Faith and Modernity: Navigating the Intersection of Islam, Secularism, and International Relations in Contemporary Turkish Society

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Abstract: This research investigates the intricate relationship between Islam, secularism, and international relations in contemporary Turkish society, focusing on how these dynamics shape social norms, values, and Turkey's global engagements. Positioned as a predominantly Muslim nation with a secular constitution, Turkey offers a unique context for examining the influence of religious and secular forces on both domestic life and foreign policy. This qualitative study employs an analytical framework that integrates realist and constructivist perspectives, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of religious authorities, cultural expressions of faith, gender roles, political Islam, economic activities, and interfaith relations. The findings reveal that Islam significantly shapes social and cultural practices in Turkey, creating a complex interplay with the country's secular policies. This dynamic also extends to Turkey's foreign policy, where religious and secular considerations influence its diplomatic strategies and international image. The study concludes that understanding this balance is crucial for comprehending Turkey's domestic and global actions, particularly as they navigate geopolitical tensions and alliances. This research contributes to the broader discourse on the interaction between religion and state, offering insights into how Turkey's approach to Islam and secularism provides insights that could be relevant to other nations facing similar challenges. The conclusions drawn underscore the importance of maintaining a nuanced perspective on the coexistence of faith and modernity in shaping national identity and international relations.

Keywords: Islam; Secularism; International Relations; Turkish Society; Political Islam.

Abstract: . Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji hubungan rumit antara Islam, sekularisme, dan hubungan internasional dalam masyarakat Turki kontemporer, dengan fokus pada bagaimana dinamika ini membentuk norma-norma sosial, nilai-nilai, dan keterlibatan global Turki. Sebagai negara yang mayoritas Muslim dengan konstitusi sekuler, Turki menawarkan konteks unik untuk meneliti pengaruh kekuatan agama dan sekuler pada kehidupan dalam negeri dan kebijakan luar negeri. Studi kualitatif ini menggunakan kerangka analitis yang memadukan perspektif realis dan konstruktivis, yang memungkinkan eksplorasi komprehensif terhadap otoritas agama, ekspresi budaya keimanan, peran gender, Islam politik, kegiatan ekonomi, dan hubungan antaragama. Temuan ini mengungkapkan bahwa Islam secara signifikan membentuk praktik sosial dan budaya di Turki, sehingga menciptakan interaksi yang kompleks dengan kebijakan sekuler negara tersebut. Dinamika ini juga meluas ke kebijakan luar negeri Turki, di mana pertimbangan agama dan sekuler mempengaruhi strategi diplomatik dan citra internasionalnya. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa memahami keseimbangan ini sangat penting untuk memahami tindakan Turki di dalam dan luar negeri, terutama ketika menghadapi ketegangan dan aliansi geopolitik. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada wacana yang lebih luas mengenai interaksi antara agama dan negara, serta menawarkan wawasan tentang bagaimana pendekatan Turki terhadap Islam dan sekularisme memberikan wawasan yang mungkin relevan bagi negara-negara lain yang menghadapi tantangan serupa. Kesimpulan yang diambil menggarisbawahi pentingnya mempertahankan

perspektif yang berbeda mengenai hidup berdampingan antara agama dan modernitas dalam membentuk identitas nasional dan hubungan internasional.

Keywords: Islam; Sekularisme; Hubungan Internasional; Masyarakat Turki; Politik Islam.

1.   Introduction

Turkey represents a unique convergence of cultural, religious, and political influences at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. This blend of traditions is especially evident in the country's approach to balancing Islam and secularism. As a predominantly Muslim nation with a constitution rooted in secularism, Turkey's societal dynamics provide a compelling case study for examining how religion and secular values coexist and interact in a modern state. Understanding this interplay is crucial for comprehending Turkey's internal cohesion and role in international relations, particularly within the Islamic world. Turkey's experience reflects broader global trends, such as the rise of political Islam and debates over secularism in other Muslim-majority countries, enhancing the relevance of Turkey's model for nations navigating similar challenges. Turkey's balancing act offers insights into how modern states might address the complex intersection of religious identity and secular governance in increasingly pluralistic societies.

This study explores how Islam influences social norms, values, and daily life in contemporary Turkey while examining the country's ongoing effort to balance secularism and religious traditions. This examination is significant because it offers insights into the broader implications of religious and secular governance in a rapidly changing global environment. Turkey's model of secularism, established under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, has long been considered a cornerstone of its national identity and modernisation efforts (Keyman, 2020). However, the increasing visibility and influence of Islam in public life, especially under recent administrations, have sparked debates about the sustainability and adaptability of this model (Kuru, 2019; Yavuz, 2023). Maintaining this balance is critical for domestic stability, as it helps manage social cohesion among diverse groups and international relations, where Turkey's position as a bridge between the East and West influences its diplomatic and strategic alliances.

The current state of research highlights a range of perspectives. Some scholars advocate that Turkey's strict secularism is essential for ensuring democratic governance and modernity (Akyol, 2017; Kuru, 2019). Conversely, others argue that the growing presence of political Islam reflects a natural evolution of societal values that need not conflict with democratic principles (Öztürk, 2021; Yavuz, 2023). This divergence in scholarly opinion underscores the complexity of Turkey's sociopolitical landscape and the need for a nuanced analysis that considers both realist and constructivist viewpoints.

This study employs a comprehensive analytical framework that integrates realist and constructivist perspectives. Realism, focusing on power dynamics and state interests, emphasises the structural constraints of anarchy on state behaviour (Mearsheimer, 2001; Morgenthau, 1948). Conversely, constructivism emphasises the role of ideational factors such as identity, culture, and norms in shaping state behaviour (Wendt, 1992). In combining these perspectives, the study acknowledges that state behaviour is influenced by structural power relations and socially constructed ideas and identities. These perspectives provide a robust lens for analysing Turkey's intersection of religion and politics. The research method involves a qualitative approach and adopts a literature-based research method, utilising an extensive review of existing academic publications, policy documents, and media sources. The approach involves thematic analysis of the literature to identify key themes and patterns related to the interplay between Islam and secularism in Turkey. This process includes coding procedures where data from selected sources is systematically categorised based on recurring themes, such as public expressions of faith, secular policies, and shifts in political discourse. Sources are included based on relevance to Turkey's socio-political context and discussions on religious-secular dynamics, while those lacking in-depth focus on this interplay are excluded. By

synthesising findings from various sources, the study aims to comprehensively understand how religious and secular values interact within the Turkish context.

