

NEO-OTTOMANISM AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF THE TURKISH NATION-STATE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST PROJECT

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Abstract

This study examines how the discourse of Neo-Ottomanism is perceived in Türkiye within the context of the Greater Middle East Project (GMEP) and how this perception converges with anxieties about the future of the Turkish nation-state. Adopting an interpretive stance, the research employs a qualitative design based on unstructured interviews; notes recorded during conversational interviews with one thousand participants were analysed through the logic of discourse analysis. The reported proportions are not statistics representing society as a whole but the density of opinions encountered in the field, and they are treated as perception data rather than as established fact. The findings point to a three-layered mechanism: a public discourse of growth and expansion, an alleged underlying objective of transforming the nation-state that this discourse is thought to screen, and the perception management that binds the two together. Approximately seventy per cent of participants read Neo-Ottomanism as a legitimising device that pulls a state structure grounded in singular citizenship towards a multi-identity order. At the same time, about eighty-six per cent favoured preserving the unitary structure, and some ninety-two per cent stated that the peoples of Türkiye are, to a large extent, historically kin. This pattern indicates that the concern voiced in the field stems not from inter-communal hostility but from the prospect of converting differences into state-constituting categories. The study's original contribution is an integrated model that analyses Neo-Ottomanism along the axis of discourse, perception and legitimacy rather than treating it merely as foreign policy or historical nostalgia. It concludes that identity policies should not erode the ground of common citizenship, that migration and citizenship processes should be conducted transparently, that security and identity discourses should be kept distinct, and that the language of the state should be clear, consistent and trust-building.

Keywords: Greater Middle East Project, Neo-Ottomanism, Turkish nation-state, perception management, discourse analysis, common citizenship.

1. Introduction

The Greater Middle East Project is, in the narrow sense, more than a particular foreign-policy initiative; it is a broad political framework that reopens the order of the state, society, identity and security in the Middle East for debate. In official texts the project has been presented under such headings as democracy, reform, good governance, women's participation in public life, the strengthening of civil society and economic liberalisation (G8, 2004a; U.S. Department of State, 2006a; United Nations Development Programme, 2002, 2003). The critical literature, by contrast, has read the same project in terms of American regional primacy, energy routes, the security of Israel, regime transformation and the reordering of states along their internal fault lines (Kaynak & Gürses, 2014; Çeçen, 2018). The debate over the GMEP is thus shaped by the tension between a visible language of reform and a geopolitical calculation in the background. Türkiye is not outside this debate; owing to its NATO membership, its Muslim-majority society, its Ottoman legacy, the Kurdish

question, migratory movements, water resources and its location opening onto the Middle East, it is one of the most sensitive countries within this framework. It is precisely here that the discourse of Neo-Ottomanism gains importance: on the one hand it produces a positive meaning through the language of historical heritage, regional opening and cultural affinity; on the other it feeds the suspicion that the identity and citizenship basis of the Turkish nation-state is being stretched towards a multi-identity structure. This article examines the tension between these two readings.

The nation-state is one of the fundamental institutions of the modern political order, resting on the idea of common citizenship, shared political belonging, central sovereignty and a legal unity established over a defined territory. The Republic of Türkiye, too, was founded upon this model after the Ottoman multi-national imperial structure; Turkish identity was positioned not as an ethnic narrowing but as the supra-identity that constitutes the state. Multiple-identity arrangements, meanwhile, are debated in modern democracies under the headings of cultural rights, recognition, local participation and pluralism. Yet multiple identity does not produce the same outcome everywhere; in some places it strengthens democratic participation, while in others it weakens the shared political identity and may divide society along ethnic, sectarian or regional lines. In a country such as Türkiye, which carries an imperial inheritance, is under geopolitical pressure and is fragile in security terms, this distinction is all the more critical. The central concern of this article is therefore to understand where the boundary between cultural plurality and political fragmentation begins. Neo-Ottomanism functions here as a kind of intermediate concept; for while it recalls the Ottoman multi-national order, it simultaneously opens the possibility of reinterpreting the Republic's nation-state identity.

Neo-Ottomanism is, in the most general sense, a discourse describing Türkiye's renewed engagement with its Ottoman past and with the former Ottoman geographies. In its positive reading, this discourse depicts Türkiye as a more active, more regional and historically deep independent actor in foreign policy; assessments holding that the country may play a key role in the Muslim world also belong to this line (Davutoğlu, 2001; Fuller, 2008). The same narrative can take on a far more contested meaning with regard to Türkiye's internal identity order; for conceiving the country not merely as a Turkish nation-state but as a post-Ottoman political space in which different identities are jointly represented reopens the founding identity of the state for debate. The work of Fuller and Barkey, which treats the Kurdish question not as a security problem but as a matter of identity, recognition, representation and state structure, is important in this respect (Fuller & Barkey, 2015). This article approaches such literature not as a "plan document" but as a strategic-academic field of discourse that reveals how Türkiye's identity and state structure are conceptualised from the outside. The difference between the attractive face of Neo-Ottomanism in foreign policy and the nation-state anxiety it provokes in domestic politics is thereby made visible. This difference constitutes the principal problem area of the article.

The significance of the subject derives from the simultaneous operation of three discursive lines concerning Türkiye. The first is the discourse of regional leadership and of Türkiye as a model country in the Muslim world. The second is the GMEP's official language of reform, democracy, pluralism and local participation (G8, 2004a; U.S. Department of State, 2006b; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004). The third is the perception, found among certain social segments, that these two discourses in fact screen the transformation of the Turkish nation-state towards a multi-identity, decentralised and loosely structured model. Field data indicate that this third line in particular must be taken into account: in unstructured interviews a significant proportion of participants evaluated Neo-Ottomanism not as growth but as a weakening of national identity. This perception does not amount to a verified policy document; yet it is important for political legitimacy and for the state-society relationship, because in modern politics it is not only the arrangements that are made but also how they are understood by society that prove decisive (Edelman, 1988; Fairclough, 1995, 2003; van Dijk, 1998, 2006).

Within this framework the study's principal research question is as follows: within the context of the Greater Middle East Project, what role does the discourse of Neo-Ottomanism play in the formation of the

social perception that the Turkish nation-state is being reconfigured? Three subsidiary questions follow from this main question. The first concerns how, in the GMEP and Neo-Ottomanism literature—particularly in externally produced strategic-academic texts relating to Türkiye—the country’s multi-identity role beyond its nation-state borders is conceptualised. The second concerns how the gap between the GMEP’s official language of reform and its critical geopolitical interpretations affects the perception of Neo-Ottomanism in Türkiye. The third concerns how the perceptions emerging in unstructured field interviews establish connections among Neo-Ottomanism, migration, the Kurdish question, the Turkish–Kurdish–Arab discourse, the “Terror-Free Türkiye” debate and the future of the nation-state.

The study’s principal hypothesis is constructed as follows: besides being a discourse that emphasises Türkiye’s regional efficacy and historical heritage, Neo-Ottomanism is perceived among a significant segment of society as an instrument that legitimises or screens the transformation of the Turkish nation-state into a multi-identity and looser political structure. Three subsidiary hypotheses support this principal one. The first is that externally produced readings of Türkiye frequently position the country together with a vision of a multi-identity, multi-actor political order (Davutoğlu, 2001; Fuller, 2008; Fuller & Barkey, 2015). The second is that state transformations and identity-based models in the Middle East directly influence nation-state debates in Türkiye. The third is that the perceptions voiced in the field interviews are nourished not only by current politics but also by historical memory, security anxieties, migratory movements and regional conflicts.

The study rests on a predominantly qualitative and interpretive research logic. On the one hand it examines the literature on the GMEP, Neo-Ottomanism, the nation-state, multiple identity, perception management and geopolitical reordering; on the other it evaluates, together with this literature, the social opinions obtained from unstructured field interviews. The unstructured interview method is well suited to this subject because it allows participants to speak without being confined to predetermined options; concepts such as Neo-Ottomanism and the GMEP acquire meanings in everyday speech that differ from those in academic texts. The field opinions obtained are treated not as quantitative survey results claiming firm representativeness, but as qualitative data indicating a particular field of social perception. The study thus carefully distinguishes among the levels of claim, perception, interpretation and fact. The aim is not to generate polemic but to analyse which state–society anxieties the discourse of Neo-Ottomanism activates within the GMEP context. Details concerning the study’s ethical framework and the nature of the interview data are addressed in the Methodology section.

The article’s contribution to the literature may be gathered at several levels. By examining the relationship among the GMEP, Neo-Ottomanism and the Turkish nation-state not only in foreign-policy or security terms but also in terms of discourse and social perception, the study brings together within a common framework two fields that are often treated separately. By systematically evaluating public perceptions of the nation-state through data obtained from unstructured field interviews, it supports theoretical debate with social observation. Moreover, by revealing how the discourse of Neo-Ottomanism is interpreted by different segments, it contributes new data to the literatures on political communication, discourse analysis and identity politics; it shows that the debate over the future of the nation-state proceeds not only at the constitutional or institutional level but also at the perceptual and symbolic level. In the sections that follow, the relevant literature is first reviewed, the theoretical framework is then constructed, the method is explained, the findings are presented, and in the discussion section these findings are compared with the literature in order to assess the risks emerging for Türkiye’s nation-state structure and the contributions of the study.

2. Literature Review

The literature on the Greater Middle East Project, Neo-Ottomanism and the transformation of the Turkish nation-state extends across a broad field spanning international relations, the theory of nationalism, identity politics, discourse analysis, security studies and Middle Eastern geopolitics. The difficulty of reading this field as a whole stems from the fact that most sources approach the subject through the window of a single discipline alone. Below, the literature is summarised in terms of the principal axes that nourish the article’s problematic,

and the gap left by existing studies is made clear.

In the literature the GMEP has frequently been explained under the headings of democracy, reform, civil society, women's rights, the market economy and good governance (G8, 2004a, 2004b; U.S. Department of State, 2006b; United Nations Development Programme, 2002, 2003). According to this official framework, the project proposes a freer and more prosperous future to the peoples of the region; American strategy documents, too, explicitly set the aim of democratising the Middle East and bringing it into alignment with the West (Bush, 2003; National Security Council, 2002). Critical studies, by contrast, read the same project as part of the post-9/11 security strategy, of Israel's regional concerns and of a search for the reordering of state structures (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004; Kaynak & Gürses, 2014; Çeçen, 2018; Project for the New American Century, 2000). The literature thus divides into two lines: in one, the language of reform and stability; in the other, the debate over intervention, fragmentation and a new regional order. Türkiye has been discussed between these two lines both as a "model country" and as an arena in which transformation is to be applied.

The literature on nationalism is the first foundation for understanding how the nation-state was constituted in the modern period. Anderson treats the nation as an imagined political community (Anderson, 2006), Gellner as a cultural-institutional requirement of industrial society (Gellner, 1983), Hobsbawm as a phenomenon reproduced by modern politics (Hobsbawm, 1990), and Smith as a belonging nourished by shared memory and symbols (Smith, 1991, 1998). Brubaker shows that the nation is not a fixed entity but a continually reproduced category, and that many states find themselves in the position of a "nationalising state" that regards itself as the state of a core nation (Brubaker, 1996); Billig, too, notes that nationalism is quietly sustained within everyday language and habit (Billig, 1995). Within this framework the Republic's nation-state model, distinct from the Ottoman religion- and community-based multi-national structure, produced a singular political belonging centred on common citizenship. The literature on pluralism, recognition and multiculturalism adds the dimension of cultural inclusiveness to this picture (Kymlicka, 1995; Taylor, 1994; Parekh, 2000); the nation-statist tradition, for its part, warns that the politics of recognition may weaken the bond of common citizenship (Fukuyama, 2014; Tilly, 1992).

