Is Turkey a Western nation? How the Turkish political elite aimed to appeal to the US political elite during the Afghan conflict

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Using discourse analysis as its methodology, this article demonstrates how the Turkish political elite sought to play a ‘Western nation role’ towards Afghanistan in order to appeal indirectly to the US political elite. In that sense, this article underlines how, under coalition (1999–2002) and the Justice and Development Party (2002–) rule, the Turkish governments used security and humanitarian narratives to underscore Turkey’s contributions to Western security after the 11 September 2001 attacks. Continuing on from those narratives, the article explains how a non-Western Muslim country could consider fellow Muslim nations as ‘others’ in order to present itself as a Western actor. This document also details how queer international relations theory and securitisation theory explain the Turkish elite’s decision-making during the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s presence in Afghanistan over the last two decades. To that end, this article highlights how the Justice and Development Party government continued the pro-Western narratives of its predecessor coalition government, which decided to send Turkish military forces into Afghanistan in order to appeal to the US political elite.

Key words Turkey • US • Syria • Middle East • Afghanistan

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Introduction

How do non-Western powers exploit an international crisis to foster a Western identity for themselves? Does Turkey need a non-Western ‘other’ to present itself as an indispensable partner to the West? Does indispensability as a partner assist states in making identity shifts at their will? Looking at the role that Turkey has played in Afghanistan since the US invasion in 2001, this article follows the representation of the
Turkish identity as an indispensable partner in attracting the West. The article explores representations of Turkish history and describes the Turkish government’s political and economic priorities to attract and retain Western interest, while presenting Afghanistan as a non-Western other. This article has two main goals: first, it expresses how the Turkish government aimed to depict a non-Western nation as an ‘other’ in order to emphasise and reflect its Western identity to the West; and, second, it explains how the heads of the Turkish government, who came from different political backgrounds, used Afghanistan as a political tool in order for Turkey to become a Western nation. In this effort, the article highlights how both the coalition (1999–2002) and Justice and Development Party (AKP) (2002–) governments sought to construct a pro-Western identity in order to appeal to the Republican Bush (2001–09), Democrat Obama (2009–17) and Democrat Biden (2021–) administrations.

This article uses queer and securitisation international relations (IR) theories to understand how both the coalition and AKP governments aimed to construct a pro-Western identity towards Afghanistan in order to appeal to both the Republican and Democratic US administrations. The article explores how security definition and gender construction define the Western identity making of non-Western states. Further, this article delineates how the Turkish governments, which felt feminine and hypermasculine towards the West, aimed to create their feminine and hypermasculine objects with Afghanistan. In that effort, queer IR theory is significant in understanding this dilemma clearly. Although Turkey is a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member and considers itself a partner of the US, Turkish governments believe that they are not respected by US officials. For example, the AKP government has felt ambivalent with regard to US support for the Syrian Kurds since 2014 (Wright, 2019). The AKP government feared that US support for the Syrian Kurds could trigger Kurdish nationalism inside Turkey. In other words, US support for the Syrian Kurds weakened the masculine position of the AKP and turned it into a feminine and hypermasculine object. In that effort, queer IR theory is important in understanding how the AKP government, which felt hypermasculine and feminine in regard to the US, tried to use Afghanistan in order to be recognised as a hegemonic masculine nation by the US political elite. This article explores how both the coalition and AKP governments considered Afghanistan as both a hypermasculine and a feminine other in order to demonstrate their hegemonic masculinity to the US political elite. In addition, securitisation IR theory underlines how these Turkish governments portrayed Afghanistan as a dangerous place in order to depict Turkey as a pro-Western nation and appeal to the US political elite. Therefore, this article examines how adopting a Western identity in Afghanistan also made the Turkish governments ontologically secure in relation to Western nations.

This article features two cases: first, the secularist coalition government (1999–2002), which consisted of the Democratic Leftist Party (DSP), the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and the Motherland Party (ANAP); and, second, the religiously conservative AKP government (2002–). Thus, this article includes different Turkish governments as two separate cases to express how opposite political ideologies (secular versus conservative) created the same pro-Western identity in relation to Afghanistan. This article focuses on how the secularist coalition government (1999–2002) of Turkey considered Afghanistan as a non-Western other in order to present a Western identity. The coalition government sided with the Republican Bush administration
Is Turkey a Western nation? (2001–09) against the Taliban regime of Afghanistan in order to obtain political backing against Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK) terrorism. The coalition government participated in the US-led war and received political support from the US for Turkey’s European Union (EU) membership and economic support from the US due to the financial crisis in Turkey in 2001 (Balci, 2017: 261, 278–80). Therefore, the coalition government sought to play an important part in the ‘war on terror’ in order to achieve a Western identity and control its ontological insecurity in regard to Western nations. After expressing how the coalition government supported the US position against Afghanistan, this article examines how the AKP government (2002–) followed the pro-Western position on Afghanistan in order to regain its Western identity.

