

‘ENTWINED’ ISLAMIC POLITICAL IDENTITY OF TURKIYE’S AK PARTY AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR THE MUSLIM WORLD

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Abstract

The narrative that presents Türkiye’s Justice and Development Party (AK Party) as ‘a model’ for the Muslim world, particularly among Islamists, remains contested, as the party’s identity remains unclear and the notion of the ‘Turkish model’ requires further scrutiny. Therefore, this paper aims to identify the AKP’s identity through the lens of Islamic political identities and to examine its relevance for the Muslim world. Employing a discursive approach, this study analyses the party’s official sources through content analysis and critical discourse analysis, focusing on its discourse and selected policies. This paper argues that the AK Party manifests an ‘entwined’ identity that combines conservative democracy, support of secularism, a pro-European Union attitude, religious sensibility, and post-Islamist characteristics. This identity is shaped by the specific Turkish context and thus is not appropriate for wholesale imitation elsewhere in the Muslim world. Overall, this paper contributes to the literature on Islamism as a significant religio-political phenomenon that shapes the dynamics of the Muslim world in the present century and beyond.

Keywords: *AK Party, Islamic political identities, Islamism, Muslim world, Türkiye*

A. Introduction

Debates on the nexus between Islam and politics have persistently been a major theme among scholars across the 20th and 21st centuries. Over the past decade, developments in the Muslim world, particularly the Arab Spring, have placed Islamists at the center of scholarly debates. Although Türkiye did not experience a similar uprising, its geographical proximity to Arab countries has made Islamism in the country a subject of discussion. The Justice and Development Party (AK Party) has been perceived as an Islamist entity that has successfully reconciled Islam and democracy in a secular setting. The Arab Spring has further highlighted the AK Party as ‘a model’ for Islamist movements in Arab countries to emulate, particularly following the latter’s successes in assuming governance after the revolution (Al-Azm, 2011; Quamar, 2018).

Nonetheless, the narrative that views the AK Party as a model for Islamists can be disputed, as the party’s identity remains contested, and the notion of the ‘Turkish model’ requires further scrutiny. Existing studies have examined the AK Party from various perspectives, including its identity. The most dominant view categorizes it as a party that adheres to the Islamist trajectory, arguing that it is an offshoot of the preceding Islamist movement but continues to uphold Islamist ideas (Gidengil & Karakoç, 2016; Kaya, n.d.; Shukri & Hossain, 2017; Yilmaz & Bashirov, 2018). Simultaneously, alternative viewpoints contend that labeling the AK Party as an Islamist party based solely on its historical roots is overly simplistic. Kassem (2013) and Yaylaci (2014), for instance, deny religious connotations associated with the AK Party. Rather, they characterize it as a party that embraces secularism while practicing ‘Muslim politics.’ According to this view, the party has moved beyond the ideals of Islamism, as it adopts discourses, approaches, and policies that deviate from its predecessor.

A puzzling contradiction exists between the AK Party’s history, its leader’s statements denying any connection to its

predecessor, and the party's practice in government. This contradiction raises a question in understanding the AK Party's identity: *What is the party's identity?* Therefore, this paper aims to unravel this question by presenting a perspective on the party's identity. In doing so, the study scrutinizes its identity through the lens of Islamic political identities by evaluating its discourse and (selected) policies. The discourse delineates the party's ideological standpoint. Nevertheless, relying solely on discourse is inadequate for examining the party's identity, as some observers allege that it has a 'hidden agenda' (Cagaptay, 2016; Pipes, 2017). Therefore, the policies implemented by the AK Party need to be analyzed to delineate its political practices.

The discussion on the AK Party's identity is closely related to the narrative of the 'Turkish model'. This narrative has been proposed since the party took office and became more prominent following the Arab Spring. Interestingly, this narrative has remained a subject of scholarly debate until recently, particularly given the ongoing political turmoil and uncertainty in Turkiye's Arab neighbors after the uprising (Adar, 2024; Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2020; Sula & Sula, 2025). By treating the AK Party's identity as central to this narrative, a second question arises: *To what extent is the AK Party's identity relevant not only to the Arab world but to the Muslim world as a whole?* In addressing this question, this paper critically analyses the relevance of the AK Party's identity for the Muslim world, particularly in terms of political discourse and approach. Based on its two main objectives—namely, to identify the AK Party's identity and to examine its relevance for the Muslim world—this paper contributes to ongoing discussions by offering its own perspective on the party's identity, which is still contested, and by presenting a critical analysis of the 'Turkish model' narrative, which remains resonant to this day.

This study employed a discursive approach to examine the AK Party's identity and its relevance to the Muslim world. This approach is particularly suited to this examination as the party's identity is not a fixed attribute but is constructed and contested through its ideational and political practice. The primary sources

for this study consisted of the AK Party's official documents, including the Party Programs (*Parti Programı*), its Regulations (*Tüzük*), its political brochures, and a speech by its key leader (delivered on January 29, 2004) that articulated foundational ideas for the party's trajectory. These sources, along with other relevant secondary sources, were analyzed using content analysis and critical discourse analysis.

The analysis of this study is structured in four sections. First, a conceptual framework for Islamic political identities was established through a review of the relevant literature. Second, this study examined the historical dimension by delving into the background that shaped the AK Party's formation and political approach. Third, the AK Party's identity was scrutinized through an in-depth examination of its discourse and selected policies. The analysis of discourse primarily focused on the articulation of concepts such as religion, secularism, and democracy, as well as on policies selected for their prominence in debates on democracy, religion, and secularity. Finally, this study conducted a critical examination of the relevance of the AK Party's identity to the Muslim world.