The literature on Neo-Ottomanism shows that Türkiye's relationship with its Ottoman past is being reinterpreted in terms of foreign policy, identity and regional role. The most systematic positive expression of this discourse is the "strategic depth" approach; Davutoğlu argues that Türkiye's historical and geographical heritage imposes upon it a regional responsibility, and that the country must reconnect with the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Middle East to become a multidimensional actor (Davutoğlu, 2001). Similarly, Fuller reads Türkiye as a key actor in the Muslim world that, after the Cold War, moves beyond a one-directional Western axis and re-engages with its Ottoman-Islamic heritage (Fuller, 2008). The critical literature, however, points out that the same emphasis may loosen the Republic's conception of singular citizenship. Particularly when the Ottoman millet system is recalled, this heritage ceases to be merely a diplomatic soft power and becomes part of the debate over a multi-identity domestic political order. Yet the millet system was historically not democratic pluralism but a graduated order that kept communities in separate statuses on a religious basis; carrying it over as a model to today's Türkiye therefore generates serious problems.

In the GMEP literature, Türkiye's position has been explained through the concepts of "model country", "key state" and "regional actor". The initiative within the G8 framework constructed its objectives in the language of reform, education, civil society and economic transformation (G8, 2004a, 2004b; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004). In the model-country narrative, Türkiye is presented as an example capable of striking a balance between Islam and democracy, secularism and Muslim sociality, the Western alliance and Middle Eastern ties (Fuller, 2008). In the critical reading, however, the same model appears as an arena requiring the transformation of Türkiye's own internal structure as well; identity politics, migration, local governments, constitutional debates and the Kurdish question are drawn into this framework (Kaynak &

Gürses, 2014). The major gap in the literature emerges precisely here: how the GMEP is perceived in Türkiye, how it merges with the discourse of Neo-Ottomanism, and how it affects the idea of the nation-state have not been examined with sufficient integration.

The literature on the Kurdish question is one of the most sensitive areas of the nation-state debate in Türkiye. Fuller and Barkey treat the matter not as a problem of terror or economic backwardness but as one of identity and recognition; they argue that a solution may be sought within Türkiye's territorial integrity, but that the classical centralist conception falls short (Fuller & Barkey, 2015). This line accords with the liberal multicultural literature, which holds that cultural rights can be reconciled with democratic citizenship (Kymlicka, 1995; Taylor, 1994). Yet in a country with high security anxiety, fragile border regions and neighbours that have experienced ethnic-sectarian conflict, this approach produces more contested outcomes; the recognition of identity is perceived by certain circles not as democratic inclusiveness but as an erosion of national unity. The weakening of state authority in Iraq and Syria, and the transformation of identities into armed-political structures, have further reinforced this anxiety.

The literature on discourse and perception management is the second principal ground for understanding the relationship between Neo-Ottomanism and the GMEP. Foucault defines discourse as an order that operates together with the knowledge–power relation (Foucault, 1972, 1980); Fairclough shows that political discourse reconstitutes social relations (Fairclough, 1995, 2003), and van Dijk that ideology is produced through language and the media (van Dijk, 1998, 2006). Studies of propaganda and political communication reveal that the public makes sense of events not through detailed information but through symbols, fear, hope and repeated narratives (Lasswell, 1927; Ellul, 1973; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Jowett & O'Donnell, 2019). For Edelman, politics often operates through staged meanings (Edelman, 1988); Le Bon, for his part, notes that crowds interpret events through emotional and symbolic frames (Le Bon, 2001). This body of work offers useful tools for explaining why a positively connoted concept such as “Neo-Ottomanism” produces different perceptions among different segments.

The literature on globalisation is one of the principal sources of the debate over the future of the nation-state. Beck reads globalisation as a process that transforms the conception of sovereignty (Beck, 2000), Bauman as the fluidisation of rigid boundaries (Bauman, 2000), Appadurai as the acceleration of cross-border mobility (Appadurai, 1996), and Castells as the strengthening of identity within the network society (Castells, 2010). The common emphasis of these studies is that, although globalisation does not abolish the nation-state, it confronts it with new pressures. Moreover, this pressure does not yield the same result everywhere; in geographies of intense ethnic and sectarian diversity it may sharpen identity claims. The cases of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen make visible the relationship between the weakening of state structure and the strengthening of identity-based movements.

The literature on the reconfiguration of the Middle East provides the historical background to the GMEP debates. Lewis drew attention to the historical fragility of the region's state structures (Lewis, 1992); the map produced by Peters, which generated intense controversy, rested on questioning existing borders (Peters, 2006). Although many researchers find it methodologically problematic to treat such maps as official policy, it is clear that these works have left strong effects on public opinion. Said's analysis of Orientalism adds a discursive depth to this picture: the Western tradition of defining, classifying and rendering the East governable lays bare the power relation behind every attempt to “impose order” on the region (Said, 1978). The structure that emerged after the occupation of Iraq, and the fragmented spaces produced by the Syrian civil war, have nourished the debate over regional reconfiguration.

The literature on Israel's regional security is a field frequently drawn upon in evaluating Middle Eastern projects. The realist tradition holds that states accumulate power to enhance their security (Mearsheimer, 2001) and that the anarchic system drives them into a constant search for security (Waltz, 1979). Within this framework Israel's security strategies have long been studied; Yinon's text is a source frequently discussed in

the critical literature and regarded by some researchers not as official policy but as a strategic essay of ideas (Yinon, 1982). Some argue that the emphasis on regional fragmentation in this text must be reread in the light of subsequent developments. Not all of these assessments are conclusions accepted within the academic literature; yet it is clear that they have had a marked effect in the field of political discourse. For this reason the literature review must take into account not only verified policies but also the intellectual frameworks that influence public opinion.

The literature on migration is among the areas in which the debates over the nation-state and identity have most intensified in recent years. The mass population movements following the Syrian civil war in particular have generated wide debate in Türkiye at the social, economic and political levels. Migration studies note that population movements must be evaluated not only in their humanitarian-crisis dimension but also in their dimensions of identity, citizenship and social integration (Castells, 2010; Appadurai, 1996). While one group of researchers regards migration as a process that increases diversity and economic vitality, nation-state-centred approaches argue that intense and prolonged migration may produce effects upon shared identity. In the Turkish case, migration is debated not merely as a demographic matter but as one linked to the future of national identity and state structure.

The literature on multiculturalism and the politics of recognition focuses on the question of how modern states manage identity differences. Taylor regards recognition as a requirement of democratic society (Taylor, 1994), Kymlicka regards cultural rights as a complement to individual freedom (Kymlicka, 1995), and Parekh regards diversity as a manageable source of stability (Parekh, 2000). The institutional counterpart of this approach is the consociational model of democracy, which holds that in divided societies stability is secured not through majoritarian rule but through power-sharing among groups (Lijphart, 1977). The critical nation-state literature, by contrast, argues that the political institutionalisation of identities may generate new divisions, and that a weakening of the idea of common citizenship may threaten political integrity (Young, 1990; Fukuyama, 2018; Smith, 1998). In the Turkish context this debate becomes even more sensitive, for the matter is not only the recognition of cultural differences but how the founding identity of the state is to be defined.

Studies of state-building and state-dissolution in the Middle East explain why the cases of Iraq and Syria are so intensely debated in Türkiye. Tilly shows that modern states emerged over long historical processes by strengthening central authority (Tilly, 1992); Mann shows that political power is sustained through the organisation of military, economic and ideological resources (Mann, 1986, 1993). Within this framework the weakening of state capacity generates not only a security problem but also a problem of legitimacy and belonging. Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen have shown how identity centres come to the fore when central authority dissolves. The Ottoman millet system historically denoted an order in which different communities lived under separate statuses; the modern nation-state denotes a structure integrated on the basis of common citizenship. The central tension in the literature arises from the difference between these two forms of organisation.

In the recent period, the debates surrounding Tom Barrack's statements have added a new dimension to the literature on the nation-state and regional order. Some of Barrack's assessments defining the Middle East through tribes, communities and local belongings have been subject to differing interpretations (Reuters, 2025b; Al Arabiya English, 2025); his remarks concerning the Ottoman millet system aroused wide resonance in Türkiye (Middle East Eye, 2025). Nevertheless, the existing literature presents no verified evidence showing that these statements directly advocate the partition or federalisation of Türkiye. For this reason, academically, direct statements must be distinguished from the interpretations derived from them. Even so, political perceptions are shaped not only by direct statements but also by how those statements are interpreted in public opinion; this is evident in the GMEP and Neo-Ottomanism debates in Türkiye.

Identity politics has, over the past three decades, become one of the most influential concepts in

international relations. Wendt shows that the system is composed not only of material power but also of identities and mutual perceptions (Wendt, 1999); Castells shows that identity has become a powerful instrument of political mobilisation (Castells, 2010). In Türkiye, discourses concerning Turkish, Kurdish and Arab identities, too, are evaluated not merely as a matter of cultural diversity but in the context of the state's future; indeed, recent statements by political leaders have made this debate more visible (Anadolu Ajansı, 2026; İletişim Başkanlığı, 2025; Şahin, 2025). The same discourses are read by one segment as a language of regional peace and integration, and by another as the harbinger of a new multi-identity model. This divergence in the literature reflects the divide between those who regard the rendering-visible of identities as democratisation and those who regard their political institutionalisation as a risk to common citizenship.

Taken as a whole, the literature shows that the relationship among the GMEP, Neo-Ottomanism and the Turkish nation-state is multi-layered. The theory of nationalism emphasises the importance of common citizenship (Anderson, 2006; Smith, 1991), the globalisation literature the fact that identities are under new pressures (Beck, 2000; Bauman, 2000), multicultural studies the democratic value of recognition (Kymlicka, 1995; Parekh, 2000), and nation-statist approaches the preservation of shared belonging (Fukuyama, 2014). The GMEP literature is divided between the language of reform and the debate over geopolitical interest (G8, 2004a; Kaynak & Gürses, 2014); the Neo-Ottomanism literature carries together the debate over historical heritage and contemporary transformation (Davutoğlu, 2001; Fuller, 2008; Çeçen, 2018). Despite this, a significant proportion of existing studies treat these fields separately; there is a marked gap in particular concerning how the discourse of Neo-Ottomanism is related, within the GMEP context, to social perceptions of the reconfiguration of the Turkish nation-state. This study aims to fill that gap and to bring together within a common framework the headings of discourse, identity, the nation-state, geopolitical transformation and public perception.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study construes Neo-Ottomanism not as a cultural interest in the past or a stylistic preference in foreign policy, but as a crossroads at which several intersecting theoretical fields overlap. These fields are the theory of the nation-state and nationalism; identity politics together with the debate over multiculturalism and power-sharing; the analysis of discourse and hegemony; the geopolitical reconfiguration of regional order; the discursive construction of security; and the processes of social trust and meaning-making. When these fields are taken separately, Neo-Ottomanism appears either as a merely positive historical narrative or as a merely threatening discourse. Yet the concept's real force comes from its capacity to activate all of these at once. The study therefore asks not whether the Ottoman past is being remembered, but to which political meanings that past is bound in present-day Türkiye and how those meanings are divided within society. The pages that follow open up these theoretical fields one by one; at the end they gather them all into a common model composed of the axes of discourse, identity, geopolitical transformation and social perception.

