

## How painful is an Ottoman Slap? Some Thoughts on Turkish Political Culture

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The already troubled Turkey-US relations have come to their lowest point so far and are currently the most explosive ingredient in the Syrian tinderbox. With an election on the Turkish horizon in 2019 the conflict may rather be expected to grow.

During a speech in mid-February this year Erdoğan warned the US that it might receive an ‘Ottoman slap’ and said that ‘Those who say they will give a sharp response if hit, have clearly never got an Ottoman slap in their lives’. By this he reacted on an earlier comment by Funk, a leading US commander in the anti-IS coalition, who said that Turkey would receive a harsh response when attacking the town of Manbij in Syria. Although tensions already existed previously, the relationship got ‘officially’ difficult since the attempted coup in July 2016 when the Turkish government held the Gülen movement responsible and unsuccessfully demanded the extradition of religious leader Fethullah Gülen from the US. Furthermore, the active support of Kurdish militias in Syria is a constant offence for the Turkish government which fears a strong Kurdish presence along its borders. As a result, Ankara started the operation ‘olive branch’ (ironically a symbol for peace) targeting Kurdish militias first in Afrin, and subsequently in other regions along its Syrian border. Lately it threatened to expand its military operation to Manbij, a region with US presence. Whereas the US appreciate the Kurdish fighters as reliable and competent allies in their fight against the IS, Turkey fears a growing Kurdish autonomy region. Indeed, it is likely that the Kurds seek to link the region around Afrin with Kobane and regions in the East of Syria. This might also give a boost to Kurdish autonomy ambitions in Turkey.

The Ottoman slap is a fighting-technique used by Ottoman soldiers particularly those in the front lines either in close combat with the enemy or if one had lost his weapon. It can be executed with both sides of the hand; the fighters were said to be trained by slapping oil marble all day long. The slap could be placed anywhere on the face and neck and at times was hard enough to break the nose, skull or neck of the counterpart. Thus, an Ottoman slap was clearly painful, often even deathly. Generally, the term ‘Ottoman Slap’ was only used in everyday speech at street level, later also by the yellow press, e.g. to comment on football matches as in ‘The Turkish national team gave an ottoman slap to the Greek’ (or alike). Over the last 10 years though the Ottoman slap has also found entrance into political discourse led by the Justice and Development Party (AKP, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi). In July 2013 after the Gezi park protests, for example, the Turkish government threatened social media websites as

Facebook and twitter with an Ottoman slap, if they refused to provide user data to the government. In August 2014, Turkish MPs of the AKP and the ultra-nationalist MHP (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, National Movement Party) got physical indeed. At least three of them got injured when the two parties could not come to a conclusion on a commission on Islamist extremists in Iraq. In May 2016 then deputies of the AKP and the pro-Kurdish HDP (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, People's Democratic Party) got at each other's throat over the immunity status of Turkish MPs after having thrown water bottles at each other. Although verbal and physical violence is clearly not unique to Turkey, it nevertheless reveals much about the tightening of the political climate characterised by verbal threats as well as a vilifying and brutalised language that actively refers to physical attacks.

Turkey has historically been characterised by authoritarian politics. The AKP -at least when it took office in 2002- presented itself as a counter-movement to such elite-driven, top-down practices. However, the last years have shown that differences are rather small. Particularly since the 2013 Gezi protests the AKP-led government is accused of ruling the country in an increasingly authoritarian manner. This leads to the question of political culture in Turkey per se. What are the overarching principles that determine political practice irrespective of ideology or party affiliation?

Firstly, political practice and framing are person-based, institutions receive much less appreciation. Thus, instead of relying on institutional processes citizens seek to establish relations to political figures or at least door openers to decision-makers. In this regard, primary identities and affiliation with ethnic or religious networks is of utmost importance. Clearly this also reflects in clientelistic relations between rulers and ruled. Patriarchic societal relations are wide-spread and can be observed from a familial level to one of primary identities and the structuring of Turkish political parties, which are characterised by a lack of inner-party democracy. Indeed, Turkish party presidents regularly nominate the delegates to the party congresses – the body that decides about their reelection (or not). Thus, both an (insufficient) legal situation as well as dominant structures within society facilitate 'strong leaders' -or rather 'strong men'- as it is predominantly the case. Secondly, Turkish politics, and subsequently political culture, is male. Nationalist and militarist discourse have historically portrayed women as passive and in need of protection, whereas males were (or had to present themselves) as proactive and courageous. These ideas also translate into politics, e.g. with low numbers of females in politics and a public and political sphere dominated by the 'virtues' described above. The so far only female Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Ciller (1993-1996) is said to have had to adopt a male body language to gain respect and indeed was often portrayed in military clothing.