B. Islamic Political Identities: Between Islamism, Neo-Islamism, Post-Islamism, and Non-Islamism

Islamism is a political ideology that believes Islam should influence all aspects of human life. Ayooob defines Islamism as “a form of instrumentalization of Islam by individuals, groups, and organizations that pursue political objectives” (Ayooob, 2009, p. 2). Mozaffari (2007) and Tibi (2012) argue that it is essential to distinguish between Islam and Islamism—the former is a religion, while the latter represents a form of ideological interpretation towards Islam that predominantly touches upon the political dimension. In other words, Islamism is an ‘ideologization of Islam’ made by its advocates.

As a political ideology, Islamism can be examined in two primary facets: its principles and programs. Principles refer to the

visions and conceptions that form the foundation of Islamist ideas, representing the ideological dimension. Meanwhile, programs represent the practical dimension, encompassing the implementation, planning, or projects advocated by Islamists. Ideologically, Islamism emphasizes the notion of Islamic totality, viewing it as a comprehensive way of life (Mozaffari, 2007). Islamism integrates worldly and hereafter matters, as well as between religion and state. The conceptualization of the Islamic totality leads Islamists to reject and criticize ideas advocated by the West. For Islamists, the Western ideal of modernity is perceived as secular, which separates worldly matters from the spiritual realm (Bulaç, 2012). However, not everything from the West is outright rejected. The notions of democracy and the nation-state, for example, are accepted by them because neither is seen as contradicting what is outlined by Islam. In addition, Islamism asserts that Muslims must return to the main Islamic sources, namely the Quran and Sunnah, as well as the generations of the early periods of Islam that were perceived as the golden age of Islam (Aykaç & Durgun, 2022). However, this does not imply that Islamism opposes modernity or seeks to revert to the societal norms of the medieval age. Rather, Islamists advocate for preserving and adapting the original traditions of Islam to contemporary contexts and realities (Dogan, 2020).

From a practical standpoint, Islamism aspires to establish an Islamic order where Islam governs all aspects of human life. Grounded in the notion of Islamic totality, Islamism maintains that all affairs of human life should be conducted in accordance with religious principles. The vision to actualize an Islamic order motivates Islamists to establish an Islamic state wherein a legal system rooted in Islamic Sharia is implemented (Tibi, 2012). Islamism advocates establishing an Islamic state by adapting to the necessities of reviving the implementation of Islamic jurisprudence in contemporary contexts. The commitment to establishing an Islamic state further propels the enforcement of Sharia to constitute the legal framework of the newly founded state (Gürsoy, 2024). Sharia, guided by the Quran and Sunnah, is

perceived as symbolic of the absolute sovereignty of God (Allah) and is deemed essential to ensure that the Islamic way of life can be fully implemented within the Islamic order and the Islamic state (Dogan, 2020).

As an ideological movement, Islamism is not static but adapts to local contexts depending on where it operates. This renders Islamism a ‘multiple-faced’ phenomenon. Islamist movements can be characterized by their attitudes and approaches in upholding their ideas. In this regard, Islamists can be categorized into: (i) *conservatives*, who maintain the original attitudes and approaches in pursuing the Islamist vision, and (ii) *reformists*, who are more pragmatic and open to innovations resulting from a re-evaluation of original Islamist ideas.

Some conservatives exhibit only minor adjustments to their approach without entirely abandoning the original ideas of Islamism, where this phenomenon can be denoted as *neo-Islamism*. Neo-Islamism is a “tendency that emerged within the mainstream Muslim Brotherhood movement and its pro-democracy affiliates in the Muslim World, which uses liberal sets of concepts for tactical or strategic purposes while pursuing the same traditional goals of the Islamic movement” (Chamkhi, 2014, p. 466). It exhibits a new form of religiosity, gradual Islamization, Islamic modernization, Islamic nationalism, pragmatism with the West, and ideological moderation. Neo-Islamism is a consequence of tactical changes and strategies employed by Islamists to achieve their goals. In other words, neo-Islamism is the result of Islamists’ adaptation to the realities and political constraints they encounter. According to Khalifa (2012), neo-Islamism is the outcome of political learning by Islamists from their long experiences and based on observations of developments elsewhere. Chamkhi (2014) outlines several characteristics of neo-Islamists: (i) they remain traditional Islamic political entities, not emerge as new entities or act individually, (ii) they do not despair in their mission to uphold Sharia law—though tactically and gradually, (iii) they do not forsake the mission of establishing