The study findings suggest that Islam significantly shapes social norms and values in Turkey, influencing everything from gender roles to political engagement. This religious influence coexists with secular traditions, creating a unique socio-cultural fabric that enriches and complicates Turkey's national identity. Moreover, Turkey's approach to Islam and secularism has profound implications for its foreign policy, particularly its relations with other Muslim-majority countries and its positioning within international organisations.

In conclusion, this study highlights the importance of understanding the delicate balance between faith and modernity in shaping domestic and international policies. Turkey's experience offers valuable lessons for other nations navigating similar challenges, emphasising the need for nuanced and flexible governance approaches that respect religious and secular values. This research contributes to the academic discourse on religion and politics and provides practical insights for policymakers and international relations practitioners.

2.   Historical Context: The Roots of Secularism, Islam, and International Relations in Turkey

The Ottoman Empire lasted over six centuries and was a significant Islamic caliphate that impacted modern Turkey's identity and international relations. As a dominant Muslim power, the Ottoman Empire established extensive diplomatic ties with various countries, balancing Islamic governance with pragmatic diplomacy. The empire's interactions with European powers and its administration over diverse religious communities within its territories set a precedent for managing religious plurality and engaging in international diplomacy. This legacy influenced how modern Turkey navigates its role as a bridge between the Islamic world and the West (Quataert, 2005). During the Ottoman era, the empire maintained a complex relationship with European states, oscillating between conflict and cooperation. The diplomatic corps, known as the Sublime Porte, played a crucial role in managing these relationships, employing a sophisticated network of ambassadors and envoys. This period also saw the development of the Millet system, which allowed religious minorities a degree of autonomy under Islamic law. These diplomatic practices and policies of religious tolerance provided a framework that modern Turkey continues to draw upon in its international relations and domestic governance (Ortaylı, 2017).

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I led to the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Atatürk implemented sweeping reforms to secularise and modernise the new republic, profoundly transforming its domestic and foreign policies. His vision was to create a secular, Western-oriented nation-state, distinct from the religiously governed Ottoman predecessor. Atatürk's reforms included the abolition of the caliphate, the closure of Islamic courts, and the adoption of a civil legal system based on European models (Zürcher, 2017). Atatürk's foreign policy was cautious, prioritising neutrality and diplomatic engagement over military alliances. This strategy was evident in Turkey's stance during World War II, which remained neutral until the final stages. Atatürk's diplomatic principles were rooted in "peace at home, peace in the world," emphasising the importance of internal stability and international cooperation. This policy framework laid the groundwork for Turkey's later involvement in international organisations such as the United Nations and NATO, reflecting its strategic balancing act between East and West (Ahmad, 2003).

Atatürk's secularisation policies aimed to limit the influence of Islam in public life, promoting a vision of modernity aligned with Western norms. These reforms were not merely political but also cultural, including the adoption of the Latin alphabet, the closure of religious schools, and the promotion of Western attire over traditional Islamic dress. Despite these efforts, Islam remained a significant part of Turkish identity, creating an ongoing tension between secularism and religious tradition. This tension has influenced Turkey's domestic policies and stance in international diplomacy, where it often seeks to balance its secular state identity with its Islamic cultural heritage (Mardin, 2006). In international relations, Atatürk's secularist approach facilitated Turkey's integration into the

Western bloc during the Cold War. Joining NATO in 1952 was a strategic move that aligned Turkey with Western powers against the Soviet Union. This alignment was also reflected in Turkey's support for U.S. policies in the Middle East, although it required careful navigation of relations with neighbouring Muslim-majority countries. The legacy of Atatürk's secular reforms thus positioned Turkey as a unique actor in international politics, bridging the gap between secular Western nations and the Islamic world (Hale, 2013).

The balance between secularism and Islam in Turkey's foreign policy has evolved, reflecting domestic politics and international dynamics shifts. The rise of political Islam in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, particularly with the Justice and Development Party (AKP) under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has introduced new dimensions to Turkey's international relations. Erdoğan's government has sought to reassert the role of Islam in public life while also pursuing an assertive foreign policy that sometimes diverges from Western allies. This approach has included increased engagement with the Middle East and efforts to position Turkey as a leader in the Muslim world (Taşpınar, 2021).

Islam has become a key component of Turkey's soft power strategy, which aims to enhance its influence in the Muslim world. Turkey seeks to project an image of a modern yet authentically Islamic nation through initiatives such as humanitarian aid, cultural diplomacy, and educational exchanges. Institutions like the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) and the Yunus Emre Institute play pivotal roles in these efforts, fostering ties with countries in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. This strategy leverages Turkey's historical legacy and cultural connections to build alliances and enhance its diplomatic clout (Öniş & Kutlay, 2020).

The interplay between secularism and Islam also impacts Turkey's stance on human rights issues in international forums. While the Turkish government promotes itself as a model of a secular, democratic Muslim-majority country, it faces criticism regarding its human rights record, particularly concerning freedom of expression and minority rights. These criticisms influence Turkey's relations with the European Union and other Western entities, complicating its accession process to the EU. Balancing its secular principles with Islamic values remains a delicate task for Turkey in maintaining its international image and diplomatic relations (Yıldırım, 2019).

Turkey's role in the Middle East has been shaped by its secular governance and Islamic identity, influencing its approach to regional conflicts and alliances. Historically, Turkey has sought to act as a mediator in disputes such as the Israeli-Palestinian issue, leveraging its unique position as a secular Muslim-majority country. Under Erdoğan, Turkey has adopted a more proactive and sometimes aggressive stance, as seen in its involvement in the Syrian conflict and its support for Qatar during the Gulf crisis. These actions reflect a blend of ideological motivations and pragmatic geopolitical interests, further illustrating the complex interplay of Islam and secularism in Turkish foreign policy (Aras & Görener, 2019).

The balance of secularism and Islam also influences Turkey's relations with Western powers, particularly the United States and the European Union. While Turkey remains a strategic ally in NATO, its increasing emphasis on Islamic identity under the AKP has led to tensions with its Western partners. Issues such as purchasing the Russian S-400 missile system and human rights concerns have strained these relationships. However, Turkey's geopolitical importance and role as a bridge between the West and the Islamic world ensure it remains a crucial player in international relations (Aydin-Düzgit & Gürzel, 2020).