The AKP came to power after the 2002 Turkish general election. The AKP government was eager to be a ‘strategic partner’ of the US in order to increase its influence over Arab and Islamic nations. Although the AKP government had a nationalist and religiously oriented conservative background, it continued to support the US-led military operations against the Taliban and Al Qaeda from 2002. Moreover, the AKP government sought to use its Islamic identity to play the intermediary role between the US and the Afghan regime (Sey and Seuffert, 2016: 4). The Obama administration also considered the AKP government a ‘role model’ for Muslim nations due to its pro-Western stance, free-market economy and democratic institutions (Martin, 2011; Cagaptay, 2020: 160). In that effort, the AKP government aimed to play a ‘Muslim democrat’ nation role in relation to Afghanistan in order to appeal to the Obama administration.

Although the AKP government sought to align with the Obama administration against Afghanistan, Turkish and US political interests clashed in the Middle East. In the first place, the Obama administration began to consider the AKP government to be an anti-Western country due to Turkey’s support for Muslim Brotherhood-led groups and organisations in Syria and Egypt (Cagaptay, 2020: 166). Furthermore, US support for the Syrian Kurds against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), which Turkey considered an extension of PKK terrorism, increased the mistrust between the AKP government and the US political elite (McMaster, 2020: 263). The problems between Turkey and the US continued during the Republican Trump administration, which came to power in 2017. Although President Erdogan and President Trump had a strong personal relationship, Turkey’s quest for regional hegemony worried the Trump administration as well. Turkey’s military operations against the US-backed Syrian Kurds in 2019 and its unilateral decision to search for gas resources in the East Mediterranean in 2020 increased the disagreements between the AKP government and the Trump administration. Therefore, the Biden administration adopted a very critical stance towards President Erdogan and Turkey after his election victory in November 2020.

The Biden administration criticised the AKP government for its authoritarian moves at home, purchasing S-400 missiles from Russia and exploring for gas in the East Mediterranean (Tahiroglu and Everett, 2019; Cagaptay, 2021: 2–3). As a result of the US questioning Turkey’s place in the Western alliance, the AKP government tried to adopt a pro-Western position in Afghanistan in order to appeal to the Biden administration (Cagaptay, 2021: 3; Coskun and Altayli, 2021). This article expresses how the AKP government was eager to stay in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of US-led NATO forces in 2021 in order to save Turkey’s position in the Western world. Overall, this article analyses how the two different Turkish governments (the
The historical context of US–Turkish–Afghan relations

The Turkish–Afghan friendship began during the Ottoman period in the 19th century. The Ottoman Empire strengthened its relations with Afghanistan because it considered the Afghan region a buffer zone between the Russian Empire and British India (Bishku, 2020: 239). Bishku (2020: 253) underlines that the Ottoman elite sought to use pan-Islamism, which demanded the unification of all Muslim nations, to counter British and Russian expansionism towards the Ottoman lands during the 19th century. Therefore, the Ottoman ruling elite aimed to support the Afghan Muslims against British and Russian influence over Central Asia.

Later, in the 20th century, the Republican Turkish elite tried to play a model role for the Afghan Kingdom. Afghanistan became the first country to recognise Turkey’s struggle for national independence against Western imperial powers (Eksi, 2010: 144). Afghan King Amanullah instituted reforms that were based on Ataturk’s secular vision for Turkey (Bishku, 2020: 240). Bishku (2020: 244) mentions that ‘Turks also assisted with the drafting of Afghanistan’s 1923 Constitution, through which although the religion of the country was Islam and the King was defender of the faith, Hindus and Jews were allowed religious freedom.’ At this time, the Republican Turkish elite considered Afghanistan an important ally and strengthened their relations with the Afghan government. Hence, the Republican elite provided military and technical assistance for the Afghan Kingdom.