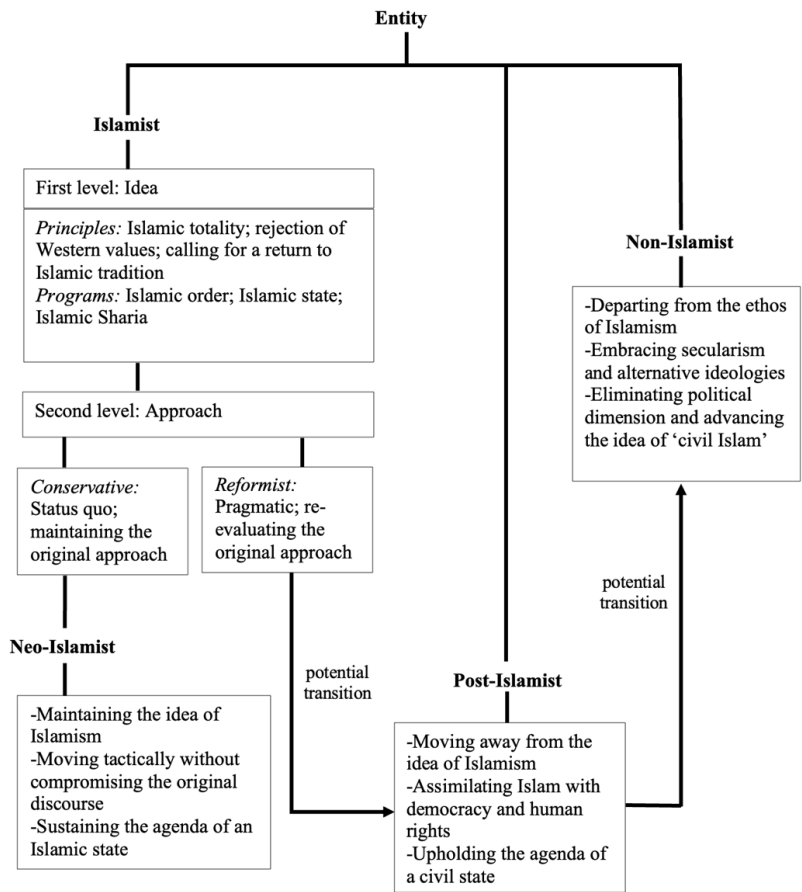
an Islamic state, and (iv) they continue the Islamic missionary agenda (*da'wa*) through political activism.

While conservatives tend to lean towards neo-Islamism, reformists are more likely to undergo an ideational transition in the opposite direction, namely from Islamism to *post-Islamism*. According to Bayat (1996), Islamism reaches the peak of its discourse before shifting towards post-Islamism, wherein some Islamists perceive that the original premises of Islamism have become 'exhausted'. This shift occurs as some adherents believe that the role of religion in politics should be limited (Yilmaz, 2011), which contradicts the core principle of Islamism that upholds the totality of Islam. The transition from Islamism to post-Islamism results from Islamists revisiting their discourse, strategies, and approaches to achieving power. This reassessment transforms Islamist from emphasizing the establishment of an Islamic state that implements Sharia to advocating a civil state that practices good governance and guarantees democratic values. A civil state does not prioritize implementing Sharia because, for post-Islamists, the essence of Sharia—comprising justice, freedom, and good governance—is more crucial to uphold, regardless of the form of government and legal system in place. Hence, post-Islamists do not reject a secular state if it can guarantee freedom to practice religion and live peacefully. The necessity of an Islamic state constitutes the primary distinction between Islamism (and neo-Islamism) and post-Islamism. For Islamists, the establishment of an Islamic state is imperative to ensure the implementation of Sharia and Islamic order. In contrast, post-Islamists view the contemporary nation-state as a 'secular entity' that should not be 'Islamized' (Mahdavi, 2020).

Contrary to neo-Islamism, which is relatively homogeneous, post-Islamism is more heterogeneous. In this regard, Muhammad Ansor's formulation of post-Islamism is worth noting. He formulates post-Islamism according to two perspectives. The first perspective is that Islamism has the potential to evolve to meet contemporary needs. Meanwhile, the second perspective views religion as having limitations and being irrelevant for

ideologization (Ansor, 2016, p. 474). These divergences produce different outcomes regarding the identity and approach of an Islamist entity. The first perspective gives rise to post-Islamist entities that offer a new interpretation of Islamism within a modern context. Post-Islamists tend to believe that the role of religion should be limited to maintain the state’s neutrality. By contrast, the second perspective leads to the emergence of entirely *non-Islamist* entities, either through the adoption of alternative ideologies or through secularization, following the loss of confidence in Islam as a source of political aspiration.

Figure 1. *Framework of Islamic Political Identities*



C. Türkiye: From the State Building to the Emergence of the Ak Party

Türkiye was officially established on October 23, 1923, by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk through a radical process of secularization. The Kemalist regime sought to portray secularism as a catalyst for the progress of the Turkish nation while depicting Islam as an impediment to modernity. However, Turkish secularism is distinct from its counterparts elsewhere. Rather than fully separating religion from state affairs, the Turkish state has provided institutional and financial support to religious bodies, including the Department of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) and Imam-Hatip Schools. Additionally, Turkish secularism differs in its utilization of religion as an instrument of social engineering. The government exerts authority over religious interpretation, aiming to shape the public's perception of Islam (Islam, 2011). State control over religious interpretation intends to standardize the public's perception of religion in accordance with the state's preferences. This practice places Turkish secularism at a crossroads, as it adopts an antagonistic stance towards religion while simultaneously exploiting it.

Despite the state's secularization process aiming to marginalize the role of religion, the influence of Islam in the lives of the Turkish people could not be entirely eradicated. Several Islamist groups emerged seeking to challenge the legitimacy of Turkish secularism. The National Outlook Movement (*Millî Görüş Hareketi*, MGH) is particularly notable, especially given its prominence from the 1970s to the 1990s. The MGH emphasized a peaceful and moderate approach to achieving its political goals. Unlike its Islamist counterparts elsewhere, which were more revolutionary, the MGH prioritized social reform and emphasized the moral development of individuals. The movement's primary approach was fostering Islamic awareness through bottom-up mechanisms. At the same time, Sufism's influence encouraged a more rational and moderate stance within the MGH. Indeed, the movement was shaped by Sufism, with various Sufi orders involved in its early formation. The discourse of Sufism, which

emphasizes the cultivation of personal virtues such as patience and tolerance, influenced the MGH by steering it away from radical paths (Atasoy, 2005).