In short, the historical context of Turkey's secularism and Islam, shaped by the Ottoman legacy and Atatürk's reforms, plays a pivotal role in its domestic policies and international relations. The ongoing balancing act between these two forces continues to define Turkey's identity and its strategic positioning on the global stage. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for analysing Turkey's foreign policy decisions and interactions with Western and Muslim-majority countries. By examining the historical roots and contemporary developments, this study highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of Turkey's engagement with the world.

3.   Islam in Public Life: Balancing Faith, State, and International Image

In contemporary Turkey, Islam's role in public life involves a delicate balance between religious practices, state policies, and the country's international image. Central to this dynamic is the Directorate of Religious Affairs, known as Diyanet, established in 1924 to oversee religious matters. The Diyanet plays a critical role in shaping how Islam is practised within Turkey and how it projects its religious policies abroad. It manages thousands of mosques, issues religious guidance, and provides Islamic education, positioning itself as a key institution in maintaining the state's secular-religious equilibrium (Yilmaz, 2018).

Diyanet's influence extends beyond Turkey's borders, reflecting the country's strategic use of religion in international diplomacy. The institution supports religious services for Turkish diaspora communities and engages in international religious dialogues. This outreach helps to reinforce Turkey's soft power, promoting its image as a modern, moderate Muslim nation. Diyanet's international activities include providing imams to Turkish communities abroad, participating in interfaith initiatives, and offering humanitarian aid through religious channels. In Europe, particularly in countries like Germany, the Netherlands, and Austria, Diyanet oversees mosques through organisations such as DITIB (The Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs), deploying imams to meet the spiritual needs of the Turkish diaspora.

Additionally, Diyanet has been involved in interfaith dialogue in the Balkans, promoting peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians in post-conflict regions. In the Middle East and Africa, such as Syria, Iraq, and Somalia, Diyanet offers humanitarian and spiritual aid by constructing mosques, providing food aid, and offering religious support to refugees. These activities highlight Diyanet's role in maintaining the Turkish diaspora's religious identity while engaging in religious diplomacy and humanitarian efforts on the global stage. Recent studies by Kaya (2019) and Yilmaz (Yilmaz, 2018) underscore how Diyanet uses its global network to support Turkey's soft power diplomacy in strategically significant regions. These efforts aim to foster positive relations with Muslim-majority countries and project a favourable image of Turkey in the global arena (Öztürk, 2021).

However, the Diyanet's dual role as a religious authority and an instrument of state policy has sparked debate. Critics argue that its increasing power reflects a shift towards greater state control over religion, undermining secular principles. On the other hand, proponents view the Diyanet as necessary to ensure religious harmony and counteract extremist influences. This tension between promoting religious values and upholding secularism is a defining feature of contemporary Turkish politics, influencing both domestic policy and international perceptions (Çitak, 2020). The debate surrounding Diyanet's dual role as both a religious authority and a state instrument resonates with similar discussions regarding the role of the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI- Indonesian Ulama Council)). Like the Diyanet, the MUI also serves as a religious institution that influences state policy, often as a bridge between Islamic values and government decisions. However, the nature of its relationship with the state is distinct. While the Diyanet operates directly under the Turkish government, reflecting more excellent centralisation of religious authority, the MUI functions more autonomously, offering religious opinions (fatwas) and guidance without being an official government body (Widigdo & Hamid, 2018). In Indonesia, the MUI has sparked debate over its role in shaping policies, especially concerning moral issues, halal certification, and interfaith relations. Critics of both institutions argue that their growing influence could blur the line between religion and state, potentially undermining secular principles. However, proponents see the MUI, like the Diyanet, as crucial in maintaining religious harmony and countering radical ideologies. The tension between promoting religious values while safeguarding secularism is evident in both Indonesia and Turkey, albeit with different historical and political contexts. The comparison highlights how both countries grapple with balancing religious authority and state influence, shaping their domestic policies and international reputations.

Religious education in Turkey is another area where the balance between Islam and secularism is carefully managed. The state controls religious education through the Diyanet and the Ministry of National Education, ensuring Islamic teachings align with national policies. This approach aims to provide a secular curriculum that respects religious beliefs while promoting scientific and modern

education. Religious courses are mandatory in schools but are designed to be inclusive and non-sectarian, emphasising Islam's ethical and cultural aspects rather than doctrinal teachings (Kaya, 2019).

Integrating religious education within a secular framework also impacts Turkey's diplomatic relations, particularly with Western nations. By promoting a balanced educational system, Turkey seeks to present itself as a model for other Muslim-majority countries, demonstrating that Islam and modernity can coexist. This stance is crucial in Turkey's efforts to join the European Union and maintain strong ties with Western allies, who often scrutinise its commitment to secularism and human rights (Öztürk, 2021).

Internationally, Turkey's approach to religious education and state-controlled Islam serves as a diplomatic tool. By showcasing its model of religious education, Turkey positions itself as a leader in the Muslim world, advocating for a moderate and state-regulated practice of Islam. This has implications for Turkey's relationships with countries in the Middle East and North Africa, where issues of religious extremism and educational reform are prominent. Turkey's model offers an alternative emphasis on state oversight and integrating religious and secular education (Göle, 2020).

Turkey's balancing act between faith and state also influences its international image. As Turkey navigates its identity as a secular yet predominantly Muslim country, it faces the challenge of being perceived as either too religious by secular Western nations or not religious enough by conservative Muslim countries. This dual perception requires a nuanced diplomatic approach, where Turkey must continuously reinforce its secular credentials while respecting its Islamic heritage. This dynamic occurs in various international forums, where Turkey advocates for religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue (Kuru, 2019).

The international image of Turkey is further shaped by its domestic policies on religious freedom and minority rights. While Turkey promotes itself as a beacon of religious moderation, it faces criticism regarding its treatment of religious minorities, including Christians, Alevis, and non-Sunni Muslims. Addressing these issues is crucial for Turkey's credibility on the global stage, particularly in its relations with the European Union and human rights organisations. Balancing religious freedoms with state control remains a contentious issue, impacting Turkey's diplomatic standing (Çarkoğlu & Bilgili, 2019).