The Democrat Party (DP) government of Turkey (1950–60) pursued a pro-Western stance towards Afghanistan after the eruption of the Cold War. In that effort, the DP government was eager to support the US position in order to deter communism in Afghanistan and the wider Asian continent (Aslan, 2022: 6–7). However, the eruption of the Cyprus dispute in the 1960s caused a rift between Turkey and the US that still exists. After the overthrow of the Cypriot leader, Makarios, by the Greek-backed National Organisation of Cypriot Fighters (EOKA), Turkey feared the unification of Cyprus and Greece in 1974 (Hale, 2013: 111). In response to the pro–Greek plan, the Republican People’s Party (CHP) government of Turkey (January 1974–November 1974) ordered a military occupation to protect the rights of Turkish Cypriots in July 1974. In response to Turkey’s military intervention, the US Congress (both the Senate and the House of Representatives) imposed an arms embargo on Turkey (Hale, 2013: 116). Therefore, the CHP government (1978–79)
sought to pursue an independent foreign policy approach towards Afghanistan, rather than relying on the US.

After its election victory in 1983, the Motherland (ANAP) government of Turkey (1983–93) sought to find new markets for the growing Turkish economy (Aslan, 2022: 9). In that effort, the ANAP government aimed to increase its cultural and economic relations with the Afghans, rather than showing direct support for US-backed Afghan fighters during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s. However, Turkey became more cautious about constructing its relations with the new Islamist Taliban regime of Afghanistan after the Cold War and supported secularist Afghan groups, such as those of General Dostum, against the Islamist Taliban regime.

The secularist Turkish military considered political Islam a rising threat to Turkish domestic politics. That is why the Turkish military put pressure on Turkish leaders to pursue a secularist foreign policy. In that effort, Turkey adopted a pro-secular position towards the Taliban regime of Afghanistan, even as this caused mutual mistrust between Turkey and Pakistan in the 1990s (Aslan, 2022: 10). Moreover, Turkey considered Afghanistan an important place due to the presence of Turkic people and energy politics. As Bishku (2020: 249) states: ‘When the Soviets withdrew, in February 1989, Western embassies ceased operations, but Turkey continued to maintain a diplomatic presence in Kabul.’ Bishku (2020: 249) also maintains that, ‘In 1998, (General) Rashid Dostum fled to Turkey, from which he had received financial but not military aid for the past half-decade for his autonomous territorial entity in northern Afghanistan’, and continues: ‘Following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 and in the midst of the ensuing civil war amongst the mujahidin warlords, Turkey, despite its ties to the ethnic Uzbeks, emphasized national reconciliation’ (Bishku 2020: 250). Clearly, then, Turkey sought to continue its friendship with Afghanistan after the end of the Cold War.

The Bush administration declared the ‘war on terror’ doctrine after the Al Qaeda suicide bombings in the US in September 2001. Bush adopted neo-conservative political thinking, which advocated offensive military tactics against US adversaries after the end of the Cold War (Feng, 2021). In that sense, the Bush administration declared war on the Taliban in order to punish the Islamist regime for harbouring the terrorists who were responsible for the 9/11 attacks (Dunn, 2005: 14). In order to depict Turkey as a secular model for authoritarian and radical Islamic nations, the coalition government of Turkey supported the US-led military operations in Afghanistan. It is this war on Al-Qaeda and its regional ally, the Taliban regime, that clearly shows the narrow path Turkey was treading. The US considered Turkey to be a Muslim, secular, democrat nation, capable of appealing to Bush and spreading democratisation among Islamic nations.