From its early days to the present, the MGH has established several political parties. Its first two political parties, the National Order Party (*Millî Nizam Partisi*, MNP) and the National Salvation Party (*Millî Selâmet Partisi*, MSP), were short-lived. Both were banned by the Turkish Constitutional Court in 1971 and 1980, respectively, for allegedly exploiting religion for political gain. The MGH's political struggle reached its peak under the Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*, RP), which adopted a more pragmatic approach to represent the aspirations of diverse voter segments. The RP emerged victorious in the 1995 general elections and formed a coalition government with the center-right True Path Party (*Doğru Yol Partisi*, DYP). The main leader and founder of the MGH, Necmettin Erbakan, was appointed Prime Minister, becoming the first Islamist to hold the position.

The rise of the RP prompted the Turkish military to issue a memorandum to the government in February 1997 aimed at curbing so-called 'reactionary Islam' and pressuring Erbakan to resign from office. A year later, the RP was banned by the courts on charges of 'violating the principles of secularism'. This ban led to the mass migration of MGH cadres into the newly founded Virtue Party (*Fazilet Partisi*, FP). The post-1997 military intervention contributed to internal crises among MGH cadres. On one side was the conservative faction, which viewed the changes in the FP's discourse merely as strategic adjustments, without involving fundamental alterations to the MGH's original Islamist ideology, and remained loyal to Erbakan. On the other side, the reformist faction perceived the need for structural changes—including those related to the MGH's ideology—and internal party reforms, while distancing themselves from Erbakan's tutelage. The FP suffered the same fate as its predecessors and was banned by the court on anti-secular charges. Its closure led the reformist faction to leave the MGH and establish the AK Party, while the conservatives formed the Felicity Party (*Saadet Partisi*, SP).

D. The Ak Party: Ideological and Practical Perspectives

Discourse

The AK Party's discourse can be analyzed from three perspectives: its political ideology, its stance on secularism, and its view of religion. Ideologically, the AK Party embraces conservative democracy, a synthesis of conservatism and democratic values that seeks to harmonize tradition with modernity, religion with democracy, and the state with its people (Özbudun, 2006). The AK Party's embrace of conservatism does not imply a rejection of change, provided that it does not conflict with Turkish values and disrupt the existing order. It rejects radical changes that could jeopardize the Turkish social and cultural fabrics (Şimşek, 2013). Rather, the party believes that changes should be gradual, organic, and not forcefully imposed. Hence, it opposes any form of social engineering, viewing it as a radical and imposed change that contradicts the spirit of organic societal evolution (AK Parti, 2002).

As an entity that emerged from the periphery of society, the AK Party is outside the secular establishment at the center. While subtly confronting this establishment, it asserts that a genuine understanding and practice of politics—particularly in serving the people—has been undermined. According to the party, the genuine practicality of politics needs to be reinstated (AK Parti, 2002). Through conservative democracy, the party seeks to reconcile the 'center' and 'periphery,' arguing that political power should not be concentrated solely in the hands of the former (Akdoğan, 2006). Rather, power should be balanced with the role of civil society, which represents both marginalized and majority segments. From this majoritarian view, the AK Party employs conservative democracy to bring the voices of the broader population into the 'center' (Özbudun, 2006; Şimşek, 2013).

Regarding the AK Party's stance on secularism, the party's founder and main leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, emphasized that:

...the state to remain impartial and equidistant to all religions and thoughts...to ensure peaceful social coexistence between different creeds, sects, and schools of thought...secularism needs to be crowned with democracy in order for fundamental rights and freedoms to be accorded constitutional guarantees (Erdoğan, 2014).

In contrast to its Islamist predecessor, which viewed secularism as a threat, the AK Party tends to acknowledge and adhere to it. The party's regulations (*Tüzük*) clearly state that it upholds Turkish national values, including the state's secularity (AK Parti, 2019). It argues that religion should be separated from political affairs, as the sacred nature of religion necessitates its detachment from politics, which is prone to flaws and human errors (Şimşek, 2013). According to Erdoğan (2014), using religion as a political tool not only jeopardizes political harmony but also risks damaging the image of religion itself. While religion is recognized as a vital social force in the Turkish context, the AK Party distinguishes between acknowledging the role of religion in society and transforming it into a political ideology. The party contends that religion should not be exclusively associated with any particular party or group, as such an association could lead to the manipulation of religious interpretations for political interests. Therefore, the party asserts that religion should remain within the personal sphere rather than being utilized as a political tool (Gumuscu & Sert, 2009).

The AK Party maintains that a genuinely secular state should remain neutral towards all religions and beliefs (AK Parti, 2019). In this sense, the state should be fair and inclusive in its treatment of all religions and beliefs, refraining from imposing any religious influence on society, prohibiting religious practice, or oppressing individuals in the name of religion (Çağliyan-İçener, 2009). The party's stance on religious neutrality implicitly serves as a critique of Kemalist secularism, which instrumentalized secularism to restrict religious practices in public spaces. The AK Party argues that genuine secularism should safeguard democratic values, including freedom to practice religions (AK

Parti, 2002; Özbudun, 2006). It rejects the notion that individual rights to practice religion and belief can be denied under the guise of 'preserving the secularity of public spaces,' contending that such a stance undermines religious freedom. For the AK Party, the secularism provision outlined in Article 2 of the Turkish Constitution does not equate to atheism or require individuals to abandon their religious practices. Rather, secularism refers to the state's equidistance from all beliefs, ensuring the protection of everyone's rights regarding their respective religions and beliefs (AK Parti, 2002).