The first pillar of the framework is the theory of how the nation-state and the nation are constituted. Anderson regards the nation as a modern bond arising when people who have never met one another imagine themselves as members of the same political community (Anderson, 2006). For Gellner, nationalism is a phenomenon intertwined with the common education, common language and central administration required by industrial society (Gellner, 1983). Hobsbawm shows that nations are not ancient and natural units but are constructed, and at times reinvented, according to the needs of modern politics (Hobsbawm, 1990). Smith places a limit on this constructivism; for him, national identity is not wholly invented but rises upon shared memory, myths, symbols and cultural continuities (Smith, 1991). Brubaker makes two important contributions to this debate: that the nation is not a fixed entity but a continually reproduced category, and that many states find themselves in the position of a "nationalising state" that regards itself as the state of a particular core nation (Brubaker, 1996). Billig, in turn, shows that nationalism is quietly reproduced not only in flag-bearing

ceremonies but within everyday language, maps and ordinary habits (Billig, 1995). Read together, these approaches render the founding of the Republic of Türkiye more intelligible. The Republic, breaking from the Ottoman multi-religious and multi-communal structure, chose to establish a singular political belonging based on common citizenship. Here Turkishness was designed not as an ethnic narrowing but as the supra-identity constituting the state. This distinction is directly connected to the crux of the article. For the Ottoman millet system was not democratic pluralism in today's sense but a graduated order of governance that kept communities in separate statuses on a religious basis. The idea of carrying this Ottoman "millet" model over to the Republic, even when presented as a cultural enrichment, theoretically corresponds to a step that loosens the bond of common citizenship. The two faces of Neo-Ottomanism arise precisely here: the same discourse can be read both as "growth and opening" and as "the re-division of national identity".

To see that Neo-Ottomanism circulates as an academic concept within two distinct readings is essential for the construction of the framework. The most systematic expression of the positive reading is the "strategic depth" approach, which has shaped Turkish foreign policy. Davutoğlu argues that Türkiye's historical and geographical heritage imposes upon it a regional responsibility, and that the country must reconnect with the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Middle East to become a multidimensional and effective actor (Davutoğlu, 2001). Along this line Türkiye is conceived not merely as a nation-state confined within its borders but as the central country of a broader historical basin; a similar view appears in assessments that regard Türkiye as a key actor in the Muslim world (Fuller, 2008). The critical reading, however, draws attention to another face of the same discourse. According to this reading, the constant emphasis on the Ottoman heritage may loosen the Republic's conception of singular citizenship and national unity; moreover, the language of regional opening may coincide with the designs of external powers upon Türkiye (Kaynak & Gürses, 2014; Çeçen, 2018). This study does not accept either of these readings as correct in advance. The real matter is to explain why the same historical symbol produces, in one segment, a sense of pride and growth and, in another, the anxiety that the identity basis of the nation-state is being eroded. For the political power of Neo-Ottomanism lies precisely in this double meaning.

One of the externally produced texts that most concretely renders this double meaning visible in the Turkish case is Fuller and Barkey's study of the Kurdish question. The authors treat the matter not merely as a security or terror problem but as one of recognition, representation, citizenship and state structure; they argue that a solution may be sought within Türkiye's territorial integrity, but that the classical centralist conception of the state is inadequate for this (Fuller & Barkey, 2015). This study does not read the text as a "plan document"; such a reading slides into the imputation of intent and turns into a hard-to-prove conspiracy narrative. It is more accurate to evaluate such texts as strategic-academic discourses that show how Türkiye's identity order is conceptualised from the outside. What is decisive here is not what the authors want but the associations these texts produce in Turkish public opinion. Indeed, the description of the centralist nation-state conception as "inadequate" is received by one segment as a call for democratisation and by another as the targeting of national unity. The study follows the social resonance of this second reception.

The second pillar is the debate over identity politics, multiculturalism and power-sharing, which addresses the politicisation of difference. Kymlicka argues that minority rights do not conflict with individual freedoms and may even complement them (Kymlicka, 1995). Taylor regards recognition as a fundamental demand bound up with the dignity of the modern individual (Taylor, 1994). Parekh argues that diversity can be turned into stability not by exclusion but by management (Parekh, 2000). Young, too, emphasises that justice concerns not only the distribution of resources but also the rendering-visible of groups (Young, 1990). The direct institutional counterpart of this line is the consociational model of democracy, which holds that in divided societies stability can be secured not through majoritarian rule but through power-sharing among groups; Lijphart theorises this model, resting on accommodation among the elites of different communities, grand coalitions, autonomy and proportional representation (Lijphart, 1977). This concept is especially important for

the article, because the anxiety voiced in the field data over a “mini millet order composed of multi-identity, autonomous units” points precisely to the possibility of transferring a consociational/power-sharing model to Türkiye. The nation-state-centred tradition, by contrast, warns that the transformation of identities into political blocs may erode the consciousness of common citizenship. Fukuyama notes that when shared identity weakens, political integrity weakens as well (Fukuyama, 2014); Tilly shows that the modern state is the product of a long and painful process of centralisation, the reversal of which is not easy (Tilly, 1992). The tension between the two approaches is not abstract. In a country such as Türkiye, which carries an imperial inheritance, has fragile borders and has witnessed ethnic-sectarian wars among its neighbours, the language of recognition and power-sharing means, for one segment, democratic opening and, for another, the first step towards partition. The article’s question sharpens here: where exactly does the boundary between cultural plurality and political fragmentation begin?

The second major context of the framework is the Greater Middle East Project. In official texts the project is described in the language of democracy, reform, education, women’s participation in public life, civil society and good governance (G8, 2004a, 2004b; United Nations Development Programme, 2002, 2003; U.S. Department of State, 2006a, 2006b). The critical literature, however, reads the same project together with the headings of energy security, Israel’s regional security, regime transformation and the reordering of states along their ethnic-sectarian fault lines (Kaynak & Gürses, 2014; Çeçen, 2018; Peters, 2006). Behind this reading lies the aim of post-9/11 American strategy documents to transform the region (National Security Council, 2002; Project for the New American Century, 2000). The theme of “the historical fragility of the region’s state structures”, voiced much earlier by Lewis, is also an early harbinger of this debate (Lewis, 1992). At this point Said’s analysis of Orientalism makes visible the discursive ground of the project: the Western tradition of defining, classifying and rendering the East governable through its own gaze lays bare the power relation behind every attempt to “impose order” on the region (Said, 1978). The theoretical importance of the project derives from the gap between the visible language of reform and the geopolitical design beneath it. The suspicion of the GMEP in Türkiye feeds largely on this gap; the fragmentation, sectarianisation and migration waves experienced in Iraq and Syria have turned the suspicion into a concrete fear. For this study, the GMEP is less a heading in foreign policy than the overarching framework within which Neo-Ottomanism acquires meaning: the language of expansion, regional leadership and historical heritage can produce a narrative that is at once attractive and disquieting.

The third pillar is the theory of discourse and hegemony. Foucault shows that discourse is not merely a matter of words but an order that carries together the production of knowledge, power and reality (Foucault, 1972, 1980). Fairclough notes that political discourse reconstitutes social relations and renders power struggles at times visible and at times invisible within language (Fairclough, 1995, 2003). Van Dijk reveals how ideology is produced and reproduced through language, the media and political communication (van Dijk, 1998, 2006). Viewed through these approaches, Neo-Ottomanism does not fit a plain mould such as “nostalgia for the past”; it is an order of meaning that simultaneously activates Türkiye’s historical memory, its sentiments towards the Ottoman geography, its bonds with the Islamic world and its desire to be a regional power. Gramsci’s concept of hegemony explains why this order finds such broad acceptance. Hegemony is not rule by force but the production of consent by making a particular order appear natural and reasonable (Gramsci, 1971). When a state model is imposed directly, it generates resistance; but when the same model is presented in the language of brotherhood, peace, civilisation and growth, it finds a far broader field of acceptance. Laclau and Mouffe’s analysis completes this point: concepts such as Neo-Ottomanism, which can be filled with different meanings, are flexible signifiers capable of gathering disparate social demands under a single banner (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). That discourses such as Turkish–Kurdish–Arab togetherness or “Terror-Free Türkiye” can address broad yet mutually opposed expectations at once can also be explained by this theoretical logic. It is precisely because of this flexibility that the same discourse arouses pride in one segment and, in another, the anxiety

that the nation-state is being quietly reshaped.

The concept that concretises this dual operation of discourse is perception management. Since Lasswell's analysis of wartime propaganda, it has been known that masses grasp complex political processes not through detailed information but through the narratives presented to them (Lasswell, 1927). Ellul holds that modern propaganda operates less through open coercion than by shaping people's frames of thought (Ellul, 1973). Jowett and O'Donnell show that these techniques are not peculiar to authoritarian regimes but appear in different guises in democratic societies as well (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2019). Herman and Chomsky reveal how consent is manufactured through the media and communication apparatus (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Edelman's contribution binds this picture to political theory: politics often proceeds less through concrete policies than through staged symbols, fears and hopes (Edelman, 1988). In this study, perception management is not used in the narrow sense of manipulation; it is treated as the manner in which social reality is constructed through language and symbol. This broad meaning is well suited to explaining the different perception clusters that emerge in the field data. When a transformation is narrated in the language of "brotherhood, unity, peace, historical heritage", it produces one kind of reaction; when narrated in the language of "partition, threat, security", it produces an entirely different one. Both the strength and the weakness of Neo-Ottomanism lie in this slipperiness, which shifts according to the language upon which it leans.

To understand why this discourse finds so powerful an emotional resonance, one must consider the concepts of collective identity and historical memory. Halbwachs shows that memory is not an individual but a social phenomenon, and that the past is always reconstructed from within the needs and frames of the present (Halbwachs, 1992). Anderson, too, reminds us that nations are imaginings constructed around shared narratives of the past (Anderson, 2006); Smith notes that societies often build their choices about the future upon narratives concerning the past (Smith, 1998). The Ottoman past is one of the most powerful memory resources serving this function in Türkiye; the memory of a state that ruled vast geographies, held different peoples under one roof and was a great power is laden with both pride and a sense of loss. This burden eases the discourse's reach to broad masses. Le Bon's analysis of the crowd adds a further dimension: masses often make sense of political events not through cold calculation but through shared emotions and powerful symbols (Le Bon, 2001). For this reason every reference to the Ottoman past is not neutral; it summons at times the image of a "growing Türkiye" and at times the anxiety of "a miniature copy of the multi-national order". That participants in the field data spontaneously associated the Ottoman millet system with today's multi-identity debate clearly confirms this political function of memory.

The preparatory ground for the fourth pillar is the theory of globalisation. Beck notes that globalisation is a process that transforms not only the economy but also the conception of sovereignty (Beck, 2000). Bauman says that the rigid boundaries of the modern period are increasingly becoming fluid (Bauman, 2000). Appadurai shows that the cross-border mobility of people, capital, ideas and identities has accelerated (Appadurai, 1996). Castells reveals that, in the network society, identity has become one of the most powerful instruments of political mobilisation (Castells, 2010). The common point of these studies is that, although globalisation does not abolish the nation-state, it leaves it face to face with new pressures. Moreover, this pressure does not yield the same result everywhere; in geographies of intense ethnic and sectarian diversity, globalisation may sharpen identity claims rather than strengthen shared political belonging. The Middle East is the most striking example in this respect. Neo-Ottomanism and the GMEP are therefore not merely a regional debate but the reflection in Türkiye of a global transformation. The Kurdish question, migration, debates over citizenship and local identity claims are the principal areas in which this reflection is seen.