After the 2002 election, the AKP government sought to use the ‘war on terror’ narrative to appeal to the Bush, Obama and Biden administrations. The AKP government aimed to present itself as a Muslim, secular and democrat nation in order to appeal to the Bush administration. In that effort, the AKP government supported NATO security policies in Afghanistan (Farrell, 2017: 148; Bishku, 2020: 254). As Bishku (2020: 251) expresses: ‘Turkey operates in the Kabul/Bagram central hub with other forces, while the United States runs operations in Kandahar in the south and Laghman province in the east closest to the Pakistani border, Italy is in Herat in the west, and Germany in Mazar-i Sharif in the north.’ In addition, Farrell (2017: 99) expresses that the Turkish and British troops tried to create a new Afghan army. In
that sense, Farrell (2017) states that the Turks supplied the uniforms and the British supplied the instructors for the Afghan army. The AKP government also supported the Obama administration’s plan to increase the democratic values and economic prosperity of Afghanistan (Ozcan, 2010: 138). After Obama left the White House, the Trump administration aimed to withdraw US military forces from Afghanistan (Borger, 2020). Hence, the AKP government sought to play a mediator role between the US political elite and the Taliban in the Trump era (Gurbuz, 2020). Later, the Biden administration also sought to end US military missions in the region until September 2021 (Wong et al, 2021), giving the AKP government the chance to express that Turkey could protect the Western nations from Al-Qaeda and the Taliban militants in order to appeal to the Biden administration. As this article explores how the AKP government continued the previous administration’s pro-Western narrative towards the Taliban in order to be recognised as a valuable partner by US officials, in the next section, I discuss the theoretical perspective of this article, followed by my analyses.

**Theoretical framework**

The concept of ontological insecurity plays an important role in the policymaking of non-Western nations in regard to Western nations. Non-Western nations felt ontologically insecure in relation to the West because the West is not only itself, but also the inventor of the identity of non-Western nations (Capan and Zarakol, 2019: 267). Non-Western countries attempt to be recognised as legitimate nations in the eyes of Westerners without knowing how the West perceives them (Capan and Zarakol, 2019: 267). Moreover, Bilgic (2015: 4) mentions that, ‘for non-Western policy-makers, gendering can “naturalize” the exclusion of the non-Western state from the international society by rejecting its equality with the West, and undermining its sovereign right to conduct its domestic and international affairs independently’. Bilgic (2015: 4) underscores that, ‘In the context of West/non-West relations, the perception of non-Western subjects that they fall short of meeting the “standards” (or being articulated as such by the West) can be a source of insecurity for them because they are positioned as “the feminized and hypermasculinized other” of the West.’ Therefore, non-Western political elites could adopt a narrative of ‘catching up with the West’ in order to control their ontological insecurity in regard to Western nations.

This ontological insecurity in relation to the Western world pushed both the coalition and AKP governments to construct a Western self-narrative in the Afghan context. Turkey, which sees itself in between the East and the West, developed structural and temporal insecurity. As Capan and Zarakol (2019: 270) explain: ‘Structural insecurity stems from the “place” a country is situated in within the international order (usually but not always manifesting as liminality); temporal insecurity stems from its perception (or self-perception) as belonging to a different time, lagging, being behind, etc.’ Therefore, as Capan and Zarakol (2019: 271) express: ‘The West was simultaneously idealized as a community to join and a benchmark to attain, on the one hand, and resented as the possible source of Turkey’s problems and as an active agent undermining Turkish unity, on the other.’ As Capan and Zarakol (2019: 268) also state: ‘The structural insecurities also construct a temporal insecurity, structuring of the “reality” of Turkey – as “barbaric”, as “less than”, as being “behind”—against Europe, which is supposed to be always ahead.’ In response, both the coalition and AKP governments aimed to develop modernising and enlightening discourses...
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in order to respond to their temporal and structural insecurities vis-a-vis the West (Capan and Zarakol, 2019: 270). These temporal and structural insecurities also fed the ontological insecurity among these Turkish governments in regard to the US. Therefore, this article investigates how both the coalition and AKP governments aimed to construct a ‘Western self’ in relation to Afghanistan in order to be recognised as a Western nation by the US political elite.

Queer IR theory explains the gendered reactions of the political elite towards certain political events. Smith and Lee (2015: 50) express that queer IR underscores how issues of gender, sexuality and the body are treated more broadly in political science. Nations that can exert their phallic power over other nations can be considered hegemonic masculine (Weber, 1999: 2–3). However, non-Western nations fear that they are depicted as hypermasculine actors by Western nations. The hypermasculine nations are represented as illiberal, irrational and undemocratic by the West (Bilgic, 2015: 5–6). Hence, when Turkey had its identity questioned by the West, it adopted castration anxiety and male hysteria. States that adopt castration anxiety cannot exert their phallic power or have the last word in international affairs (Weber, 1999: 2–3). Moreover, male hysteria appears as the excessive miming of masculinity (a miming that psychoanalytic discourse equates with subjectivity) that ‘stands in’ for a lack of phallic power (inability to make meaning) (Weber, 1999: 86). In that case, both the coalition and AKP governments sought to express their phallic power towards the Taliban and Afghan people in order to claim hegemonic masculinity in regard to both the Republican and Democratic US elites.