Advocating secularism does not imply that the AK Party lacks a religious sensibility, let alone that it is anti-religious. Emerging from an Islamist tradition, the movement retains a strong sense of piety among its founding members. Religious aspirations continue to influence the party's discourse, even as it adheres to conservative democracy and secularism. At a party conference on February 1, 2012, Erdoğan articulated his vision of creating a 'pious generation' by stating, "We will raise a generation that is conservative, democratic, and upholds principles rooted in history. That is our goal" (Hürriyet, 2012). This vision drives the AK Party to emphasize values, history, and symbols of Turkish identity, aligning them with an Islamic narrative and placing special attention on youth. The party has sought to reshape the youth's understanding of national identity by associating it with Islamic notions. For instance, several historical events symbolizing the greatness and heroism of the Turkish-Muslim nation have been emphasized, such as the Seljuk victory in the Battle of Manzikert in 1071, the mass killing of Ottoman troops in the Sarıkamış Campaign during the First World War—portrayed as 'martyrdom'—and the triumph of the Turkish army in the Gallipoli Campaign (Lüküslü, 2016). Highlighting these events illustrates that the AK Party aims to introduce a new way for the Turkish people to understand their national identity, grounded in an Islamic historical context.

Being conservative and inclined to historicize Turkish identity, the AK Party has endeavored to evoke memories of the

Turkish people's greatness in earlier eras, particularly drawing inspiration from the Ottoman-Islamic period. In 2015, the AK Party proposed the *New Turkey Contract 2023*, a document outlining the aims to be achieved as Türkiye reaches its 100th year. In this document, the party asserted that the identity of the 'new Türkiye' (*yeni Türkiye*) derives from a synthesis of Seljuk, Ottoman, and Republican legacies (AK Parti, 2015). This orientation is also reflected in the party's emphasis on Ottoman heritage, illustrated by the construction of the Çamlica Mosque, completed in 2019. The mosque's architectural design, inspired by Ottoman imperial mosques, and its location in Istanbul—the former Ottoman capital, rather than Ankara, the current capital of Türkiye—reflect the symbolic revival of Ottoman influences. The inclination towards Ottomanism suggests that, despite the AK Party's attempts to present itself as a conservative and moderately secular entity, the party continues to adhere to an Islamic-leaning political paradigm.

Selected Policies

For over two decades, the AK Party has implemented various policies in the political and social arenas. In the political arena, the most significant policies have been the democratization agenda and the restructuring of key state institutions. The party continued the Harmonization Package initiated by the previous government to advance domestic democratization. This package placed particular emphasis on human rights, including freedom of association, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, and cultural rights (Secretariat General for EU Affairs, 2007). Furthermore, the democratization agenda was pursued through a series of constitutional amendments, most notably the 2010 amendment, which restructured the powers of the military and the judiciary. The AK Party proposed an initiative in Parliament to amend the Turkish Constitution, aiming to address the excessive powers held by the military and the courts. This proposed amendment was supported by a majority in a national referendum, thereby granting popular legitimacy to the party's

democratization agenda. In 2013, the AK Party introduced the Democratization Package to further its earlier democratization endeavors. The 2013 package focused on issues such as combating hate crimes and discrimination, allowing the teaching of languages other than Turkish in schools, guaranteeing the right to practice religion freely, and amending the Clothing Law to lift the ban on wearing headscarves (The Official Gazette of the Republic of Turkey: Decision No. 2013/5443 Regarding Amendments to the Dress Code Regulations for Personnel in Public Institutions, 2013).

However, the AK Party's policy focus shifted from a democratization agenda to systemic restructuring. In 2017, the party proposed a package of constitutional amendments to transform Turkiye's political system from a parliamentary to a presidential system. The amendments aimed to consolidate executive power in the President's office by abolishing the Prime Minister's position, granting the President the authority to form a cabinet, and allowing the President to retain membership in their political party (AK Parti, 2017). These amendments were enacted following a national referendum. Although the AK Party had expressed its intention to establish a presidential system early on, momentum for this change accelerated following the failed military coup on July 15, 2016. This event served as a 'blessing in disguise' for the AK Party, providing a rationale for transitioning Turkiye's political system to a presidential one under the pretext of 'preserving stability.'

In the social arena, the AK Party has focused on several issues, particularly those related to Imam-Hatip Schools. These vocational schools are designed to prepare future prayer leaders, preachers, and religious officials. Their existence has sparked debates between supporters and critics (Nor & Ibrahim, 2020). Supporters argue that the schools have existed since the time of Mustafa Kemal. In contrast, critics claim that they serve as centers for anti-secular activities and as focal points for producing religious fundamentalists (Çakmak, 2009). The critics' view was more dominant among the state elite, who were staunch

supporters of secularism. Following the 1997 military intervention, several measures were taken to curb the expansion of Imam-Hatip Schools, including restrictions on graduates from pursuing studies in non-religious fields and changes to the education system that led to the closure of secondary-level Imam-Hatip Schools (Nor & Ibrahim, 2020). To address these issues, the AK Party, through the Ministry of National Education, implemented changes to the university entrance examination system, allowing Imam-Hatip graduates to pursue studies in non-religious fields (Ozgur, 2012). The ministry also introduced a new schooling system to allow the reopening of secondary-level Imam-Hatip Schools.