Turkey's strategic use of Islam in public life is also evident in its cultural diplomacy. Turkey promotes Turkish culture and Islamic heritage worldwide through cultural institutions like the Yunus Emre Institute. These efforts aim to enhance Turkey's soft power, fostering cultural and religious connections with other countries. By highlighting its rich Islamic history and contemporary religious practices, Turkey seeks to build bridges with Western and Muslim-majority nations, positioning itself as a cultural and religious leader (Arik, 2018).

Ultimately, the role of Islam in public life in Turkey is characterised by a complex interplay between religious practices, state policies, and international diplomacy. The Diyanet's influence, the integration of religious education within a secular curriculum, and the strategic use of cultural diplomacy all contribute to Turkey's unique position as a secular yet predominantly Muslim country. Navigating this balance is crucial for Turkey's domestic stability and international relations, reflecting the ongoing challenge of harmonising faith, state, and global image.

The analysis demonstrates that Islam's role in public life in Turkey, as managed by institutions like the Diyanet and through strategic cultural diplomacy, exemplifies a complex balancing act between secular governance and religious traditions. This balance is central to maintaining Turkey's domestic stability and influences its diplomatic strategies and international image. Through state-regulated religious practices, secular-integrated religious education, and soft power initiatives, Turkey attempts to position itself as a model for modernity and religious moderation in the Islamic world while aligning with secular expectations from Western allies. This approach answers the research question by illustrating how Turkey's domestic religious policies and international outreach reflect a nuanced model that manages religious identity within a secular framework, addressing internal cohesion and global perception challenges.

4.   Cultural Expressions of Faith: Islamic Traditions in a Modern, Globalised Setting

Islamic traditions are crucial in shaping cultural expressions of faith in modern, globalised Turkey. Festivals and celebrations such as Ramadan and Eid serve as religious observances and significant cultural events that foster community cohesion and national identity. These occasions provide opportunities for cultural diplomacy, allowing Turkey to showcase its rich Islamic heritage to the world. During Ramadan, fasting, communal iftars (breaking of the fast), and charitable activities highlight the values of empathy, community, and generosity, which resonate with domestic and international audiences (Karatas, 2019).

Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha are celebrated enthusiastically, marked by prayers, feasts, and social gatherings. These festivals are occasions for families and communities to unite, reinforcing social bonds and cultural continuity. In cultural diplomacy, Turkey uses these celebrations to engage with the international community, inviting foreign diplomats, tourists, and expatriates to participate in the festivities. This inclusivity enhances Turkey's soft power, promoting a positive image of the country as a hospitable and culturally rich nation (Kaya, 2019).

The revival of Sufi practices in Turkey represents another significant cultural expression of faith. Sufism, emphasising mysticism, spirituality, and inner purification, has a long-standing tradition in Turkish culture. Sufi orders such as the Mevlevi, Bektashi, and Naqshbandi are pivotal in preserving and promoting this spiritual heritage. Sufi practices, including the whirling dervish ceremonies and Sufi music, are religious rituals and cultural performances that attract global attention (Yavuz, 2023).

Sufi festivals and events, like the annual Mevlana Festival in Konya, dedicated to the famous Sufi poet Rumi, draw visitors worldwide. These events serve as platforms for cultural exchange, where Turkey can share its spiritual and artistic traditions with an international audience. The appeal of Sufi practices lies in their universal themes of love, tolerance, and spiritual quest, which transcend cultural and religious boundaries. This universal appeal enhances Turkey's cultural diplomacy efforts, promoting cross-cultural understanding and dialogue (Göl, 2018).

Turkey leverages Islamic traditions as soft power in a modern, globalised setting. By highlighting its rich cultural and spiritual heritage, Turkey positions itself as a bridge between East and West, fostering cultural exchanges and strengthening international relations. The government supports initiatives promoting Islamic arts, crafts, and traditions domestically and abroad. These efforts include exhibitions, cultural tours, and educational programs highlighting Turkey's Islamic heritage and contemporary cultural expressions (Sandikci, 2020).

Integrating Islamic traditions into contemporary Turkish society reflects a dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity. While maintaining its Islamic heritage, Turkey embraces modern values and global trends. This duality is evident in how Islamic festivals and Sufi practices are celebrated and presented. Traditional rituals are often adapted to contemporary contexts, making them accessible and relevant to modern audiences. This adaptability ensures the continuity of cultural practices while fostering innovation and creativity (Balkan, 2019).

Cultural expressions of faith in Turkey also contribute to social cohesion and national identity. Islamic traditions give the Turkish people a sense of belonging and continuity, reinforcing their cultural roots and heritage. These traditions are integral to the social fabric of Turkey, influencing various aspects of daily life, from family dynamics to community interactions. Celebrating Islamic festivals and practising Sufism offer moments of reflection, connection, and renewal, strengthening the nation's collective identity (Tekke, 2021).

On the international stage, Turkey's promotion of its Islamic cultural heritage enhances its image as a custodian of rich and diverse traditions. Cultural diplomacy initiatives, such as the Yunus Emre Institute, play a vital role in these efforts. Named after the renowned Turkish poet and Sufi mystic, the institute promotes Turkish culture and language worldwide, strongly emphasising Islamic arts and heritage. Turkey seeks to build cultural bridges through these initiatives, fostering mutual understanding and respect between different cultures (Yilmaz, 2018).

The global appeal of Turkish Islamic traditions, particularly Sufism, has significant implications for Turkey's soft power strategy. Sufi music, poetry, and dance are celebrated worldwide for their

spiritual depth and artistic beauty. Collaborations with international artists and participation in global cultural events enhance Turkey's cultural footprint. Turkey strengthens its influence and builds positive international relations by positioning itself as a centre of Islamic culture and spirituality (Göle, 2020).

Turkey's cultural expressions of faith, encompassing Islamic festivals and Sufi practices, play a crucial role in shaping the nation's identity and international image. These traditions serve as powerful tools for cultural diplomacy, promoting Turkey's rich heritage and fostering global cultural exchanges. As Turkey navigates its place in the modern, globalised world, the balance between tradition and modernity continues to define its cultural landscape, enhancing its role as a bridge between cultures and nations. In other words, the discussion highlights how Turkey's cultural expressions of faith, mainly through Islamic festivals and Sufi traditions, actively contribute to both national identity and Turkey's international image. Domestically, celebrations such as Ramadan, Eid, and Sufi practices like the Mevlana Festival reinforce community bonds and social cohesion and allow Turkish citizens to maintain a strong cultural and spiritual heritage amid modernisation. Internationally, these expressions of faith enhance Turkey's cultural diplomacy, enabling it to showcase Islamic values of compassion, generosity, and unity, which appeal to a global audience. Through initiatives like the Yunus Emre Institute and global Sufi collaborations, Turkey positions itself as a hospitable, culturally rich nation that bridges Eastern and Western traditions. Consequently, these practices preserve Turkey's cultural identity and strengthen its role on the international stage, answering the research question of how Turkey utilises its Islamic traditions within a modern, globalised context to foster cross-cultural understanding and diplomatic relations.

