growing weak and that the secular authoritarian regimes in the Middle East were at an end.

However, Turkish foreign policy is also constrained by the world's great powers and the United States. Far from acting consistently as a protector of the *ummah* and Palestine, Turkey has sought alliances with European nations such as Hungary, remained in NATO despite Turkey being the only non-Western, non-Christian member of the alliance, and re-established full diplomatic relations with Israel. Equally, Erdoğan has remained quiet on China's abuse of Muslims in Xinjiang, despite evidence of Muslim Uighurs being interned by the hundreds of thousands in concentration camps where they face secular 're-education'. This suggests that the AKP and Erdoğan are ultimately pragmatic actors, and will not act rashly to protect Muslims' interests the result would be contrary to the national interest.

Finally, the AKP is spreading its ideology within both the Turkish diaspora and the wider European Muslim population via a variety of organizations and popular television series. In this transnational populist way, the party attempts to move its ideology beyond Turkey's borders, in an effort to convince diaspora Turks and Sunni Muslims in Europe to perceive themselves to be part of an aggrieved *ummah* facing constant attacks from the West, and Erdoğan and the AKP as the leaders of the *ummah*. Despite their transformation of Turkey over the past two decades of their rule, the AKP now faces increasing pressure due to Turkey's poor economic performance and perhaps now the government's inadequate

planning for and response to the devastating February 2023 earthquake. Whether the party and its leader are able to politically survive and win the parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled on 14 May 2023 remains to be seen. Either way, the two decades of AKP rule have led to the introduction of a new identity for Turkish people both within Turkey itself and beyond its borders, though one based on an old identity: heirs to the Ottoman Empire and leaders of the *ummah*, and the people called upon to rejuvenate Islamic civilization in Turkey following decades of a secular nationalism perceived to have failed.

7. Conclusions

This article finds that the AKP has increasingly, and especially in response to the Gezi Park protests and 2016 attempted coup, construed opposition between ‘self’ and the ‘other’ not in primarily nationalist terms, but in civilizational terms and as a conflict between the Ottoman-Islamic ‘self’ and ‘Western’ other. The AKP has achieved sustained electoral success by portraying its opponents as anti-Muslim and therefore illegitimate and dangerous and framing the party’s mistakes as the result of foreign anti-Muslim forces intervening in Turkish politics, and attempting to destroy Turkey’s economy and society.

Furthermore, the article finds that the AKP’s domestic and foreign policies reflect its civilizational populist division of Turkish society. Within Turkey, the article shows, the AKP is attempting to raise, with the help of an Islamist Diyanet and education system, a ‘pious generation’ that supports its Islamizing of Turkey society, and glorifies the Ottoman Empire and Erdoğan as leader of Islamic civilization. The AKP’s civilizational turn has also, the article finds, had a powerful impact on Turkey’s foreign policy. Turkey’s post-Arab Spring neo-Ottoman imperialism in the Middle East is predicated on the party’s notion that Islam is in conflict with the West, and that Turkey—heir to the Ottoman Empire—is the chief defender not only of the Turkish people but of Sunni Islam globally. The article also finds that the AKP’s civilizational populism is attempting to turn its civilizationalism into a transnational populist phenomenon via the party’s production of successful television shows that reflect its anti-Western worldview, and which justify its neo-Ottoman imperialism in the Middle East.

Finally, the article cautions that despite the AKP’s success in framing Turkey’s economic and social problems as the result of Western attempts to oppress Muslims globally and prevent Turkey from flourishing, Turkey’s increasingly poor economic performance has caused the party to lose support. Thus, the 2023 general elections will prove to be a test of the AKP’s ability to perpetuate its rule via an anti-Western civilizational populist narrative.

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