While reforms concerning Imam-Hatip Schools focused on restructuring the status of religious education, the AK Party also addressed restrictions in religious expression in the public sphere, most notably the headscarf ban. Before the party's rise to power, Türkiye's strict enforcement of secularism prohibited religious symbols in public spaces, particularly in state-owned premises. As the headscarf was perceived as a religious symbol, its use was restricted in various settings, including schools, universities, and government offices (Akbulut, 2015). Upon assuming power, the AK Party undertook several initiatives to lift the headscarf ban. For instance, the party proposed amendments to Articles 10 and 42 of the Turkish Constitution to ensure that university students could wear headscarves without facing discrimination. Although this initial step encountered resistance—and the party nearly faced closure due to accusations that it had become a center of anti-secular activities—the party's later strategy proved more effective. The 2013 Democratization Package, which included provisions protecting headscarf rights, paved the way for the abolition of the ban on wearing headscarves in public premises.

Another significant social policy to consider is the introduction of new school curricula encompassing 51 courses across all educational levels—elementary, secondary, and high schools (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2017). The AK Party utilized these newly introduced curricula as a platform to promote specific

narratives concerning the failed July 15 military coup and a new understanding of the concept of jihad. To prevent a recurrence of the former, a nationalist reinforcement agenda was implemented through education, including the addition of several new courses (Hürriyet Daily News, 2017). Regarding the latter, the Minister of National Education at the time, İsmet Yılmaz, articulated jihad in a broader sense, encompassing efforts "to serve our society, to increase welfare, to ensure peace in society, [and] to serve the society's needs." Yılmaz emphasized that "jihad is an element in our religion... The duty of the Education Ministry is to teach every concept deservedly, in a correct way" (Hürriyet Daily News, 2017). This reinterpretation was incorporated into the Basic Islamic Knowledge course, aligning the concept with the practicalities of students' daily lives.

E. The Ak Party's Identity: Islamist, Neo-Islamist, Post-Islamist, or Non-Islamist?

In an ideological sense, the AK Party identifies itself as a conservative democrat. The party's founders have passively upheld secularism rather than the assertive one, as categorized by Kuru (2009), without compromising their inclination toward religious interests. As a political ideology, conservative democracy has significantly shaped the AK Party's discourse. The term 'conservative' denotes its tendency to preserve certain traditional elements. However, the party's concept of tradition, which is distinctly defined, does not align with the call to return to Islamic tradition that constitutes a core principle of Islamism. Within the framework of conservative democracy, tradition is understood as comprising Turkish identity, culture, history, and nationalism. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the AK Party's conservatism also incorporates Islam as a component of Turkish national identity. This incorporation explains the party's interest in religio-Ottoman revivalism and its emphasis on creating a pious generation, both of which reflect its religious sensibility.

Embracing secularism, however, marks a clear divergence between the AK Party's discourse and the core tenets of Islamism.

Erdoğan asserted that the state must remain neutral, refraining from endorsing any religion or belief, and that secularism must be compatible with democracy (Erdoğan, 2014). Consequently, the Islamist program of establishing an Islamic state governed by Sharia law is not part of the party's agenda. Advocating secularism, even in its passive form, is fundamentally at odds with the Islamist vision of Islamic totality (Mozaffari, 2007). The essence of secularism lies in the separation of religion from worldly affairs, which contradicts the principle of Islamism that integrates both the temporal and the spiritual realms. The AK Party's advocacy of secularism suggests that it does not view Islam as an all-encompassing system governing all aspects of human life, but rather as a matter of personal belief.

Recognizing that secularism should be compatible with democracy (Erdoğan, 2014), the AK Party placed particular emphasis on democratization, especially during its early terms. Democratization initiatives were largely intended to facilitate Türkiye's accession to the European Union (EU). Meeting the Copenhagen Criteria—an essential prerequisite for EU membership—required Türkiye to adhere fully to liberal democracy. This trajectory suggests that the AK Party, as a key driving force behind Türkiye's EU accession efforts, also adopts Western democratic norms, thereby distinguishing the party from the broader Islamist stance, which typically rejects Western values.

However, the AK Party did not sustain its momentum toward democratization or Türkiye's accession to the EU. This shift can be attributed to two interconnected factors. First, the party increasingly perceived its efforts to align Türkiye with the EU as unfruitful, given the Union's persistent reluctance to accept Türkiye's membership (Ibrahim et al., 2025). As a result, the AK Party no longer viewed it as necessary to maintain a strongly pro-Western orientation—with democratization as its primary vehicle—since it no longer promised the anticipated returns. The decline in the party's commitment to the EU must therefore be understood in light of both external and domestic factors, namely

Turcoscepticism and Euroscepticism, respectively (Özdemir & Bayraklı, 2019; Sipahioğlu, 2017). Second, the AK Party's bid to integrate Türkiye into the 'large family of Europe' is debatable, as it seems to have pursued a pro-Western stance for strategic rather than genuine reasons. Democratization, as the means of pursuing EU membership, functioned as a tactical strategy to weaken military tutelage, gain political legitimacy, and attract support from diverse voter segments. Once these objectives were largely achieved, the AK Party deprioritized the democratization agenda and shifted its focus toward consolidating power. This interpretation aligns with the views of several observers (Akkoyunlu, 2021; Bashirov & Lancaster, 2018; Sipahioğlu, 2017). The culmination of this transition was the adoption of the presidential system following the 2017 constitutional amendments.