5.   Gender and Religion: Women's Roles, Rights, and Global Perceptions

Gender and religion in Turkey, particularly concerning women's roles and rights, present a dynamic interplay of tradition and modernity, significantly influencing both domestic and international perceptions of the country. In a society where Islam and secularism coexist, women's attire becomes a symbol of identity, faith, and cultural expression. The hijab, for instance, is not merely a religious obligation but a personal and political statement that reflects the unique balance Turkey maintains between Islamic tradition and Western influence. Women in Turkey navigate their attire choices between traditional Islamic and Western fashion, reflecting broader societal debates about identity and autonomy. This duality highlights the nation's unique position at the crossroads of Eastern and Western cultural influences, underscoring the ways Turkey's gender dynamics are emblematic of its cultural tensions (Cindoğlu, 2019).

The hijab's significance in Turkey extends beyond personal choice; it embodies the struggle for asserting women's rights within a secular state and affirming religious identity. Turkish women who choose to wear the hijab often do so to assert their religious identity and personal autonomy. However, the choice remains contentious in professional and educational settings where secular norms dominate, underscoring the continued tension between secularism and religious freedom in Turkey. This tension is not only reflective of domestic issues but also parallels global discussions on religious expression and women's rights. By situating the hijab in both local and global debates, Turkey's experience highlights the complex navigation of secularism within an Islamic-majority nation (Gökarıksel & Secor, 2021).

In contrast, many Turkish women's adoption of Western attire represents an alternative means of identity expression that aligns with ideals of modernity and autonomy. This choice, often associated with progressive values and gender equality, showcases the influence of globalisation and Western cultural norms on urban Turkey. For some, Western attire serves as an expression of individuality, signaling a rejection of traditional gender roles in favour of an image that aligns with Turkey's secular aspirations. Adopting Western fashion becomes a form of cultural negotiation as Turkish women balance traditional expectations with modern social values (Güneş-Ayata, 2020). Female participation in both religious and secular spheres is another critical aspect of gender and religion in Turkey. Women actively engage in religious activities, education, and community leadership. Institutions like the Diyanet, Turkey's religious authority, often support this participation, which has initiated programs to

include women in religious education and community leadership. These efforts aim to empower women within the framework of Islamic teachings, promoting a more inclusive interpretation of religious roles. The presence of women in religious spheres also challenges traditional patriarchal structures, suggesting a movement toward more inclusive interpretations of religious roles that align with gender equality (Balkan, 2019).

In the secular sphere, Turkish women have made significant strides in education, politics, and the workforce. The participation of women in these areas reflects the country's commitment to gender equality and modernisation. However, challenges remain, particularly in achieving equal representation and addressing gender-based discrimination. The balancing act between secular and religious expectations shapes women's experiences and opportunities in Turkey. These dynamics have international implications, as Turkey's approach to gender equality is often scrutinised in global forums. The country's progress in women's rights can influence its international diplomatic relations and soft power (Çınar, 2019).

The international implications of women's roles in Turkey are multifaceted. As a country that straddles both Eastern and Western cultural spheres, Turkey's policies and practices regarding women's rights are closely watched. International organisations and foreign governments often evaluate Turkey's commitment to human rights and gender equality based on its treatment of women. This scrutiny can impact Turkey's diplomatic relations and standing in global organisations. Positive advancements in women's rights can enhance Turkey's image as a progressive nation, while setbacks can lead to criticism and diplomatic challenges (Kaya, 2019). In this sense, women's rights become an arena where Turkey's international standing is actively contested and reinforced.

Media representations, cultural exchanges, and international advocacy form global perceptions of Turkish women. Turkish women's experiences are often highlighted in global discussions about gender equality and human rights. Their stories resonate with broader movements advocating for women's empowerment and gender justice. The visibility of Turkish women on international platforms can challenge stereotypes and promote a more nuanced understanding of their roles and contributions. This visibility also underscores the interconnectedness of local and global struggles for gender equality (Arat, 2018).

Efforts to promote gender equality in Turkey involve a range of strategies, from legal reforms to grassroots activism. Civil society organisations play a crucial role in advocating for women's rights, providing support services, and raising awareness about gender-based violence and discrimination. These organisations often collaborate with international partners to amplify their impact and share best practices. The intersection of local and global advocacy efforts highlights the importance of solidarity and collective action in advancing women's rights. This collaboration underscores the global dimension of gender equality struggles (Güneş-Ayata, 2020).

Educational initiatives are vital in shaping perceptions of gender roles and promoting equality. Programs to increase girls' access to education and encourage female participation in STEM (Science, Technology, Engeenering, and Mathematics) fields are essential for empowering women and fostering economic development. Education also plays a critical role in challenging traditional gender norms and promoting progressive values. Turkey can create a more inclusive and equitable society by investing in education. These educational efforts contribute to broader social change and have long-term implications for gender equality (Acar & Altunok, 2019). These efforts also support domestic growth and a positive international image of Turkey as a nation that prioritises equal opportunity and social progress.

In summary, this discussion underscores the unique interplay of gender and religion in Turkey and its implications for global perceptions of the country. Women's choices concerning attire, their roles in religious and secular spheres, and the nation's broader gender policies reveal how Turkey navigates identity and autonomy at the intersection of tradition and modernity. Turkey's approach to gender issues serves not only as a window into the country's cultural fabric but also as a factor influencing its diplomatic relations and global standing. The ongoing dialogue between traditional and modern values in Turkey's treatment of gender roles and rights reflects the country's broader efforts to balance its

Islamic heritage with its secular identity, illustrating how Turkey's domestic gender policies intersect with its international aspirations.