Non-Western nations that fall short of meeting the standards of Western nations can be considered feminine objects (Bilgic, 2015: 4). In this case, this article emphasises how both the coalition and AKP governments depicted the Afghan people as feminine objects in order to appeal to both the Republican and Democratic US administrations. In such a case, I also explore how the Turkish government, which had lost US support, became a melancholic object. As Weber (1999: 56) states, the narcissistic identification of the melancholic with the loved/lost object means that the melancholic has invested their ego in the loved/lost object. Weber (1999: 56) explains that ‘because the melancholic’s love for the lost object is a form of self-love – of narcissistic love – the melancholic does not give up the loved object even after it has been “lost”’. Thus, I explore how both the coalition and AKP governments aimed to use Afghanistan as a narcissistic image in order to find their lost object, which meant US political support for Turkey. In other words, this article stresses how both the coalition and AKP governments constructed the Afghan people as an ‘Eastern other’ in order to indirectly present their hegemonic masculinity to the Republican and Democratic US political elites.

Securitisation theory explains how the political elite constructs a group of people as ‘others’ in order to appeal to the external elite audience. This article explores how both the coalition and AKP governments considered the Taliban and Al-Qaeda as extremist threats in order to be considered a Western nation by the Republican and Democratic US political elites. McDonald (2008: 564) states that political leaders are the dominant actors in terms of constructing security-oriented speeches. As Balzacq (2005: 172) explains: ‘securitization is better understood as a strategic (pragmatic) practice that occurs within, and as part of, a configuration of circumstances, including the context, the psycho-cultural disposition of the audience, and the power that both speaker and listener bring to the interaction’. Balzacq (2005: 172) then underlines that
political leaders try to use metaphors, emotions, stereotypes, gestures, silence and even lies in order to persuade their targeted audience of the existence of identified threats. Therefore, this article underscores how both the coalition and the AKP governments used a ‘war on terror in Afghanistan’ narrative to appeal to the US political elite. After explaining the theoretical framework, I move on to the methodology of this article.

In my methodology, I use critical discourse analysis to analyse the collected data. As Wodak and Meyer (2009: 2) express: ‘discourse means anything from a historical monument, a lie du memoire, a policy, a political strategy, narratives in a restricted or broad sense of the term, text, talk, a speech, topic-related conversations, to language per se’, adding: ‘Moreover, CDA (Critical Discourse Analysis) is characterized by the common interests in de-mystifying ideologies and power through the systematic and retroductable investigation of semiotic data (written, spoken or visual). (Wodak and Meyer, 2009: 3). In addition, Wodak and Meyer (2009: 3) express that CDA attempts to make its own position and interest an explicit whole, retaining its respective scientific methodologies while remaining self-reflective of its own research process. This article selects the coalition government era (1999–2002) and the AKP government period (2002–) to analyse the narratives of the Turkish governments regarding the Afghan conflict. Therefore, I discuss the speeches of Bulent Ecevit, who was the prime minister of the coalition government (1999–2002), Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who was the prime minister and is now the president of the AKP government (2002–), and Ahmet Davutoglu, who was the foreign minister and then prime minister of the AKP government (2009–16) in order to understand the external audience-making processes of the Turkish governments. In the next section, I express how the coalition government constructed a Western self-narrative in order to appeal to the Bush administration after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

The Western self: Turkey as a secular and democratic nation

The coalition government of Turkey (1999–2002) aimed to underline its secular identity in order to appeal to the Bush administration after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001. The militants of Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for these attacks, which killed 2,977 people (Jackson, 2021). In response, the Bush administration declared its ‘war on terror’ policy in order to prevent future terrorist attacks in the US (Bush, 2010: 191). The Bush administration declared war against the Taliban regime, which protected the Al-Qaeda militants and their leader, Osama Bin Laden, who organised the attacks in the US. In that case, the coalition government used the early Republican era to highlight that Turkey had already absorbed the Western cultural and political way of life. The coalition government preferred to use the Kemalist narrative that advocated a secularist vision and a pro-Western foreign policy. The then prime minister, Ecevit, conducted an interview with Jim Lehrer from the Public Broadcasting Service’s NewsHour. In this interview 17 on January 2002, Ecevit stated that Turkey pursued pro-Western policies towards Afghanistan due to its Kemalist past:

We have been helping, trying to help Afghanistan in many ways, even from the beginning of … the beginnings of the ’20s, 1920s, when we were fighting our own national struggle. Atatürk sent several Turkish staff officers to Afghanistan, helped them build their own army. And even very recently, when Taliban was
in office, we took the humanitarian task of building hospitals, for instance, schools and other arrangements. (Public Broadcasting Service, 2002)

Hereby, Ecevit aimed to underline that it was not the first time that Turkey had helped the Afghan people. In other words, he stressed that the Ataturk government (1923–38) also tried to bring modernity to the Afghan people, just like the coalition government was doing in the 2000s. Thus, the coalition government sought to construct Turkey as a modern and secular nation in order to appeal to the Bush administration, which had declared war on radical Islamism. Indeed, US support for the recovery of Turkish economic loss feminised the Turkish political elite. In other words, the coalition government felt that Turkey was lagging behind the strong economic position of Western nations. In that case, the coalition government aimed to depict the Afghan people, who were oppressed under the Taliban, as a feminine object that needed Turkish guidance in order to express their hegemonic masculinity. The coalition government sought to portray Turkey as the saviour of the Afghan people against the hypermasculine Taliban regime in order to appeal to the Bush administration. Therefore, the coalition government aimed to depict Turkey as a Western nation in order to control its ontological insecurity in regard to the Bush administration.

The coalition government used the US-led ‘war on terror’ in Afghanistan as a political tool in order to catch up to Western nations, which considered the Taliban and Al-Qaeda to be security threats. In that sense, the coalition government tried to adopt hegemonic masculinity towards Afghan Islamist groups in order to control its ontological insecurity in relation to the Bush administration. The coalition government also tried to present Turkey as a ‘role model’ nation for the Islamist Afghans in order to make an appeal to the Bush administration. It aimed to emphasise that Turkey was a successful model nation because it could pursue democracy and modernity with Islamic beliefs. In the same interview on 17 January 2002, Ecevit sought to portray Turkey as an example nation for the Afghan people and other Islamic nations that did not have democratic institutions:

We have proven, Turkey has proven, that Islam can be compatible with democracy, with modernity, and even with secularism, so … But some Islamic countries had doubts about that. However, after the tragic events of the 11th of September, several circles in other Islamic countries began to think that after all the Turkish model should be the model that they would take as an example themselves. It may take some time, but I’m sure that a new feeling to that…. In that regard is becoming apparent in many Islamic countries – not in all of them, but most them. (Public Broadcasting Service, 2002)

Hereby, Ecevit aimed to underscore the secular and democratic identity of Turkey in order to appeal to the Bush administration. Indeed, the coalition government felt insecure due to the delayed promise of the EU in regard to full membership for Turkey. Thus, the coalition government, which was excluded from the EU, was considered a feminine object due to its Asian and Muslim identities. In other words, the coalition government adopted castration anxiety due to its loss of phallic power in relation to Western nations. In order to control their castrated position against the West, the coalition government depicted the jihadists as a hypermasculine object and a security threat in order to construct the Turkish Western identity. Moreover, it
aimed to represent the Afghan people and other Islamic societies as feminine objects in order to exert its hegemonic masculinity. That is to say, the coalition government depicted the Islamic societies as oppressed, backward and emotional in its need to follow its self-created Turkish rationality. In the next section, I underline how the AKP government aimed to use NATO identity in order to portray Turkey as an important partner in the Western alliance in the Afghan conflict.

The AKP’s Western self-narrative: Turkey is a security-provider nation

After being elected in 2002, the AKP government aimed to present a pro-Western stance against global radical terrorism. In such a case, the AKP government depicted itself as a ‘warrior’ against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in order to appeal to the Bush and then the Obama administrations. As mentioned previously, the AKP government depicted itself as a modern Islamist entity to support President Bush’s policy of ‘spreading democratic values’ in Muslim and authoritarian countries after the 9/11 attacks (Stewart, 2005: 404). Later, the AKP government also aimed to play the ‘Muslim democrat’ role for the Obama administration. In that effort, the AKP government expressed itself as an intermediary between the US and the Islamic world.