Several social policies implemented by the AK Party illustrate the party's inclination toward religious interests. This tendency is particularly evident in its emphasis on education. The strengthening of Imam-Hatip Schools and the introduction of new curricula that increasingly emphasize Islamic principles reflect the AK Party's efforts to integrate Islamic education into the mainstream educational system. The expansion of religious education aligns directly with the party's vision of creating a pious generation, demonstrating that its goals were not merely ideological but were translated into practical measures. In addition, the headscarf issue has received significant attention from the AK Party, which has consistently advocated abolishing the headscarf ban. These efforts reflect its conservative-democratic aspirations: democratization by granting women the freedom and right to wear headscarves, and conservatism by enabling individuals to fulfill a religious order.

In contrast to the MGH, which is clearly Islamist, the AK Party's identity is more difficult to identify. The party's identity is characterized by ambiguity, as reflected in both its discourse and policies. On the one hand, it adopts conservative democracy as its political ideology, upholds secularism, and supports Türkiye's

accession to the EU. On the other hand, its religious-conservative dimension is evident in its vision to create a pious generation, its engagement with religio-Ottomanism, and several policies that emphasize Islamic interests. Throughout its existence, the AK Party has demonstrated a multifaceted and adaptive identity. It has distanced itself from the Islamist MGH, embraced a conservative democracy, strongly supported the democratization agenda, upheld secularism, and adopted a pro-Western orientation by advocating for Türkiye's EU membership, while consistently maintaining its religious sensibility.

Nonetheless, it would be inaccurate to view the AK Party as a fully secular party, given its continued attention to certain religious policies and its pro-religion stance. To understand this contradiction, the rationale behind its approach to secularism warrants closer consideration. The AK Party has adopted secularism largely as a necessity for operating within its existing context. Functioning within a system that interprets secularism assertively, the party's embrace of secularism should be understood as a means of ensuring its political survival. This situation illustrates how the party's founders, who were formerly active in the MGH, shifted their stance after undergoing a process of 'political learning' in response to resistance from secularist forces. The AK Party's stance toward secularism should therefore be viewed in light of the party's discourse. The party program explicitly states that it embraces and is committed to secularism (AK Parti, 2002). However, this position does not align the AK Party with Kemalists' conception of secularism, as the former adopts a passive form, whereas the latter adheres to an assertive one. In the Turkish context, secularists are generally understood as those who adhere to a strict interpretation of secularism. Despite its commitment to secularism, the AK Party should not be regarded as a secular party, as the distinction between passive and assertive secularism precludes such a categorization.

In terms of Islamic political identity, the AK Party fits neither the Islamist nor the neo-Islamist category. Rather, it is more suitably associated with a *post-Islamist* identity for several

reasons. First, the party's separation from the MGH was not merely a technical reason but rather fundamental. The split was driven by a shift in discourse among the reformist faction within the movement. Second, as a splinter group that broke away from the MGH, the AK Party practically embodied the discursive transition from Islamism to post-Islamism. The reformists undertook this move because they no longer embraced Islamism and believed that it was incapable of addressing the sociopolitical realities in Türkiye. Third, the AK Party's discourse itself aligns with the characteristics of post-Islamism. Conceptually, post-Islamism is grounded in a critique of Islamism, which is overly ideological. In this sense, the party's discourse can be interpreted as a critique of the MGH's Islamist ideology, which is perceived as having failed to respond to the realities of Turkish politics.

Being a post-Islamist, however, does not mean that the AK Party is entirely non-Islamist or non-religious. Despite the party's embrace of secularism, it continues to manifest religious tendencies and interests in elements of religio-Ottomanism. However, its religiosity does not closely align with the idea of Islamism. Rather, the party can be described as an *Islamic party*, as it demonstrates religious sensibilities without adhering to Islamism. This configuration produces the unique, 'entwined' identity that distinguishes the AK Party within Türkiye's political landscape—it is rooted in an Islamist milieu, abandons Islamism, advocates secularism, yet does not entirely relinquish its religiosity.

F. The Ak Party's 'Entwined' Identity: 'A Model' for the Muslim World?

As a party widely perceived as politically successful, the AK Party has often been seen as 'a model' for the Muslim world. This perception became increasingly prominent in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, particularly with the rise of Islamist entities in several Arab countries that were seen as potential successors to the overthrown authoritarian regimes. As Duran (2022b) argues, under the AK Party, Türkiye has consistently been among the key

actors shaping Middle Eastern dynamics in the post-Arab Spring period, especially during the era of region-wide normalization. Even though the wave of uprisings has passed for more than a decade, this perception continues to resonate, largely due to the party's ability to sustain political dominance at home while maintaining its religiosity in an assertive secular setting, and to its continued influence abroad. However, the question remains: *Is the AK Party truly worthy of being treated as a model for the Muslim world?*

Viewing the AK Party as a model warrants critical consideration. Generally, any political entity is shaped by the context in which it operates. As Spiegel (2017) argues in his study of Moroccan Islamists, context is a decisive force in shaping the political discourses and approaches of ideologically driven entities such as Islamists and their offshoots. For the AK Party, Turkish secularism, together with its strategic geopolitical position, forms the backdrop shaping the party's discourse and approach. Embedded in these settings, the AK Party had to address three interrelated imperatives: ensuring its survival within a secular structure, preserving a religio-traditional heritage that constitutes part of the state's historical, cultural, and social fabric, and maintaining its relevance as a polity proximate to Europe. All three reflect the party's response to the specific context in which it operates. This demonstrates that the party's identity, as a contextual response, is largely confined to the Turkish milieu. As this context differs fundamentally from others, treating its identity as a model to be wholesale imitated is indeed inappropriate.