Thirdly, Turkish political culture is characterised by a high degree of nationalist discourse and the constant call to 'national unity'. Opposition is easily framed as a traitor to the national cause, instead those in power seek to impose their view on the consistency single-handedly.

If the principles described above are interpreted as more underlying principles of Turkish political culture than what is new with the AKP? On the one hand Erdoğan's political position is not comparable with that of any other president or prime minister before him (with the possible exception of Turkey's first president Mustafa Kemal Atatürk) as he has accumulated political power in an unprecedented way. Further, the former institution of the Turkish military as an (unofficial) checks and balances has vanished. On the other hand, Turkey is pursuing a pro-active foreign policy which is quite untypical for the country. Traditionally, Turkish foreign politics had been led by Atatürk's saying 'Peace at Home, Peace in the World (*yurtta sulh, cihanda sulh*)' that dictated a refrain from a proactive foreign policy and an entanglement in international conflicts. A shift may be observed under the ruling AKP that engages in international relations much more actively, the initial step being the publication of former Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's book 'Stratejik Derinlik (Strategic Depth)', which came to be known as the 'Zero Problems Foreign Policy'. In an opinion piece for *Foreign Policy* Davutoğlu described the approach as 'visionary' (vs. crisis-oriented), as well as 'consistent and systematic' and concludes: '*The third methodological principle is the adoption of a new discourse and diplomatic style, which has resulted in the spread of Turkish soft power in the region. Although Turkey maintains a powerful military due to its insecure neighborhood, we do not make threats. Instead, Turkish diplomats and politicians have adopted a new language in regional and international politics that prioritizes Turkey's civil-economic power.*'<sup>1</sup>

How does the Ottoman slap fit the scene? While Davutoğlu framed the country's new role as a moral obligation and a step towards a new global order, many critics remarked that the underlying motive was Neo-Ottomanism instead. This has become more visible lately, particularly after his (forced) departure in spring 2016 when the 'intellectual framing' of Turkey's foreign policy made way to a single-minded and ad-hoc style of engagement in international relations, exclusively executed by President Erdoğan himself. Similarly, the Ottoman slap is part of the country's 'Ottoman turn', the revival of its Ottoman past, or, as historian Berna Pekesen rightly remarks 'what one believes (or wants to believe) an Ottoman past was'. The continuous reference to an Ottoman past is highly popular with the citizens as e.g. in Ottoman TV-series. Also, the current government actively engages in an Ottoman discourse, e.g. by

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<sup>1</sup> Ahmet Davutoğlu. Turkey's Zero-Problems Foreign Policy.  
<http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/05/20/turkeys-zero-problems-foreign-policy/>. May, 20, 2010.

self-designation as *Osmanlı torunuyuz* ('We are the grandchildren of the Ottomans'), the use of a neo-Ottoman style for governmental buildings, the call to teach 'Ottoman in schools in 2014, or Erdoğan's posing with a range of 'Ottoman warriors' at the stairs of his new presidential palace. Further, Turkey is seeking to enlarge its area of influence in the region, often referred to by critics as a neo-Ottoman foreign policy. This is clearly linked to strong nationalist feelings within the constituency (One of Erdoğan's main reasons of political success is his ability to communicate a feeling of 'We're back on top again' after decades of perceived humiliation and non-recognition). However, it is also linked to Turkey's claim to take a leadership role in Sunni Islam. The AKP domestically is and frames itself as a counter movement against a Kemalist domination since 1923. Furthermore, it is also motivated to revive the idea of a Turkish-led Sunni Islam. The country's pious population felt that the Arab world looked down at it, particularly since the reforms initiated by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in the 1920s and '30s that radically diminished the political role and public visibility of Islam, before the abolishment of the Caliphate in 1924. The longing for leadership of Sunni Islam is at the same time a longing for the Ottoman Classical age, an outstanding time in Islamic history and civilisation.

The Ottoman slap is thus an attempt to show who is wearing the pants around here, both nationally and internationally, a move supported by the AKP constituency as well as a large nationalist segment. It plays well, as anti-imperialism is a common theme popular in the whole political spectrum from ultra-left to the ultra-right (with the possible exception of pro-Kurdish parties). Columnist Özlem Albayrak of AKP-close newspaper *Yeni Şafak* writes: '*The legitimate strategy of today is "one who does not come to their senses with words deserves a beating". At least, it should be stated that this strategy is among the possibilities. Don't you think it is high time to speak to an addressee in the "language they understand" regarding the issue of Syria?*'. Other positions are not really heard; in Turkey's current political climate dominated by terrorist accusations, who would dare to stand with domestic (the Kurds) or external (the US) enemies?