Although the AKP government sent its military officials to train the Afghan army against Taliban fighters, Turkish soldiers did not participate in the military operations against the jihadists in Afghanistan (Aslan, 2022: 11). Instead, the AKP government sought to increase its cultural and economic interactions with the Afghan government from 2002 to 2013. In that sense, this section is significant in demonstrating how the AKP government, which did not consider the Afghan radicals to be a real security issue, sought to pursue security-oriented narratives to appeal to both Republican and Democratic US administrations.

The AKP government sought to adopt hegemonic masculinity in order to express that Turkey would be in solidarity with the Obama administration and US citizens against radical Islamists. This position was secured after the death of Anne Smedinghoff, a US diplomat who was killed by a suicide attack in Kabul. After this attack, Foreign Minister Davutoglu met with Secretary of State John Kerry to discuss the ongoing problems in Afghanistan. In a joint press conference on 7 April 2013, Davutoglu stated that Turkey supported the US position against jihadist extremism:

The U.S. has lost many diplomats in the light of such horrific attacks, and the Turkish diplomats have lost their lives in the aftermath of such vile attacks. And we are very much familiar with this disaster. We were very happy to host you here this morning, but we were very, very upset because of the developments of yesterday, ending in the loss of Anne Smedinghoff. I would like to extend my deepest condolences to her family and to the people of the United States. We shall always remain against terror, and we will always force the strongest ever possible solidarity in fighting against terrorism. (Davutoglu, 2013)

Hereby, Davutoglu sought to depict Turkey as the victim of global terrorism as well in order to construct Turkey as the extension of its Western self. In that case, the AKP government considered the Taliban and Al-Qaeda to be hypermasculine
figures that threatened Western civilisation. The AKP government thereby sought to claim phallic power over the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in order to express Turkey’s hegemonic masculinity in relation to the US political elite. In that sense, the AKP government sought to create a pro-Western identity in order to feel ontologically secure in regard to the Obama administration as well.

The ‘strategic partnership’ between Turkey and the US weakened when their strategic interests clashed after 2013. Although the Obama administration considered Turkey a model nation for Arab countries, Turkey’s support for Islamist groups weakened the Obama administration’s alliance with the AKP government (Cagaptay, 2020: 166). In addition, Turkey’s purchase of S-400 missiles from Russia also led the Trump administration to question Turkey’s position in the Western alliance (Aslan, 2022: 11). In response, the US Congress imposed sanctions under the Counter America’s Adversary Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) on the Turkish defence industry for buying S-400 missile systems from Russia in 2021 (Landay and Mohammed, 2021). Therefore, the mutual distrust between Turkey and the US grew under the Trump administration.

The AKP government also came to the notice of the Biden administration for being an authoritarian government in domestic politics (Spicer, 2020). The Biden administration depicted the AKP government as a hypermasculine object that acted like an irrational and emotional non-Western nation due to its pro-Russian stance and authoritarian move. Being a hypermasculine object also increased the ontological insecurity within the AKP government. Therefore, the AKP government sought to construct a hegemonic masculine narrative in order to amend its aggressive and authoritarian image in the US administration. The AKP government aimed to send Turkish troops in order to protect Kabul Airport from the Taliban after the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. Erdogan delivered a speech at the party congress in Diyarbakir on 9 July 2021, explaining that Turkey was in contact with the Biden administration in order to coordinate the Turkish protection of Kabul Airport:

By having these meetings with the United States and NATO regarding the operation of Hamid Karzai Airport, we have decided what will be the mandate of Turkey in Hamid Karzai, what we accept here and what we do not accept. In the NATO negotiations, Mr. Biden and I personally talked about them both in our one-to-one meeting and in the meeting between the delegations, we talked about them and hopefully we will take this step in Afghanistan in the most ideal way. (Congar, 2021)

In this narrative, Erdogan aimed to underline that Turkey would remain as a strategic ally of the US administration, despite the AKP government’s feelings regarding the critical US stance towards the domestic and external elements of Turkish politics. In that effort, the AKP government sought to present itself as a pro-Western nation that could protect the Western allies from the jihadists of Afghanistan. By doing this, the AKP government believed that it could adopt a pro-Western stance towards the Taliban in order to find its lost loved object: partnership with the US. Although the AKP government sought to claim hegemonic masculinity towards the Taliban and the Afghan people, it already lacked its phallic power. In that sense, the AKP government became a hysterical object due to its non-existent hegemonic masculinity. This lack of phallic power also increased the castration anxiety of the
AKP government. As a result, the AKP government became a queered object due to its constant gender change in the Afghan context. After the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Taliban regime controlled all parts of Kabul in the summer of 2021. Although the AKP government sought to negotiate with the Taliban regime in order to station Turkish troops in Kabul Airport, these negotiations did not result in success. In that effort, the AKP government failed to attract the attention of the Biden administration by protecting the airport against the jihadists. In the conclusion, I summarise how both the coalition and the AKP governments aimed to use the Afghan conflict in order to appeal to both the Republican and Democratic US administrations.