Treating the AK Party as a model also requires careful consideration of democratic practice in Türkiye since it came to power, given its self-presentation as a 'democrat' that positions democracy as a central pillar of its discourse and policy agenda. Democratic practice under the AK Party can be divided into two major phases. In the early phase (from 2002 to 2011), the party pursued a series of democratization initiatives. While in the later phase (from 2011 onwards, particularly following the failed military coup of July 15, 2016), the AK Party paid significantly less

attention to democratization (with the notable exception of the 2013 Democratization Package). This shift has been widely criticized by scholars who attribute it to increasing authoritarianism within the party (Bashirov & Lancaster, 2018; Yavuz & Öztürk, 2021; Yilmaz & Bashirov, 2018). While acknowledging a decline in the AK Party's commitment to democracy, this paper contends that such a shift should be understood in the context of Türkiye's evolving domestic political climate, which has prompted greater strategic flexibility in pursuing democratic reforms. The party's focus on consolidating power—through the transition from a parliamentary system to a presidential one, for instance—should be interpreted as an attempt to stabilize the political system amid periods of uncertainty rather than as an outright abandonment of democratic means (Duran, 2022a). Nevertheless, uncritical adoption of the AK Party's 'adaptive democrat' identity, which is entwined with conservative democracy and post-Islamism, remains inappropriate across differing political circumstances. Therefore, the party's identity has clear limitations as a model for the Muslim world.

Although direct transplantation is inappropriate, this paper does not entirely dismiss the relevance of the AK Party's identity for the Muslim world. The party's success in harmonizing Islam and democracy within an assertive secular system merits consideration, particularly in countries experiencing democratic deficits and continuing to face domestic authoritarian secularism. In this regard, Tunisia has often been cited as a case that shares similarities with Türkiye in its practice of assertive secularism. As a former French colony, Tunisia was influenced by *laïcité*, a stricter form of secularism that restricts religious manifestations in public spaces (Anas, 2023). This approach is similar to Turkish secularism (*laiklik*), which historically entailed a sharp exclusion of religion from the Turkish public sphere. Through conservative democracy, the AK Party has dismantled this exclusion by presenting a new understanding of secularism. From the party's perspective, religion should not be viewed as a threat to the public

sphere, as it can coexist with a democratized form of secularism. Considering different contextual realities, the AK Party case offers Tunisia, among others, an analytical reference for redefining secularism as not necessarily an anti-religious principle in democratic environments that guarantee freedom of religion.

The relevance of the AK Party's identity for the Muslim world should also be understood through the discourse of conservatism that the party upholds. Through conservative democracy, the party demonstrates that support for democracy, modernity, and progress is not necessarily incompatible with the preservation of tradition and local values. As a vital social force, religion, according to the party, should not be viewed as conflicting with the state's secularity. A conservative worldview shapes its approach to avoiding confrontation with the secular system as it understands that such confrontation would disrupt the existing order (Duran, 2022a). Rather, the party favors gradual and organic change to ensure a more enduring and profound societal impact. The AK Party's experience illustrates that conservatism functions not merely as a strategic adaptive mechanism but also as a mediating ideological framework through which political entities reconcile continuity with societal change marked by strong religious and cultural traditions. Adhering to conservatism, however, does not entail adopting its conservative-democratic ideas *in toto*, as conservatism is inherently context-specific. It must be articulated as a normative framework by considering the historical, cultural, social, and political realities within which it operates. The preservation of the status quo and local values—namely, the central tenets of conservatism—is intended to sustain social order. Accordingly, this understanding may hold relevance for certain Muslim countries today, particularly those grappling with societal polarization and sociopolitical instability.

G. Conclusion

This paper presented an in-depth analysis addressing the following questions: *what is the AK Party's identity*, and *to what*

extent is it relevant to the Muslim world? Regarding identity, the AK Party exhibits an ‘entwined’ identity: it adopts conservative democracy as its official political ideology, advocates secularism, and maintains a pro-EU orientation, while simultaneously adopting a conservative and religiously sensitive stance. In terms of Islamic political identities, the AK Party exhibits clear post-Islamist characteristics: it emerged from an Islamist milieu and no longer adheres to its predecessor’s ideas. Instead, it has developed a distinct political discourse and approach. This ‘entwined’, post-Islamist identity positions it as a unique political entity.

The relevance of the AK Party identity for the Muslim world, however, requires a critical assessment. It is essential to recognize that the party’s unique identity is an outcome of the specific context in which it operates. This paper argues that what is often referred to as the ‘Turkish model’ cannot be regarded as a universal template applicable across different settings, since the contemporary Muslim world comprises heterogeneous nation-states shaped by their respective contexts. Nevertheless, this does not render the AK Party’s identity completely irrelevant to the Muslim world. Rather, it remains meaningful as an interpretative lesson, not as a model to be imitated in its entirety. By offering contextualized scrutiny of the AK Party’s identity and presenting a critical analysis of the ‘Turkish model’ narrative, this paper contributes to the broader literature on Islamism—a significant religio-political phenomenon—that continues to shape the dynamics of the Muslim world in the present century and beyond.

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