The fifth pillar is the geopolitical reconfiguration of regional order. The realist tradition explains state behaviour less through ideology than through calculations of power, security and geography; Waltz holds that the anarchic structure of the international system drives states into a constant search for security (Waltz, 1979), while Mearsheimer foregrounds great powers' tendency to accumulate supremacy (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Keohane shows that this competition is conducted not only through conflict but also through institutions and interdependence (Keohane, 1984). The Middle East, owing to its water basins, trade routes and military transit corridors as well as its oil and natural gas, is among the areas where this competition is most intense. Çeçen draws attention to the fact that the Euphrates and Tigris basin may in future become as decisive a security element as energy (Çeçen, 2018). Türkiye lies at the very centre of this equation, both through its position at the intersection of continents and through its control of the lands where the region's major water resources rise. This position lends the country weight even as it renders it a target of external designs. It is for this reason that social perceptions of Neo-Ottomanism cannot be explained by cultural or ideological causes alone; they are interwoven with expectations and anxieties concerning the future of regional resources, borders and water basins.

An extension of the geopolitical debate is the rescaling of states. Brenner shows that, in contemporary capitalism, state power shifts from the national scale both upward and downward, with regional, local and supranational levels gaining strength (Brenner, 2004). After the Cold War, federal structures, autonomous administrations and multi-level governance models are the visible forms of this shift. The justification for these models is often the view that central states struggle to manage social differences. Opposing approaches, however, argue that political structuring on an ethnic or sectarian basis may in the long term produce new conflicts; Iraq, Lebanon and Bosnia-Herzegovina are examples frequently cited in this debate. In Türkiye, proposals to strengthen local governments, expand cultural rights and adopt multi-level governance are read within the same dual frame: for some, democratisation; for others, a loosening of integrity. This is also why external discourses defining the region through loose communities, tribes and local belongings rather than nation-states provoke a sharp reaction in Türkiye; for at the theoretical level these discourses correspond precisely to the debate over the rescaling of the state.

At this point the bond between security and identity comes to the fore. While the traditional understanding of security focuses on protecting the state against external military threats, the Copenhagen School reveals that security is produced not only by objective conditions but also by discourse. For Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, a matter becomes a security issue only when political actors frame it as an existential threat (Buzan et al., 1998). The concept of "societal security" developed earlier by the same team is especially useful for this study: in this approach the object to be protected is not only the state but a society organised around a shared identity and sense of belonging; debates over migration and identity, too, are often politicised through this societal-security anxiety (Wæver et al., 1993). Wendt's constructivist approach completes this: state behaviour is shaped not only by material power but also by identities and mutual perceptions (Wendt, 1999). This framework offers a powerful tool for reading the field findings. A transition to a multi-identity structure or mass migration may be securitised by one segment in the language of "existential threat", while the same process is presented by another as an opportunity in the language of "peace, brotherhood and the ending of terror". The same phenomenon is thereby experienced as threat or as glad tidings depending on the discursive frame in which it is placed. What the research is concerned with is not whether this frame is right or wrong but how it is constructed by different social clusters.

Beneath all these debates lies an older tension: the difference between the nation-state and the imperial legacy. Tilly shows that modern states arose by consolidating central authority through long processes of war and taxation (Tilly, 1992). Mann reveals that political power is sustained through the organisation of military, economic, political and ideological resources (Mann, 1986, 1993). Within this framework the weakening of state capacity is not only a security vulnerability but also a problem of legitimacy and belonging; the cases of Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen have shown how identity centres come to the fore when central authority dissolves. While empires held different communities together through flexible and graduated orders, the modern nation-state aims at integration on the basis of common citizenship. The Ottoman Empire falls into the first category. The revival of Ottoman references in today's politics is therefore not mere nostalgia but a debate

over a preference for how political organisation ought to be. The central concern of the article is knotted precisely here: a multi-identity “mini millet” order, or a unitary structure based on common citizenship?

To understand how this debate over preference is received within society, the concept of political trust is decisive. Norris terms the gap between citizens’ expectations and the perceived performance of the state the “democratic deficit”, and shows that as trust declines people begin to read official statements with a more critical, even suspicious, eye (Norris, 2011). In environments where trust has weakened, the tendency to seek other causes behind the visible ones grows stronger, and alternative models of explanation attract greater interest. A particular form of this tendency has long been described in political culture: Hofstadter exhibits the proclivity of a portion of public opinion to read political developments through hidden intentions, conspiracies and behind-the-scenes designs (Hofstadter, 1965). This concept is used here not to make a diagnosis or to belittle participants, but to show that suspicion-based narratives are a recurring discursive form and that this form is reinforced together with low trust. In keeping with the interpretive approach, the study does not judge these narratives as true or false; it treats them as data showing how a particular social segment makes sense of reality. That participants associate certain political developments with the “transformation of the nation-state” or with scenarios of external pressure and blackmail is not merely an ideological preference; it is also linked to the level of trust in institutions. For this reason the study does not keep the concept of trust separate from the analysis of identity and discourse; it evaluates the three together. The question “why do they think this way?” thereby becomes as important as the question “what do they think?”

The study’s reliance on unstructured interviews also rests theoretically on the interpretive tradition of social science. This tradition does not seek to explain human behaviour through objective conditions alone; it places at the centre of analysis the meaning people attach to events. Geertz’s notion of “thick description” proposes that the significance of a cultural act be sought in the web of meaning behind it (Geertz, 1973). This approach requires reading the field data not as a statistical measurement but as the index of a world of meaning. Unstructured interviews are valuable precisely for this reason: participants are not confined to predetermined options but show, in their own words, which concept they bind to what. People’s assessments of Neo-Ottomanism, the GMEP, the nation-state and identity politics reveal not only their current political preferences but also their historical memory, their level of trust and their expectations for the future. For this reason the data are evaluated not as figures claiming firm representativeness but as qualitative indices of a particular field of social perception.

When all these pillars are brought together, it becomes possible to gather the study’s principal variables into a single explanatory model. According to this model, Neo-Ottomanism is a flexible political narrative that produces legitimacy through historical memory. This narrative intersects with the identity politics rising with globalisation; identity politics, in turn, connects directly with the debate over the future of the nation-state. All these processes are framed by expectations of regional geopolitical transformation and by security perceptions. Social perception is the final link that determines with what meaning these developments will be read. The model’s four load-bearing axes thus become clear: discourse, identity, geopolitical transformation and social perception. These axes are not disconnected; discourse shapes identity, identity is nourished by geopolitical anxieties, geopolitical expectations affect the level of trust, and the level of trust determines how the discourse will be received. Moreover, the cycle is not one-directional; a change in perception can reshape the discourse, so that the loop returns to its starting point. The subsequent sections of the study read the field data within this cyclical model. In particular, how participants make sense of Neo-Ottomanism, which anxieties and expectations they carry regarding the future of the nation-state, and upon which intellectual foundations the interpretations they produce in the GMEP context rest, are analysed within this framework. The research thereby ceases to be a study that merely describes political discourses and becomes an analysis that aims to explain, in an integrated manner, the resonance of these discourses within society.

4. Research Methodology

This section explains, step by step, how the research was conducted: which questions were asked, which paths were followed, with whom conversations were held, how the data were collected, and how they were evaluated. Although the subject appears at first glance to be a single heading, it in fact comprises several interlocking issues together: the Greater Middle East Project (GMEP for short), the discourse of Neo-Ottomanism, and the debate over the reshaping of the Turkish nation-state. Because these three headings affect one another, the research has treated them not separately but as three interconnected layers. The first layer is how these concepts are narrated in books and documents. The second is what the political aims behind that narration might be. The third is how the public understands all of this.

The principal aim of the research is to reveal with which meanings these three headings are brought together and how people interpret them. In keeping with this aim, answers were sought to four questions. The first is this: is the discourse of Neo-Ottomanism perceived by the public as a language of nostalgia for the past, or as a political narrative aimed at changing the identity order of the state? The second asks through which connections this discourse is fused with headings such as the GMEP, migration, citizenship and “Terror-Free Türkiye”. The third examines how the relationship between discourse and public perception operates—that is, what acceptance or suspicion the constant repetition of certain concepts produces in people. The fourth investigates the extent to which these perceptions are shared or diverge among different segments of society. In short, the issue is not only “what is said”; the real issue is “how what is said is heard by the public”.

The research rests on an interpretive perspective. Although this may sound somewhat technical, it conveys a simple idea: to understand an event fully, one must also know the meaning people attach to it. For social reality is constructed largely through the meanings people share; the same statement may appear to one person as hope and to another as threat (Tekindal & Uğuz Arsu, 2020). The study therefore did not set out with the claim of “finding a single correct answer”. Instead, it sought to see how the same concept finds different responses in different people.

On this ground, the research was designed as a predominantly qualitative mixed design. A few terms used here should be explained plainly. Qualitative research is the type of research concerned not with numbers but with what people recount, seeking answers to the questions “why” and “how”. Quantitative research, by contrast, is concerned with numbers, proportions and measurements. A mixed design is one that uses the two together. In this study the weight lies on the qualitative side; numbers were used only to support the narratives. Data gathered from written sources and from the field were first analysed separately and then brought together at the interpretation stage; this kind of design, in which the two types of data complement one another, is called a convergent mixed design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2021). The reason for resorting to this path is clear: the subject examined is too multifaceted to be grasped through a single type of data. Using quantitative and qualitative data together allows the phenomenon to be seen from different angles; where one falls short, the other completes it (Toraman, 2021). Rendering one type of data numerically and placing it alongside the other is also one of the known applications of the mixed approach (Özen, 2016).

The research has two principal data sources. The first is written sources—that is, books, documents and articles. The second is data collected from the field, directly from people. These two sources were not substituted for one another but treated as two distinct types of knowledge that complement each other. Thus both the intellectual background of the subject and its counterpart in society could be seen together.

The written sources were analysed through document examination. Document examination is, put simply, the method of carefully reading and evaluating written sources according to a certain order and set of criteria; it follows the steps of reaching the source, testing whether the source is genuine, understanding its content and analysing what is obtained (Kıral, 2020). Within this framework, both official and critical texts written on the GMEP, Graham Fuller’s books on Türkiye and the Islamic world, the assessments of Fuller and Barkey on the Kurdish question, and relevant Turkish critical sources were read one by one (Fuller, 2008, 2012, 2023; Fuller & Barkey, 2017; Kaynak & Gürses, 2014; Makdisî, 2024). During this reading, attention was paid not only to

what the texts say but also to which concepts they foreground, which they leave in shadow, and which political picture they make appear ordinary. This manner of reading accords with discourse analysis, which holds that words do not merely carry information but also construct certain realities and normalise certain meanings. Discourse analysis, in short, seeks to read between the lines of a text and to discern what it emphasises and what it passes over in silence (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998; Foucault, 1980).

How a discourse is heard among the public is as important for this research as how it is constructed in texts. For the political effect of a concept is most often determined not by the intention of the one who utters it but by the meaning people attach to it. Something people believe to be real may influence their behaviour even when it is not objectively true (Edelman, 1988; Jowett & O'Donnell, 2019). For this reason expressions such as “Neo-Ottomanism”, “the Türkiye model”, “Turkish–Kurdish–Arab togetherness”, “Terror-Free Türkiye”, “multi-identity structure” and “the Ottoman millet system” were evaluated not in isolation but within the connections they establish with one another. It was accepted from the outset that the same concept may carry different connotations in different groups, and it was kept in mind that meaning changes according to the situation in which one finds oneself (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021).

To collect data from the field, one thousand people were interviewed. These were unstructured interviews; that is, no prepared, formulaic questions were posed, and people were enabled to speak freely. In selecting whom to speak with, an effort was made to reach as many different segments as possible. Those interviewed included people of various ages, occupations, educational levels and political views. In qualitative research the aim is not to represent the whole of society numerically; the aim is to capture as rich and varied a range of perspectives on the subject as possible. A relatively broad participant group of high diversity was therefore preferred (Baltacı, 2019; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). The reason for choosing the unstructured interview is likewise clear: this method makes visible the feelings, suspicions and associations that ready-made survey questions cannot capture, and it allows people to recount the subject in their own words.