6.   Political Islam: Influence, Controversy, and Global Relations

Political Islam in Turkey, mainly through the lens of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), has significantly influenced both domestic politics and international relations. Since its rise to power in 2002, the AKP, under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has fundamentally reshaped the political landscape of Turkey by blending Islamic values with modern governance. Initially, the AKP implemented democratic reforms and economic liberalisation, stabilising Turkey's economy and aligning it with European Union (EU) standards. However, by the 2010s, the party's policies reflected a more conservative Islamic orientation, leading to tensions with secularists, as seen during the 2013 Gezi Park protests (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2020). The failed 2016 coup attempt further allowed the AKP to consolidate power, culminating in the 2017 shift to a presidential system, which critics argue has veered towards authoritarianism. Despite economic challenges, including high inflation and public discontent, the AKP maintains a strong voter base by appealing to Islamic identity and nationalism. By 2024, Erdoğan's leadership will remain central to Turkey's domestic and international trajectory, with the AKP continuing to balance religious values with governance (Yavuz, 2023). Overall, the party's platform, which blends Islamic values with modern governance, has resonated with a broad segment of the Turkish population. This blending has created a unique model of political Islam that strives to balance religious principles with democratic practices, economic development, and social modernisation (Yavuz, 2023).

Domestically, the AKP's policies have fostered substantial economic growth and infrastructural development, positively impacting the lives of many Turks. For example, the Marmaray Project—a massive undersea rail tunnel connecting Europe and Asia beneath the Bosphorus—was completed in 2013, enhancing transportation between the two continents. Additionally, the construction of Istanbul's Third Airport (Istanbul Airport), one of the largest in the world, opened in 2018, boosting Turkey's role as a global transportation hub. The party's commitment to social welfare programs and healthcare reforms has also contributed to its popularity. In terms of healthcare, the AKP implemented the Health Transformation Program (2003–2013), which expanded access to healthcare and modernised hospital infrastructure, contributing to improved health outcomes across the country. These infrastructural advancements and economic reforms helped maintain Turkey's GDP growth, especially in the early 2000s (Duman & Korkmaz, 2019). However, the AKP's tenure has not been without controversy. Critics argue that the party has increasingly adopted authoritarian tendencies, undermining democratic institutions and eroding secular principles. These concerns have led to widespread protests and significant political polarisation within the country. The AKP's approach to governance, marked by centralisation of power and suppression of dissent, has drawn comparisons to authoritarian regimes, raising alarm both within Turkey and internationally (Özbudun, 2019).

Internationally, the AKP has sought to reposition Turkey as a major player in the Muslim world, leveraging its unique geopolitical position to mediate conflicts and foster diplomatic relations. The party's foreign policy, often called "neo-Ottomanism," aims to restore Turkey's influence in regions formerly under Ottoman control. This approach has seen Turkey take active roles in Middle Eastern politics, engage with African nations, and assert itself in the Balkans. The AKP's diplomatic strategies emphasise the importance of soft power, cultural diplomacy, and economic partnerships, reflecting a departure from previous administrations' strictly secular foreign policies (Altunışık, 2020).

The rise of political Islam under the AKP has also influenced Turkey's relationships with Western nations. The party's emphasis on Islamic values has sometimes caused friction with Western allies, particularly in the context of Turkey's EU accession process.   Concerns about human rights, freedom of expression, and the rule of law have strained relations with the European Union and the United States. For instance, the EU has expressed repeated concerns about Turkey's record on freedom of expression and the rule of law, particularly following the 2016 coup attempt. European officials, including former European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, have criticised Turkey's

actions, stating, "Turkey is moving away from Europe" due to its authoritarian practices. Moreover, the U.S. has also voiced its discontent, particularly regarding Turkey's crackdown on dissent and the media. In 2018, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo emphasised that the U.S. "stands for the protection of human rights," underscoring the importance of freedom of expression and assembly (Snyder, 2021). However, Turkey's strategic importance as a NATO member and its role in addressing regional conflicts, such as the Syrian refugee crisis, ensure that it remains a crucial partner for the West despite these tensions. For example, during the Syrian refugee crisis, Turkey has hosted millions of refugees and played a key role in managing this humanitarian situation, which has been a concern for Europe. In 2020, EU officials recognised Turkey's efforts, with European Council President Charles Michel stating that "Turkey has been a partner in managing the migration crisis" (Kirişci, 2021). These dynamics illustrate the complex interplay between Turkey's political developments under the AKP, its relationships with Western nations, and its strategic significance as a NATO member, especially in regional security matters.

Secular opposition to the AKP has been robust, with various political parties and civil society groups challenging the party's policies and governance style. The Republican People's Party (Turkish: Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP), Turkey's leading secular opposition, has consistently opposed the AKP's encroachments on secularism and democratic norms. This opposition has sparked intense political debates and public demonstrations, highlighting the deep ideological divide within Turkish society. The secular camp argues that the AKP's policies threaten Turkey's secular heritage and democratic foundations, calling for a return to the secularist principles established by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (Çınar, 2019).

In the global arena, perceptions of Turkey are shaped by these internal dynamics and the AKP's foreign policy initiatives. The international community watches as Turkey navigates its dual identity as a secular republic and a nation with a strong Islamic heritage. The AKP's ability to maintain this balance while pursuing ambitious foreign policy goals influences how Turkey is perceived by both its allies and adversaries. As Turkey asserts itself globally, it must manage its internal contradictions to maintain credibility and influence abroad (Taşpınar, 2021).

The controversy surrounding political Islam in Turkey is not limited to domestic concerns. The AKP's support for Islamist groups in the Middle East, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, has drawn criticism from some quarters. Critics argue that Turkey's alignment with these groups undermines regional stability and complicates its relations with neighbouring countries. However, the AKP contends that its engagement with Islamist movements reflects a commitment to democratic principles and promoting political pluralism in the Muslim world (Dalay, 2021).

Turkey's political debates have significant implications for its global relations. The country's position as a bridge between East and West means the international community closely monitors its internal political developments. The balance between secularism and political Islam within Turkey can affect diplomatic relations, economic partnerships, and strategic alliances. Understanding the nuances of Turkey's political landscape is crucial for any comprehensive analysis of its role in international affairs (Öniş & Kutlay, 2020).