Conclusion

This article has explained how Turkish governments (both the coalition and the AKP governments) have aimed to use the ‘war on terror’ narrative in regard to Afghanistan in order to appeal to the Republican and Democratic US political elites. In that sense, this article has outlined how Turkish governments have tried to construct a Western hegemonic identity towards the official Afghan government and the Taliban regime in order to appeal to the US political elite. On the one hand, the coalition government adopted a Kemalist identity to underline the secular and democratic character of Turkey, thus appealing to the Bush administration. Hence, the coalition government aimed to express that Turkey was a democratic Muslim nation that could play a model role for the Afghan people in order to emphasise its Western credentials. On the other hand, the AKP government aimed to use Turkey’s NATO identity in order to attract both the Obama and Biden administrations. In that case, the AKP government depicted Turkey as pro-Western in order to appeal to US political leadership. Thus, the AKP government sought to depict Turkey as a ‘security-provider’ nation in order to appeal to the insecurity of the US political elite, who were wary of the rise of radical terrorism.

First, queer IR theory explained how both the coalition and AKP governments could adopt two gendered (female–male) characteristics in regard to the US political elite. This article has underscored how these governments aimed to use the Afghan war as a political tool in order to prevent Turkey’s depiction as a feminine and hypermasculine nation by both the Republican and Democratic US administrations. In other words, this article has presented how both the coalition and AKP governments aimed to create a hegemonic masculine position in order to control their ontological insecurity in relation to the US political elite. In this case, they sought to depict the Taliban as a hypermasculine figure and the Afghan people as a feminine object in order to appropriate hegemonic masculinity. To put it another way, the coalition government sought to use the Taliban and the Afghan people as political tools in order to appear as a Western nation in the eyes of the Bush administration. Although the AKP government seemed to be ruling an anti-Western, Islamist and authoritarian nation, it also adopted a pro-Western position against the Taliban in order to appeal to both the Obama and Biden administrations. This article has argued that although both the coalition and AKP governments tried to depict the Taliban and the Afghan people as ‘Eastern others’, Turkey’s lagging behind Western economic and political positions prevented the Turkish governments from becoming fully fledged masculine hegemonic figures in the eyes of the US political elite. Therefore, this article has
expressed how these Turkish governments adopted castration anxiety and male hysteria due to their loss of phallic power in regard to the US political elite.

Second, securitisation theory was also used to present how both the coalition and AKP governments tried to construct the Taliban and Al-Qaeda as security threats in order to appeal to both the Republican and Democratic US administrations. This article has explained how both the coalition and AKP governments adopted security-oriented narratives to express their Western identity. Like queer IR theory, securitisation theory also helped to highlight how they found their non-Western object (Afghanistan) in order to claim a strong partnership with the US. In that case, both the coalition and AKP governments adopted the ‘NATO alliance’ narrative in response to the anti-terror policy of the US political elite after the 9/11 attacks. In other words, both the coalition and AKP governments aimed to use their contributions to the US-led alliance in Afghanistan as a political tool to appeal to the US political elite. Therefore, these Turkish governments aimed to use security-oriented narratives to control their ontological insecurity in regard to the US political elite.

In summary, this article has established how two different IR theories could be used to analyse the Western identity making of Turkish policymakers. This article has also sought to express the constant gender shift of Turkish policymakers towards the Afghan people and the US political elite. Moreover, this article has explored how ideologically different Turkish governments have sought to adopt a pro-Western identity in order to appeal to the US political elite. As a result, it has explained how non-Western nations, such as Turkey, have sought to find an Eastern other (like Afghanistan) in order to construct themselves as an extension of the Western self.

Note
1 The author chooses to use the word ‘feminine’ from queer IR theory. The author believes that all gender concepts are constructed. As such, when using ‘feminine’ or ‘feminised’, the author does not devalue women’s rights.

Conflict of interest
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

References