The interviews were conducted in everyday conversational settings, without disrupting the natural flow of the conversation. People were not asked narrow “yes/no” questions; they were enabled to speak as they wished around such headings as the GMEP, Neo-Ottomanism, migration, the Kurdish question, “Terror-Free Türkiye” and the nation-state. The conversations were not recorded as audio or video. Instead, the researcher took notes during and immediately after the interview. This choice is deliberate: in sensitive political matters the presence of a recording device may make people hesitant, whereas free conversation based on note-taking facilitates more comfortable and more candid speech (Baltacı, 2019). In the notes, the words participants chose, the connections they made and the examples they gave were recorded as far as possible in their own expressions; these notes were later evaluated together with the information obtained from the written sources.

In the field section, percentages are given in places; what these percentages mean must be stated clearly. These proportions do not carry, as in classical surveys, a firm claim of representation in the form of “such-and-such a portion of society thinks thus”. They show only how frequently a particular view was voiced among the one thousand people interviewed. That is, the narratives have been rendered numerically in order to see in how many people they were repeated. This operation is a way of summarising qualitative data in numerical form (Toraman, 2021; Özen, 2016). Such a count makes visible not only the most frequently voiced view but also the segments that disagree with it, remain undecided, or do not wish to express an opinion. Indeed, in presenting the proportions, those who did not express an opinion were kept separate, those who took a positive view were shown distinctly, and those who harboured suspicion were treated in their own right. In short, these percentages were used not to pass judgement on the whole of society but to see how widespread particular ideas were in the field.

Thematic analysis was used in analysing the data. This method in fact rests on a plain logic: gathering similar statements under common headings. The procedure ran as follows. First, the interview notes and the texts were read several times. Then frequently repeated words and narratives were marked and coded; coding

means giving a short name to a statement or idea. Codes close to one another were then brought together to form themes. The principal themes that emerged are these: the perception of Neo-Ottomanism, the reading of the GMEP, the preservation of the nation-state, anxiety over a multi-identity structure, migration and demography, the Kurdish question, the “Terror-Free Türkiye” discourse, the perception of external intervention, and the crisis of trust. Reducing scattered notes to meaningful clusters in this way is one of the established paths of qualitative research (Baltacı, 2019; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). Each theme was evaluated according both to how many times it was repeated in the field and to the connection it established with the study’s theoretical framework. For example, the expression “mini Ottoman millet system” was not regarded merely as a historical analogy; it was treated as a social concept carrying the fear that the nation-state would be transformed into a multi-identity order. Likewise, the “Terror-Free Türkiye” discourse was examined not only as a security matter but through the connection it establishes with debates over identity and state structure.

The information from the written sources and that from the field were used so as to check one another. This is called data triangulation—that is, examining the same subject from more than one source and seeing whether the results support one another. This path makes the conclusions reached more robust (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021; Toraman, 2021). For example, while how the discourse of Neo-Ottomanism is perceived by the public was determined through the interviews, the intellectual origin of this perception was examined through the theoretical sources. Here, fundamental views on what the nation is were drawn upon: Anderson defines the nation as an “imagined community”; Gellner and Hobsbawm show that the modern nation is constructed over time (Anderson, 2006; Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1990; Smith, 1991). These views helped to understand why the nation-state debate is not only a legal but also an identity-related matter. No conclusion was thus constructed on the basis of a single source.

For the research to be trustworthy, certain criteria were observed. In qualitative research these criteria may be explained plainly as follows. The first is credibility—that is, whether the conclusions genuinely correspond to the situation in the field. To ensure this, the interviews were conducted with a wide variety of people and the field data were compared with the written sources. The second is transferability—that is, the reader’s ability to see how far these conclusions may apply to other situations. For this, the participants’ words and the settings in which they spoke were described in as much detail as possible. The third is consistency—that is, carrying out the same operation with the same criteria from beginning to end. Coding and theme-building were therefore conducted in a traceable manner. The fourth is confirmability—that is, that the interpretations rest not on the researcher’s personal opinion but on actual data. For this reason every interpretation was tied directly to the interview notes and the texts. These criteria accord with the approach holding that, in qualitative studies, reliability is established not through numerical tests but through such forms of care (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021; Baltacı, 2019).

In the unstructured interview, the researcher is the principal instrument of data collection. This requires the researcher to see his own position and possible biases clearly (Tekindal & Uğuz Arsu, 2020). In this study, participants were not steered towards a particular answer throughout the interviews; the direction of the conversation was left largely to the associations they constructed. Particular care was shown because of the sensitivity of the subject. Statements containing grave claims such as blackmail, covert steering or external intervention were not accepted as verified facts. They were recorded as interpretations participants used to explain events. The researcher did not attempt to test whether these claims were true; setting his own judgement aside, he chose only to describe the perception present in people. Because people’s beliefs and perceptions can influence political behaviour, whether or not they are true, making them an object of research is not contrary to the qualitative research tradition (Edelman, 1988; Jowett & O’Donnell, 2019).

At every stage of the study, adherence to ethical principles was maintained. The interviews rested on the principle of voluntariness; those who wished were spoken with, and no one was compelled. Participants’ identity information was not recorded, and no personal information was included. Because the conversations

were not recorded as audio or video and were kept only in note form, no data enabling anyone's identity to be reached were collected. The data were obtained in everyday conversational settings, without any experiment, measurement instrument or intervention. A field study of this nature does not require ethics committee approval, because it contains no personal or identity-related data, carries no character of intervention and poses no risk to participants. No ethical violation was committed at any stage of the study. Participants' words were used not to single out particular persons, institutions or groups, but only to understand the perceptions circulating in society.

The study's limitations, too, are openly acknowledged. Unstructured interviews allow one to see people's world of thought in depth, but they are not suited to statistical generalisation. The findings here should therefore be read not as firm conclusions representing the whole of Türkiye, but as perceptual tendencies strongly observed in particular segments. Moreover, by the very nature of political matters, some views may have been influenced by the developments of the day; social perceptions can change over time and be reshaped by new events. In addition, concepts such as Neo-Ottomanism and the GMEP are not defined in the same way by everyone; the meaning different people attach to the same concept does not always coincide. These differences were not disregarded; they were seen as a natural part of the multi-layered nature of social reality (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021).

All these choices serve a single aim: to see the relationship between political discourse and public perception as a whole. The debates over the nation-state, nationalism, identity politics, propaganda and globalisation addressed in the literature review, and the approaches to hegemony, discursive legitimacy and perception management treated in the theoretical framework, were read together with the field data. The study's premise at its point of departure is this: political transformations are shaped not only by high-level decisions but also through the consent and trust of the public (Gramsci, 1971; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). The data gathered and analysed within this framework will be presented, in the Findings section that follows immediately, according to the logic described here. It will thereby be possible to see more clearly how the process of data collection and analysis is reflected in the conclusions.

5. Findings

The data compiled from the field interviews are concentrated not in a single heading but in a broad, interconnected cluster of headings. The percentages cited below show how frequently an assessment of the same tenor was repeated in the unstructured interviews with one thousand people; these proportions are not statistics representing the whole of society but the densities of opinion encountered in the field. Because the interviews proceeded in a conversational manner, participants' identity information was not recorded, and no particular view was imposed on anyone, the material obtained is treated as perception data rather than fact. As this study rests on unstructured conversations containing no personal data, it does not require ethics committee approval, nor is any ethical violation involved. In particular, what was said on grave matters such as blackmail, threat or covert steering was recorded not as a claim whose truth had been tested, but as people's manner of making sense of events for themselves. This distinction is preserved throughout the section; alongside the dominant opinion, opposing views and those who remained reticent are shown separately.

The first and most marked opinion is that the discourse of Neo-Ottomanism is not seen as merely a nostalgia for the past. Approximately 70 per cent of participants evaluated this discourse as an instrument of legitimation and perception management that carries the Turkish nation-state towards a multi-identity political model. A segment of 13 per cent saw it as it stands—that is, as a sincere language of regional opening—while 17 per cent refrained from expressing an opinion. This silence is itself a finding, for it suggests that the subject is perceived not as an ordinary foreign-policy debate but as a matter of state on which even speaking requires caution. In participants' eyes the same discourse carries two things at once: on the one hand the connotation of growth, opening and a historical sphere of influence; on the other the anxiety that shared national identity may loosen. Studies recalling that the nation is constituted not only by institutions but also by shared

imagination, memory and a sense of belonging (Anderson, 2006; Smith, 1991) render this ambivalent reading intelligible. The real issue is not the recollection of the Ottoman past but the state model to which that past opens a door in today's political language. Approaches arguing that political speech does not merely convey information but also shapes reality (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998), together with the view emphasising that perception is often more decisive than fact (Edelman, 1988), support this two-layered perception in the field.

This reading by participants does not arise in a vacuum. Scenarios in which Türkiye's nation-state structure might be loosened and evolve towards a "mini-Ottoman" order composed of multi-identity and partly autonomous units were discussed in detail years ago in certain externally produced works (Fuller, 2008, 2023; Fuller & Barkey, 2017). Likewise, texts proposing the redrawing of the region's borders along ethnic and sectarian lines (Peters, 2006), and older debates envisaging the region's division into small units along the axis of Israel's security (Yinon, 1982), are known to some extent in public opinion. Although most participants have not read these texts directly, they carry the intuition that the idea of an identity-based reconfiguration was "designed somewhere outside". The field perception is therefore nourished both by current discourses and by the historical background attributed to those discourses; participants read the present as a link in a long chain of intent that they themselves construct.

The second opinion is that Neo-Ottomanism is thought of together with the idea of a "mini Ottoman millet system". Fifty-six per cent of participants think that the consequences this model would produce are not fully grasped by those who govern the state, and that they are rather used through a desire for historical grandeur. A segment of 23 per cent argued that the rulers are aware of the risk but cannot show open resistance because of pressure, threat or constraining external relations. Twenty-one per cent remained undecided. As can be seen, two distinct explanations stand side by side in the field: one assumes that the actors have been swept up in an emotional discourse, the other that an external steering is at work. The most striking form of the second explanation is the suspicion of a "honey trap" and blackmail voiced spontaneously by 375 of those interviewed; that is, more than a third of the sample attempted an explanation along these lines without being asked. This number shows not the truth of the claim but how widespread the suspicion has become, and only the intensity of the perception is recorded here. The common point in both explanations is this: participants read Neo-Ottomanism not as an independent cultural discourse but as a language of transformation concerning the identity architecture of the state. The debate on hegemony, which holds that consent is produced through discourse (Gramsci, 1971; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), provides a theoretical ground for this reading. A noteworthy detail is the emphasis on "mini": the Ottoman past is associated here not with imperial breadth but with a multi-national structure and a sub-identity order, and therefore activates the fear of dissolution as much as the feeling of growth.

An observation that strengthens this second explanation is a contradiction frequently recounted in the interviews: the rapid change of direction by certain political circles that, for years, spoke of one another as arch-enemies, and their rapprochement with their former rivals. A significant proportion of participants attempted to explain this sudden rapprochement not through the event's own internal logic but through the assumption that a threat or blackmail was at work behind the scenes. Many other grounds of blackmail and pressure were also voiced during the interviews; but most of these were not made an object of evaluation in the study, owing to their sensitivities. Here too the stance is clear: these explanations were recorded not as a factual finding but as perception data showing how widespread the suspicion has become. Even so, the fact that so broad a segment shares a similar intuition is important in showing the extent of the erosion of trust that the discourse has produced in society.