The AKP's impact on Turkey's global image is multifaceted. On one hand, the party's economic achievements and proactive foreign policy have enhanced Turkey's reputation as a rising power. A key aspect of these achievements is the government's emphasis on fiscal discipline, which has played a crucial role in stabilising the economy and bolstering international confidence in Turkey's financial management. Graph 1 illustrates the fiscal discipline under AK Party governments between 2002 and 2016, highlighting key indicators such as public debt and budget expenditures as a percentage of GDP.
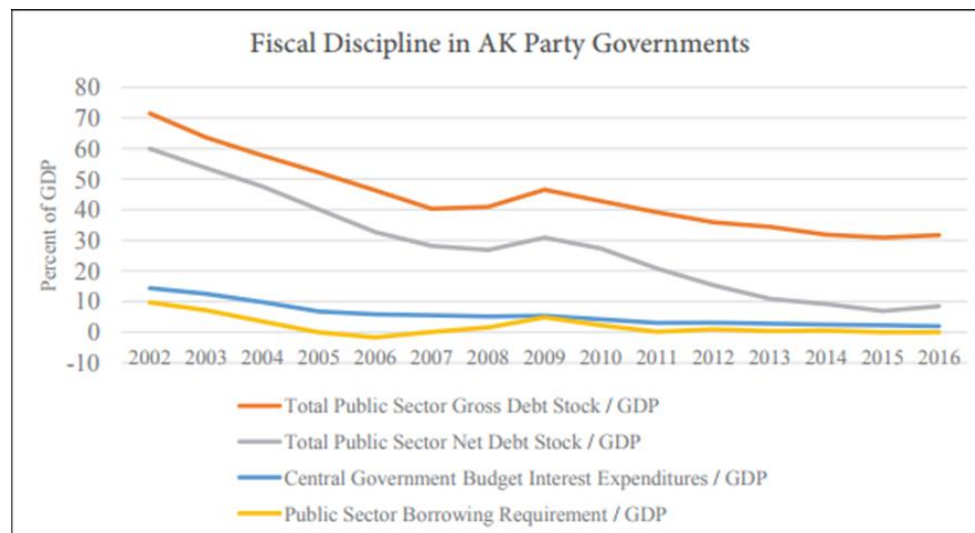
Figure 1. Graph of the Fiscal Discipline in AKP Governments
Source: Ministry of Development and Turkish Treasury (2017)

Figure 1 illustrates the fiscal discipline under AK Party governments between 2002 and 2016, showing a consistent decline in key fiscal indicators as a percentage of GDP. The Total Public Sector Gross and Net Debt Stock, represented by the orange and grey lines, decreased significantly over this period, indicating a reduction in national debt relative to economic growth. Similarly, Central Government Budget Interest Expenditures (blue line) and the Public Sector Borrowing Requirement (yellow line) show a downward trend, demonstrating improved fiscal management and reduced borrowing needs. These improvements highlight the AKP's economic achievements, contributing to Turkey's global image as a rising power with sound fiscal policies. This financial stability underpins Turkey's proactive foreign policy, strengthening its international credibility.

However, on the other hand, concerns about democratic backsliding and human rights violations have tarnished Turkey's image in the eyes of many Western observers. This duality underscores the complexity of Turkey's identity and its challenges in maintaining a positive international image while pursuing its domestic and foreign policy objectives (Pusane, 2020).

To sum up, the rise of political Islam in Turkey under the AKP has profoundly influenced the country's domestic politics and international relations. The party's blend of Islamic values and modern governance has reshaped Turkey's political landscape, fostering economic growth while generating significant controversy. The AKP's foreign policy initiatives reflect its ambitions to reposition Turkey as a major player in the Muslim world and beyond. However, the tension between secularism and political Islam continues to shape Turkey's internal dynamics and global perceptions, presenting both opportunities and challenges for its future.

This analysis of political Islam under the AKP in Turkey provides a nuanced understanding of how the party has balanced Islamic principles with governance, fostering economic growth and infrastructural development while also stirring controversy. By blending Islamic values with modern governance, the AKP has established a model of political Islam that appeals to a substantial portion of the Turkish population. Domestically, this approach has brought about improvements in healthcare, transportation, and social welfare, reflecting the AKP's commitment to developmental governance. Internationally, the party's neo-Ottoman foreign policy has strengthened Turkey's role as a pivotal player in the Muslim world while maintaining essential, albeit strained, relationships with the West. In answering the research question, the data underscores that Turkey's model of political Islam, though economically and infrastructurally beneficial, has led to political polarisation and raised concerns regarding democratic backsliding. These developments illustrate the complex interplay between Turkey's Islamic identity and secular heritage, affecting its domestic stability and international relations. The AKP's leadership under Erdoğan continues to navigate these tensions, shaping Turkey's trajectory in a way that has significant implications for regional and global politics.

7.   Contemporary Issues and Global Perspectives

Contemporary issues in Turkey are heavily influenced by the ongoing process of globalisation, which has profound effects on the practice and perception of Islam within the country. Globalisation has introduced new ideas, technologies, and cultural exchanges that challenge traditional norms and practices. For Turkish Islam, this means balancing preserving religious traditions and adapting to modern societal changes. The rapid flow of information and the influence of global media have exposed Turkish society to diverse interpretations of Islam, prompting debates about the role of religion in public and private life (Yilmaz, 2018).

The impact of globalisation is particularly evident in the urbanisation and modernisation of Turkish cities. As cities grow and develop, the traditional ways of life are often supplanted by more cosmopolitan and secular lifestyles. This urbanisation brings about a clash between conservative values and modernist perspectives, especially among the younger generation, who are more connected to global cultures through the internet and social media. This generational divide raises important questions about the future of Islamic practice in Turkey and how it will evolve in response to these global influences (Bayat, 2019).

Turkey's role in the Islamic world is another critical aspect of its contemporary issues. As a country with a rich Islamic heritage and strategic geopolitical position, Turkey has positioned itself as a leader in the Muslim world. This leadership is reflected in its active involvement in regional conflicts, support for various Islamic movements, and efforts to mediate disputes within the Islamic community. The government's policies under the AKP have aimed to strengthen ties with other Muslim-majority countries and to promote Turkey as a model of a modern yet religiously grounded nation (Taşpınar, 2021).

One of the significant challenges Turkey faces in this leadership role is balancing its Islamic identity with its aspirations to be a secular, democratic state. Internal and external pressures, including political opposition within the country and differing expectations from the international community, complicate this balancing act. While some view Turkey's Islamic orientation as a source of soft power and cultural diplomacy, others express concerns about the erosion of secular principles and democratic norms (Yavuz, 2023).