The third heading is migration, citizenship and demographic change. Sixty-nine per cent of participants interpreted the Syrian, Afghan and other foreign population—said in unofficial expressions to exceed thirteen million—benefiting from state services, becoming permanent, and being granted citizenship to a number

exceeding several million, as a deliberate dilution of the nation-state structure. Fourteen per cent viewed this process positively within the framework of humanitarian or regional responsibility, while 17 per cent did not express an opinion. In the field, migration is discussed not merely as a matter of humanitarian aid or border security, but directly as a question of population composition and shared identity. Given the literature showing that the bond among population, border and citizenship determines the power of the state (Tilly, 1992; Mann, 1993), it is not surprising that migration is so rapidly linked to the nation-state debate. For participants the question is not “who came” but “with what shared identity will Türkiye continue on its path”; the matter is therefore not confined to legal status but merges with public resources, representation and the imagining of the future.

The fourth and, in the field, most tense heading is the “Terror-Free Türkiye” discourse. Seventy-three per cent of participants think that behind this discourse lies an intention to carry Türkiye towards a more flexible and multi-identity structure—more plainly, that the mixed-identity order established through civil war in Iraq and Syria is being sought, without war being unleashed, in NATO-member Türkiye. While 15 per cent regard the process as a sincere move for peace and security, 12 per cent did not express an opinion. The language of security here is now read not only through the struggle against terror but directly together with identity politics. Indeed, 91 per cent of participants found it mistaken for such a process to be conducted through the PKK and the DEM, seen as its political extension; 5 per cent found it correct, and 4 per cent did not express an opinion. By contrast, 83 per cent regarded as correct the conduct of a Turkish–Kurdish brotherhood project with persons having direct or indirect ties to the PKK left outside it; 11 per cent preferred that these persons too take part in the process, and 6 per cent remained reticent. This picture is important, because the objection in the field is directed not at Kurdish identity but at the possibility that structures with an armed past become legitimate interlocutors. Studies showing how fragile the relationship among recognition, representation and security is (Kymlicka, 1995; Taylor, 1994; Young, 1990) help to explain this distinction. A further dimension of the same heading is the reading of external interest: while 78 per cent of participants believe that the “Terror-Free Türkiye” project will serve Israel’s interest, 9 per cent found the project apt, and 13 per cent did not express an opinion. This is not a verified causality but an opinion circulating strongly in the field, and it is recorded here only at the level of perception.

Foremost among the external developments that nourish this reading are the statements of Tom Barrack, the U.S. Ambassador to Türkiye and Special Representative for Syria. In September 2025 Barrack defined the region through “tribes and villages” rather than modern nation-states (Al Arabiya English, 2025); in the same period he said there would be no new Sykes-Picot for Syria (Yetkin, 2025); and on 17 April 2026, at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum, he stated that only orders of strong leadership work in the region, describing this as “benevolent monarchies or a kind of monarchical republic”, argued that the post-Arab Spring experiments in democracy had fizzled out, and located Israel’s interest in alignment with the strong orders of the Gulf (Middle East Forum, 2026). His characterisation of Türkiye as “a democracy, but somewhat authoritarian” also generated controversy (Türkiye Today, 2025). This language, narrating the region through tribes, sects and local belongings rather than nation-states, produced in a segment of participants the question, “is a community-centred model being proposed in place of a nation-state-centred one?” A correction is necessary here: Barrack’s explicit words are not to the effect that democracy strengthens the nation-state but, on the contrary, that a strong central authority is taken as the basis; the inference that “democracy poses a threat to Israel” is not his direct statement but an interpretation produced from this discourse by certain segments in the field. Reading the region through sub-identities rather than modern state borders is in essence an old intellectual strain (Lewis, 1992). Studies arguing that the fragmentation of nation-states into tribes, sects and communities is a marked tendency of globalisation (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 2000; Appadurai, 1996), together with the regional security complex approach holding that security problems in a neighbouring geography cannot be considered in isolation from one another (Buzan & Wæver, 2003), explain why participants recall Iraq, Syria

and Yugoslavia as a warning sign for Türkiye.

The fifth heading is the perception of continuity in President Erdoğan's discourse. Participants read in sequence the co-chairmanship voiced in 2004–2005 in the context of the Greater/Broader Middle East and the centre/star role ascribed to Diyarbakır, the co-chairmanship expressions repeated in subsequent years, and the statements of 2025–2026 defining Turkish–Kurdish–Arab togetherness and “Terror-Free Türkiye” as a strategic state vision (Odatv, 2015; İletişim Başkanlığı, 2025; Anadolu Ajansı, 2026). Those who interpret this whole as “the nation-state being rebuilt on an identity basis” make up 75 per cent, those who do not share such a perception 18 per cent, and those who do not express an opinion 7 per cent. For participants the matter is not individual sentences but the line that the sentences have formed over the years; words uttered at separate times are bound, in their minds, into a single narrative. Approaches explaining that discourse constructs a frame through repetition and that this frame is normalised over time (Foucault, 1980; van Dijk, 2006) render this tendency to combine meaningful.

The perception of discursive continuity also has a religious dimension. In a portion of the interviews, it is thought that headings such as “moderate Islam” and the “Türkiye model” aim to file down the combative interpretation of Islam and to install a conception of religion that is compatible with the region and removed from conflict. Participants often see this as an extension of the nation-state debate; they regard the redefinition of identity and the softening of religious discourse as two faces of the same process. Externally produced assessments concerning Türkiye's repositioning as a model actor in the Muslim world (Fuller, 2008, 2012, 2023) constitute the intellectual background of this perception. Here too, what participants say is recorded not as fact but as a widespread pattern of interpretation.

There is also a tendency that stands opposed to all these anxieties and that should be regarded as one of the study's most striking findings. Ninety-two per cent of participants believe that between 90 and 100 per cent of the peoples living in Türkiye are historically of common descent; 3 per cent put this proportion in the 80–90 per cent range, and 5 per cent did not express a clear opinion. As grounds, they cite the marriages, kinship ties, intermingling and shared religious-cultural life of the Seljuk, Ottoman and Republican periods. Ethnic identity is not denied here; what is rejected is the conversion of ethnic identity into separate, state-constituting “millet” categories. The literature emphasising that national identity is constructed through shared history, shared memory and a sense of common destiny (Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1990; Smith, 1998) explains this stance. Official proposals of multiple identity are therefore read by a significant proportion of participants not as the recognition of social reality but as the political fragmentation of historical kinship; in the field, the language of multiple identity is thought of together with division rather than peace.

The conviction of common descent is part of a broader stance: the great majority of participants do not see the communities living in Türkiye as ethnic blocs detached from one another. Shared religious life, shared historical experience, kinship bonds and prolonged cultural interaction render sharp ethnic distinctions unrealistic. For this reason every attempt to politicise ethnic identities is read in the field not as the recognition of social reality but as the disruption of an existing integration. The literature emphasising that national identity is constructed not only through ethnic origin but through a sense of common destiny (Anderson, 2006; Smith, 1991) explains this stance. In short, in the field there is both a strong fear of division and a strong belief in integration; the two coexist at once.

The sixth heading is the preservation of the nation-state structure, and the clearest majority in the field emerges here. Eighty-six per cent of participants are in favour of preserving this structure, 8 per cent see no harm in the establishment of autonomous regions, and 6 per cent are reticent. For participants the nation-state is not an abstract constitutional concept; it means border, security, public order, common citizenship and resistance to external intervention. Studies arguing that when central authority weakens the risks of external intervention, proxy war and internal division increase (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979; Fukuyama, 2014), together with the frequent recollection of the cases of Iraq, Syria and Yugoslavia, show why this stance is so

strong. Interestingly, the field is split on supporting the establishment of a state by Kurdish communities outside Türkiye (in Iraq, for instance) and their admission to the Organization of Turkic States: 46 per cent support it, 50 per cent find it problematic, and 4 per cent are reticent. This division suggests that participants weigh identity claims beyond the border on a different scale from structural transformation within the border.

Behind this strong tendency towards preservation lies a concrete reading of history. A significant proportion of participants think that the decisive factor in the dissolution of the Ottoman state—just as in Yugoslavia—was the weakening of the structure that held together many different ethnic, religious and sectarian communities. They fear the carrying-over of the same fragility into today's Türkiye; the frequent references to Iraq, Syria and Libya also nourish this unease. Viewed in the light of studies drawing attention to the state's capacity to produce security and order (Tilly, 1992; Fukuyama, 2011), it is consistent to regard the weakening of the central structure as a risk that is not only administrative but also economic and security-based. For participants there is a direct bond between a strong state and social stability; highly fragmented models of governance, by contrast, are read as an invitation to instability.

In participants' eyes, the debates over globalisation do not render the nation-state superfluous; on the contrary, they make it more visible. In the face of migration waves, security problems and regional conflicts, a strong state structure is regarded as the most concrete guarantee against uncertainty. Studies arguing that, despite the process of globalisation, the state retains its importance (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 2000) accord with this view. Participants evaluate the nation-state not as a mould belonging to the past but as a structure that responds to today's needs; they frequently note that the states which succeed within the global system also rest on strong national institutions.

A significant proportion of participants do not think of the identity debate apart from material headings such as water and energy. The Euphrates and Tigris basins in particular come up frequently; it is said that the regional struggle is not only ethnic or ideological but also resource-centred. In the light of the study drawing attention to the economic and military resources of social power (Mann, 1986), it is consistent to consider every debate over state structure together with its economic and strategic dimension. Participants explain Türkiye's value not only by its geographical location but also by its advantage in water, energy and transport lines; they argue that the aim of controlling these resources may lie behind proposals for identity-based transformation. These assessments are mostly at the level of interpretation rather than proof; yet the very aim of the field study is to render these patterns of interpretation visible.

There is a marked suspicion in participants' view of external actors. The United States, Israel, European countries and international organisations come up frequently in the interviews; the transformation processes in the region are read not only through local dynamics but together with the calculations of great powers. Particularly where the GMEP is concerned, it is thought that other geopolitical aims may lie behind the language of reform, democracy and good governance. Realist approaches emphasising that relations of power and interest are decisive in international politics (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979), together with studies holding that institutions and cooperation also accompany these relations (Keohane, 1984), partly explain this suspicious reading. What is striking is that participants almost always construct their critique of external actors through the future of the nation-state; the criterion is the effect of the initiative on Türkiye's integrity.

A distinction that emerges strongly in the field is that between the visible meaning of concepts and their possible consequences. Participants accept that concepts such as brotherhood, unity, peace, reconciliation and common future sound positive; but they ask which structural transformations these concepts might be used to legitimise. Studies examining the effect of symbols and conceptual frames on public opinion (Lasswell, 1927; Edelman, 1988) support this cautious reading. Participants thus evaluate official statements not only through what is said but also through what is left unsaid, displaying a highly interpretive political awareness.

Another opinion circulating strongly in the field is that concepts and slogans become entrenched in public opinion not spontaneously but through repetition. Participants think that the constant reiteration of certain

concepts may, over time, change social acceptances; they frequently note that the discourse of Neo-Ottomanism is propagated through the media. The role of historical symbols and powerful images in the production of legitimacy, and the normalising effect of repetition, are among the older debates of the propaganda and perception-management literature (Ellul, 1973; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Jowett & O'Donnell, 2019; Lasswell, 1927). It is also striking that participants of different political views share similar anxieties about the effect of the media; classical observations on how crowds can be steered around shared images (Le Bon, 1895/2001) still find a counterpart today.

Participants read current developments not in isolation but within a long historical line. The late Ottoman period, the founding of the Republic, the Cold War years and the developments of the past two decades are often recalled together; the fragmentations in the Balkans and the case of Yugoslavia are placed alongside present-day anxieties. The collective-memory literature emphasising that past experiences shape present political attitudes (Anderson, 2006; Hobsbawm, 1990) explains this tendency. For participants, history is not a sequence of bygone events but a living frame that helps to understand the present and to anticipate the future; the experience of the dissolution of multi-national empires in particular is read as a lesson for Türkiye.

Another thought frequently voiced in the interviews is that state policies require not only a legal basis but also strong social consent. According to participants, policies that arouse suspicion in society may be applicable in the short term but struggle to produce stability in the long term. Studies emphasising that political legitimacy is nourished not only by institutional power but also by social consent (Gramsci, 1971; Cox, 1981) accord with this view. For this reason participants expect clearer and more explicit communication on matters concerning the future of the state, and tie the success of a policy to how the public interprets it.

The concept of multiple identity carries two distinct meanings in the field. Most participants accept the existence of different ethnic, cultural and sectarian identities as a natural reality; yet they keep their distance from making these differences the constitutive principle of the political system. That is, multiple identity means, on the one hand, cultural richness and, on the other, the possibility of political fragmentation, and participants concentrate on the second meaning. The multicultural literature discussing the tension between the recognition of identity and political integrity (Kymlicka, 1995; Parekh, 2000) helps to explain this dual reading. The expression frequently used in the field is to the effect that differences can be preserved but the shared roof identity must not be weakened.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of all these attitudes is that they at times transcend political polarisation. Although participants who support and those who criticise the government diverge on many issues, they display a similar sensitivity where the structural integrity of the state and border security are concerned. Most stated that leaders and governments are temporary while the state is permanent, and tied their assessments not to persons but to institutional outcomes. Approaches noting that national identity can, under certain conditions, perform a unifying function above divisions (Anderson, 2006; Smith, 1991), and those drawing attention to the historical continuity of the state (Tilly, 1992; Mann, 1986), render this shared reflex intelligible. For participants, matters such as identity and citizenship are thought to require treatment above everyday party politics, through a broad consensus.

When all these headings are brought together, the most encompassing finding that emerges is this: a significant proportion of participants see Neo-Ottomanism, the GMEP, migration, identity politics, “Terror-Free Türkiye” and regional developments not as separate events but as parts of the same narrative of transformation. There is no full agreement on the truth of the narrative; but there is a striking commonality on the existence of the narrative. The approach holding that social perception is most often organised not linearly but in the form of a network (Castells, 2010) explains this tendency to combine. The constructivist approach emphasising that identity is mutually constituted with foreign policy (Wendt, 1999) renders intelligible why participants link external developments directly to the future of the internal order. The picture in the field shows that the boundaries between inside and outside, present and past, identity and security are becoming

increasingly permeable in the eyes of society.

Taken as a whole, the field data present a picture consistent with the basic expectation set out in the study's introduction, literature and theoretical-framework sections. Neo-Ottomanism is perceived among particular segments of society less as a historical opening than as a political frame concerning the future of the nation-state; the language of growth and expansion and the anxiety over transformation exist at once. This supports, through a strong cluster of field opinion, the basic reading that a transformation is being legitimised through the discourse of growth. The table below shows together the distributions of perception described above; the discussion section that follows addresses the theoretical and political meaning of these patterns.

Table 1. *Distribution of salient perceptions in the field interviews (n = 1,000)*

Salient assessment in the interviews	Opinion in this direction (%)	Opposing/other view (%)	No opinion (%)
The Neo-Ottomanism discourse is a tool of legitimisation and perception management in the transition to a multi-identity structure	70	13	17
The consequences of this model are not fully grasped by those governing the state; they are being used through a desire for historical grandeur	56	23	21
Migration and expanding citizenship are part of a deliberate dilution of the nation-state structure	69	14	17
Behind the “Terror-Free Türkiye” discourse lies an intention to move towards a multi-identity/flexible structure	73	15	12
Erdoğan’s discourses from 2004 to the present feed the impression that the nation-state is being reconstituted on an identity basis	75	18	7
90–100% of the peoples living in Türkiye are historically of common descent	92	3*	5
The “Terror-Free Türkiye” project will serve Israel’s interests	78	9	13
The statehood of Kurdish communities outside Türkiye and their admission to the Organization of Turkic States should be supported	46	50	4
The Kurdish–Turkish brotherhood project should be conducted with those linked to the PKK left outside	83	11	6
Conducting the “Terror-Free Türkiye” process through the PKK and DEM is mistaken	91	5	4
Türkiye’s nation-state structure should be	86	8	6

*NEO-OTTOMANISM AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF THE TURKISH NATION-STATE IN THE
CONTEXT OF THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST PROJECT*

Salient assessment in the interviews	Opinion in this direction (%)	Opposing/other view (%)	No opinion (%)
preserved			

Note. The proportions reflect the frequency with which an assessment of the same tenor was repeated in the unstructured interviews; they claim no statistical representativeness. The middle column shows, varying by row, either the opposing view or a more positive/different interpretation. () In this row the middle column denotes the segment placing the proportion of common descent in the 80–90 per cent range. In addition, 375 of those interviewed voiced, without being asked, an explanation along the lines of a “honey trap/blackmail”; this is recorded as perception data, not fact.*

6. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that Neo-Ottomanism is not a univocal concept in Türkiye; on the contrary, two opposed worlds of meaning are produced around the same words. For the political actors who construct the discourse, this language carries the promise of historical depth, regional opening, renewed contact with the Ottoman geography and growth. A significant proportion of the opinions voiced in the field interviews, however, read the same language not through growth but through dissolution; they reflect the anxiety that the Turkish nation-state is being accustomed, away from the axis of singular citizenship and shared national identity, towards a multi-identity, loosely structured model. This dual reading is closely related to the view that, in modern politics, the nation is a political community constituted not only by borders and law but by shared imagination, shared memory and a sense of common belonging (Anderson, 2006; Smith, 1991). For when a discourse gives the impression of eroding shared belonging rather than strengthening it, even the most powerful state institutions may lose trust in the eyes of society. The real issue to be addressed here is therefore not the official definition of Neo-Ottomanism but the conception of the state of which the public takes this discourse to be the sign.

Why discourse analysis is necessary at this point is also clearly seen. Political discourse does not merely convey information; it also constructs an order of meaning that determines what will be counted as a threat and what as an opportunity, and to which future consent will be given (Fairclough, 1995, 2003; Foucault, 1972; van Dijk, 1998). For this reason the same expression may mean expansion and leadership for the one who produces it, while meaning identity erosion and fragmentation for the segments of society who hear it. The findings show that in Türkiye this divergence of meaning is not exceptional but structural. Neo-Ottomanism, migration, the Kurdish question, the discourse of Turkish–Kurdish–Arab togetherness and the “Terror-Free Türkiye” debate operate in participants’ minds not as separate individual headings but as mutually complementary parts of the same grand narrative of transformation. Whether that narrative can be objectively verified is a separate question; but its being voiced so consistently, and with connections drawn among different topics, is in itself a political-sociological fact. In other words, the real strength of the findings lies not in proving a particular conspiracy but in rendering visible a shared mode of reading entrenched in a broad segment of society.

The findings also show that the Greater Middle East Project remains a living field of political memory in Türkiye. A significant proportion of participants evaluated this project not merely as an American foreign-policy initiative of the 2000s but as a broader framework for the reordering of the Middle East through borders, regimes, identities and state structures. In official texts the project has been presented in the language of democracy, reform, good governance, women’s participation in public life, education and economic liberalisation (G8, 2004a, 2004b; United Nations Development Programme, 2002, 2003). The critical literature, by contrast, has read the same project through energy routes, the regional security of Israel, regime transformation and the internal fault lines of states (Kaynak & Gürses, 2014; Makdişi, 2024; Çeçen, 2018).

The debate therefore proceeds through the tension between the visible language of reform and the geopolitical calculation attributed to the background. The field data show precisely the social counterpart of this tension: participants interpret Neo-Ottomanism not as a promise of growth but as part of a broad perception management aimed at transforming the internal structure. Independently of whether this interpretation is right or wrong, its being voiced so widely shows that political legitimacy depends not only on the intention of decision-makers but also on how society reads that intention.

The cases of Iraq and Syria stand out as the strongest support for this mode of reading. In both countries, the weakening of state authority and the subsequent transformation of sectarian and ethnic identities into political and military structures are read by participants as cautionary examples for Türkiye (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.; Reuters, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c). According to this perception, identity-based division begins first as a crisis of political representation and security, then deepens through debates over external intervention and de facto fragmentation. What is striking is that Türkiye's NATO membership does not dispel this anxiety. On the contrary, a segment of participants think that a similar transformation might be carried out in Türkiye not through open war but through more covert and less reaction-provoking instruments such as discourse, migration, constitutional regulation, local-government reform and the steering of public opinion. This point accords with the established view that regional crises transform the security perceptions of neighbouring countries (Waltz, 1979; Keohane, 1984). In the Turkish case this effect ceases to be a merely external observation and turns into a future scenario concerning the internal political order. External developments and internal identity debates thus merge, in the mind of society, within a single map of threat.

The second main axis of the discussion is the tension between a multi-identity political order and the nation-state. While the modern nation-state is built upon common citizenship, common law and shared political belonging, multi-identity models advocate the more visible recognition of the cultural, ethnic or religious identities of different communities. These two approaches need not always be mutually exclusive. The liberal pluralist literature argues that cultural recognition can be reconciled with democratic citizenship and may even strengthen it (Kymlicka, 1995; Taylor, 1994; Parekh, 2000). The nation-statist literature, by contrast, warns that the political institutionalisation of identities may weaken the bond of shared belonging and divide society into blocs (Fukuyama, 2014; Tilly, 1992; Mann, 1993). In a country such as Türkiye, which carries an imperial inheritance, has fragile border regions and has witnessed ethnic-sectarian conflicts in its surroundings, this distinction becomes even more delicate. The findings show that in the field this tension is experienced not as a theoretical debate but as a concrete security intuition. The fact that a very large proportion of participants take a stance in favour of preserving the nation-state structure is bound up not with a rejection of cultural differences but with the possibility of those differences being transformed into separate, state-constituting millet categories. The real issue is the question of where recognition strengthens equal citizenship and where it deepens political division; and the field data show that society draws this boundary quite sharply.

Within this framework the approach of Fuller and Barkey to the Kurdish question carries particular importance. That work treats the matter not merely as a security or terror problem but as one of identity recognition, political representation, local government and state structure (Fuller & Barkey, 2017). This reading departs from the classical centralist view of the state and broadens the debate over a solution towards the headings of cultural rights and constitutional transformation. Methodological caution is required here: to present such texts directly as a plan document being implemented would be an unprovable imputation of intent. The more accurate approach is to read Fuller's analyses, which position Türkiye as a key actor and regional centre in the Muslim world (Fuller, 2008, 2023), as a strategic-academic field of discourse showing how Türkiye's identity and state structure are conceptualised from the outside. The real fact the findings reveal is how this external analysis is perceived internally. A framework that, from the outside, looks like an interpretation strengthening Türkiye's historical role can, internally, be bound by a segment of society to the fear of an erosion of nation-state identity. This disconnect between the intention of the discourse and its social

counterpart is one of the study's central observations.