The AKP's foreign policy has been instrumental in shaping Turkey's image and influence in the Islamic world. Turkey has sought to build alliances and influence in regions such as the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia by promoting a foreign policy that emphasises solidarity with Muslim nations. This approach has sometimes put Turkey at odds with Western allies, mainly when it involves support for Islamist groups or opposition to Western regional policies (Altunışık, 2020).

However, Turkey's role in the Islamic world is not without controversy. The country's support for groups like the Muslim Brotherhood has drawn criticism from other Muslim-majority countries and has complicated its diplomatic relations. Additionally, Turkey's military interventions in Syria and Libya have sparked debates about its intentions and the long-term implications of its regional ambitions. These actions are viewed through different lenses, with some seeing them as necessary for national security and others as overreach and imperialistic tendencies (Mardin, 2006).

Global perspectives on Turkey are also shaped by its domestic policies, particularly those concerning human rights and democratic governance. The international community has raised concerns about the crackdown on dissent, the erosion of judicial independence, and restrictions on freedom of expression. These issues affect Turkey's global image and relations with international bodies such as the European Union and the United Nations. The tension between Turkey's domestic policies and its international ambitions highlights the complexity of its position on the global stage (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2020).

Globalisation and Turkish Islam have also influenced the country's socio-economic landscape. As Turkey integrates more with the global economy, issues such as economic inequality and labour migration become more pronounced. With increased exposure to international norms and lifestyles, the rise of a global middle class in Turkey challenges traditional socio-economic structures and creates

new dynamics. These changes are reflected in the evolving relationship between religion and economic practices, such as Islamic banking and halal industries (Göle, 2020).

Turkey's growing movement seeks to reconcile modernity with Islamic values in response to globalisation. This movement emphasises the adaptability of Islam to contemporary challenges and promotes interpretations that align with modern human rights principles, gender equality, and scientific advancements. This evolving discourse is critical for understanding how Turkish Islam will continue to be shaped by global trends. It also illustrates the dynamic nature of Islamic thought and practice in the face of rapid societal changes (Kara, 2021).

The evolving thought and practice of Turkish Islam in response to globalisation illustrates a significant hypothesis that Islam in Turkey can be harmonised with modern values without compromising its core principles. This hypothesis is evidenced by the increasing emphasis within Turkish Islamic discourse on human rights, gender equality, and scientific progress, showcasing an adaptable interpretation that resonates with religious adherents and broader society. The discussions throughout this analysis reveal that Turkish Islam's engagement with global trends does not signify a departure from tradition but rather an expansion of its interpretative scope, where religious principles are applied in ways that align with contemporary norms. This adaptability in thought and practice demonstrates that Turkish Islam is responsive to and actively participates in the global dialogue on modernity. Consequently, the results support the hypothesis that Islamic values in Turkey can evolve alongside global changes, providing a model for reconciling tradition with modernity.

Contemporary issues in Turkey are deeply intertwined with globalisation and the country's role in the Islamic world. The balance between tradition and modernity, the impact of global influences on religious practices, and Turkey's ambitions as a leader in the Muslim community all play crucial roles in shaping its domestic and international policies. Understanding these dynamics requires a nuanced approach considering Turkey's internal developments and interactions with the broader global community. For example, Indonesia, a diverse and predominantly Muslim nation, is a compelling case study in balancing tradition and modernity within a diverse Muslim context. The Indonesian government promotes religious tolerance and pluralism, as seen in initiatives like the Interfaith Dialogue Forum, which brings together various religious leaders to discuss shared values and social cohesion. This approach helps to mitigate sectarian tensions and promotes a unified national identity, demonstrating how faith can coexist with modern democratic principles. The interplay between faith, state, and globalisation continues to define the contours of Turkish society and its position on the world stage. It also offers valuable lessons for other nations, such as Indonesia, that face similar challenges in harmonising religious values with contemporary governance.

8. Conclusions

Turkey faces a significant opportunity to harmonise its dual identity of Islam and secularism while enhancing its global influence. A nuanced understanding emphasises that the coexistence of strict secularism and the rising presence of political Islam reflects a significant transformation in societal values that aligns with contemporary democratic principles. This transformation is not merely a domestic issue; it has profound implications for Turkey's socio-political landscape, as it fosters a more inclusive environment where diverse ideological perspectives can coexist, potentially reducing internal conflicts and strengthening national unity. To achieve this, Turkey must embrace a model of governance that integrates religious and secular values, fostering a society that respects both traditions and modernity. By advancing policies that promote religious tolerance, gender equality, and cultural pluralism, Turkey can set a precedent for how faith and modernity can coexist. These policies are crucial for domestic cohesion and enhancing Turkey's international standing, as they demonstrate a commitment to global norms and human rights, positioning Turkey as a model for other countries grappling with similar challenges. Turkey's role on the international stage will likely continue to evolve as it navigates complex socio-cultural and geopolitical landscapes. As a bridge between East and West, Turkey has the potential to play a pivotal role in mediating regional conflicts and fostering cross-cultural dialogue. Its ability to balance its Islamic heritage with secular principles will be crucial in

shaping its diplomatic relations and economic partnerships. The success of this mediation will heavily depend on Turkey's ability to balance its Islamic heritage with secular principles, as this balance will be vital in shaping its diplomatic relations and economic partnerships. The country's strategic position and dynamic internal policies make it a key player in international affairs, with the potential to finfluence global discourse on faith, culture, and modernity. Turkey can leverage its unique position to promote stability and collaboration in a fragmented global landscape by proactively engaging with the Western and Islamic worlds.

Future research should focus on the impacts of Turkey's socio-cultural policies on its international relations and economic development. In particular, scholars should investigate the ongoing issues of religious freedom, gender equality, and cultural pluralism within Turkey, as these factors will be instrumental in determining its global image and diplomatic strategies. Analysing how Turkey's approach to integrating Islam with secular governance affects its global image and diplomatic strategy could provide valuable insights. Additionally, studying the role of Turkey's cultural diplomacy in strengthening international partnerships and promoting mutual understanding will be crucial. Research should also consider how Turkey's evolving identity, shaped by its historical context and contemporary challenges, could influence its foreign policy direction and engagement with international organisations. These areas of investigation will help clarify how Turkey can navigate its complex identity to maximise its influence and contribute to global discussions on faith and modernity.

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