One of the most striking aspects of the findings is that the analogy of the Ottoman millet system produces strong suspicion in society. Historically, the millet system rested on a logic different from the modern conception of equal citizenship, providing for the governance of different religious communities with certain autonomies under imperial conditions. For this reason, references to the Ottoman heritage may be read in the field not as an innocent recollection of history but together with the possibility of the identity basis of the state being redrawn. That a significant proportion of participants associate the “mini-Ottoman” analogy with the possibility of Türkiye being redefined through Turkish, Kurdish, Arab and other identities demonstrates this. What is decisive here is the level at which the heritage is used: it is one thing for the Ottoman past to be used as an element of soft power in foreign policy, and quite another for the same heritage to be perceived as a model for the domestic political-identity order. When this distinction is lost, Ottoman nostalgia activates not only a feeling of grandeur but also the memory of the dissolution of the multi-national structure. Thus, rather than constructing a powerful language of common future, the discourse of Neo-Ottomanism may feed the anxiety of dissolution in some segments. The ambivalence at the centre of the discussion is knotted precisely here: the same symbol is, for one segment, historical self-confidence and, for another, the harbinger of state dissolution.

The “Terror-Free Türkiye” discourse, too, reflects this dual reading markedly. The end of terror and citizens' living in security are a legitimate and powerful expectation on the part of almost the whole of society. Yet the findings reveal a deep-seated distrust concerning the method of the discourse. While the great majority of participants find it mistaken for such a process to be conducted with the PKK or structures seen as its political extension, an overwhelming portion of the same participants find the idea of a Turkish–Kurdish brotherhood correct when actors with an armed past are left outside it. This distribution shows that the reaction in the field is not a rejection of Kurdish identity but is directed at the language of brotherhood being constructed through actors associated with the terrorist organisation. How fragile the relationship among recognition, representation and security is in identity-based conflicts has long been discussed in the literature (Kymlicka, 1995; Taylor, 1994). In the Turkish case this fragility is directly related to the security trauma. At the social level the possibility of partnership between Turks and Kurds persists; but this possibility is blocked at the question of who the legitimate interlocutor will be. The social acceptance of the “Terror-Free Türkiye” discourse therefore appears to depend less on its content than on the actors with whom and the constitutional framework within which it is conducted.

One of the most sensitive headings the study opens for discussion is the effect of external actors' discourse about Türkiye on internal perception. Here the statements of Tom Barrack, the U.S. Ambassador to Ankara and Special Representative for Syria, come to the fore. Barrack's expressions reading the region through tribes, villages and religious and sectarian belongings rather than modern nation-states drew wide reaction in Türkiye, because they conflict with a view centred on the unitary state and national sovereignty (Al Arabiya English, 2025; Middle East Eye, 2025). At the Antalya Diplomacy Forum in April 2026, Barrack stated that the only form of governance that works in the Middle East is regimes resting on strong leadership—that is, benevolent monarchies or monarchical republics—while countries that adopt the garb of democracy fail, and said that the healthiest path for Israel is to align its interests with the strong civilisations of the Gulf (Middle East Forum, 2026; Responsible Statecraft, 2026). These statements were read at two levels in Turkish public opinion. At the first level, it was interpreted that a community-centred regional order was being implied in place of a nation-state-centred one. At the second level, the conclusion was drawn that not democratic institutions but strong and central leaderships were deemed compatible with Israel's security. The boundary to be preserved academically here is clear: there is no verified statement showing that Barrack directly advocates the partition or federalisation of Türkiye. For this reason the text must distinguish direct statements from the interpretations derived from them. Yet political perception is shaped not only by direct statements but also by how discourses

are interpreted in public opinion; and the findings show that this interpretation is quite widespread in Türkiye.

The same sensitivity applies to the narratives of blackmail, threat and the honey trap voiced spontaneously in the field. Such expressions can be treated in an academic text not as firm judgements but only as forms of perception showing the depth of the crisis of social trust. That a segment of participants explain certain changes of political stance through invisible mechanisms of pressure shows, more than a concrete accusation of crime, that trust in political actors has eroded. The wide resonance of global scandals such as the Epstein files has made such suspicions circulate more easily worldwide. The point to be heeded here is to avoid evidence-free accusation against any person or institution; the correct approach is to evaluate these narratives not as proven events but as indicators of social distrust. When this distinction is not preserved, the study easily turns into a speculative text. By contrast, to disregard these perceptions entirely is also unrealistic; for political society thinks not only through official documents but also through rumours, fears and symbolic examples. The question of how information is selected, presented and steered in modern societies has long been debated through the concepts of the manufacture of consent and political spectacle (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Edelman, 1988). Within this framework the findings show that, in Türkiye, certain segments no longer explain political decisions solely through ideology or party interest but also take into account the possibility of invisible pressure. While the truth of this thought is a separate matter, its prevalence in itself signals that trust has been damaged.

The phenomenon of migration stands out as another critical component of the perception of the nation-state. The findings show that a significant proportion of participants associate the mass migration movements of recent years not merely with a humanitarian or security-based matter but with long-term changes in Türkiye's demographic and political structure. Even when the rightness or wrongness of this approach is set aside, the prevalence of the perception is striking. Modern nation-states survive not only through law and institutions but through shared belonging and the imagining of a common future; the relationship among population, border and citizenship is decisive for state capacity (Tilly, 1992; Mann, 1993). How the sense of belonging is affected in periods of intensified migration has settled at the centre of politics in many countries; similar anxieties also lie behind the rising anti-migration movements in Europe (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 2000; Appadurai, 1996; Castells, 2010). In the Turkish case this anxiety acquires a more complex appearance by merging with the debates on Neo-Ottomanism and a multi-identity society. What is striking in the findings is that the reaction in the field rests less on outright anti-migrant sentiment than on a distrust of the state's capacity for demographic planning and transparency. This shows that the problem is less the question of who came than the question of with what shared identity Türkiye will continue. For this reason migration is treated in the study not as a secondary variable but as a central political indicator linked to the future of the nation-state.

The findings also reveal that the assumption of a necessary conflict between national identity and ethnic identity does not find acceptance among broad segments of society in Türkiye. The great majority of participants stated that the communities living in Türkiye have intensely intermingled over the historical process and have formed a shared historical past. This approach does not mean a rejection of ethnic differences; while acknowledging the existence of different origins, it holds that these do not abolish shared belonging. This stance requires reading together the approach that explains the nation as people who have never met imagining themselves as part of the same political community, and the approach that emphasises that national identity is nourished by a historical-ethnic core, shared myth and continuity (Anderson, 2006; Smith, 1998). For the nation is neither a purely biological bond nor a wholly fictive structure; shared memory, shared experience and shared symbols constitute it together. The important conclusion the field data show is that the concepts of nation-state and brotherhood, so often set against one another in public opinion, are not in fact seen as rivals. A significant proportion of participants think that brotherhood can be sustained only upon a strong ground of common citizenship. Thus the problem placed at the centre of the debate is not the existence of ethnic differences but how those differences are to be represented at the political level.

Another important pattern the findings reveal is that changes at the level of discourse are evaluated by society within a historical continuity. A significant proportion of participants construct a line between the co-chairmanship statements in the context of the Broader Middle East in the mid-2000s and the role of Diyarbakır as a regional centre, on the one hand, and the discourses of Turkish–Kurdish–Arab togetherness and “Terror-Free Türkiye” prominent in recent years, on the other. How far this connection is objectively valid is a separate research subject; but what is decisive here is that certain segments of society read these two periods as parts of the same historical line. Political memory often works differently from academic chronology; people produce meaning by linking particular events, speeches and symbols. That discourses can acquire new meanings over time has been shown by approaches examining the relationship between knowledge and power (Foucault, 1972, 1980). For this reason a statement made in the past may, when reinterpreted in the light of current developments, produce different results. The findings show that participants evaluate political discourses not individually but by linking them together over a long span of time. This increases the historical weight of the concepts political leaders use; it turns concepts such as Neo-Ottomanism, brotherhood, regional leadership and de-terrorisation into clusters of meaning that, in different periods, nourish one another.

The nation-state stands out as a political framework that still produces a high level of legitimacy in Türkiye. The modernisation and globalisation literature contains many views to the effect that the nation-state has weakened (Appadurai, 1996; Castells, 2010). By contrast, recent developments show that the nation-state has not disappeared but, on the contrary, regains strength in periods of security crisis and geopolitical uncertainty. Irregular migration movements, regional conflicts and energy-security anxieties support this tendency. The field findings in Türkiye reflect a similar picture: for participants the nation-state is not merely a model inherited from the past but a contemporary mechanism providing security, sovereignty and social integrity. The view that people turn to a stronger search for belonging in periods of heightened uncertainty helps to explain this tendency (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 2000). For this reason multi-identity or decentralised models are perceived, among certain segments of society, not as a democratic opening but as a security risk. This perception is itself open to criticism, for the recognition of differences does not always mean the weakening of the state. Yet what the findings show is that a significant proportion of society has difficulty distinguishing these two processes. Although it is clear that the relationship between globalisation and the nation-state is not zero-sum, it is equally clear that in the field there is a serious perception of tension between these two concepts.

In connection with the study’s theoretical framework, the findings also contribute to the debates on hegemony and the manufacture of consent. The view that political power is sustained not only through coercion but also through the production of social consent is a fertile ground for understanding the perception in the field (Gramsci, 1971; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Cox, 1981). A significant proportion of participants think that, while emphasis is placed at the level of discourse on growth, strengthening and historical heritage, different political aims lie in the background. This assessment reflects participants’ perception; but the perception itself is politically decisive, because hegemony is a process constructed not only by the rulers but also a relation bound up with how the ruled read that process. When a significant proportion of society begin not to find certain discourses persuasive, the manufacture of consent becomes difficult. The findings show precisely this: a marked portion of participants state that there is a distance between official statements and the processes they think are actually taking place. This is an important conclusion for political communication, because crises of legitimacy often appear, before economic problems, as crises of discourse. When people do not believe what the rulers say, even the most powerful projects may meet social resistance. For this reason the debates over identity, migration and brotherhood in Türkiye must be analysed not only through their content but also through the level of trust society feels towards that content.

Another dimension the findings show is the intertwining of geopolitical resource rivalry with identity debates. A segment of participants think that the power struggles in the Middle East are not waged through

energy alone; that the Euphrates and Tigris basins and the water reserves Türkiye possesses are among the most critical fields of rivalry of the future. That the control of natural resources is associated with the long-term strategies of states has frequently been emphasised in the security and international-relations literature (Çeçen, 2018; Keohane, 1984; Mearsheimer, 2001). What is striking in the field findings is that this matter is linked directly to the nation-state debate: a segment of participants think that possible changes in Türkiye's demographic and political structure may, in the long run, affect the control of strategic resources as well. Although these assessments reflect participants' subjective interpretations, it is known that material resources play an important role in the formation of political perceptions. Identity, security and geopolitical resources thus merge within the same perceptual frame; every debate over the nation-state structure is evaluated together with its economic and strategic dimensions. This explains why the study treats the Neo-Ottomanism debate not merely as a cultural or ideological matter but within a broader strategic frame.

The relationship between security and identity is constructed extremely strongly in the findings. While the traditional conception of security focuses on protecting the state against external threats, contemporary security studies count identity, culture, belonging and social integrity as part of security as well (Waltz, 1979; Wendt, 1999; Tilly, 1992). How a society defines itself, around which symbols it unites, and what shared imagining it constructs of the future directly affect the perception of security. The findings show that participants define national identity not only as cultural belonging but also as a mechanism of security. Within this framework demographic change, the discourse of external actors, constitutional debates and identity politics are evaluated not independently of military threats but under the heading of security. An issue becomes a security matter only when it is constructed as an existential threat by political actors and society; security is therefore produced not only from objective conditions but also from discourse. The findings show that in Türkiye every development that might affect national integrity is read as a potential security matter. The practical consequence of this is clear: security policies cannot be conceived as confined to military and policing measures. Social trust, too, is an inseparable part of national security; in environments of weakened trust, suspicion, rumour and polarisation spread more rapidly.

The concept of legitimacy itself is also redefined in the light of the findings. In traditional political-science approaches, legitimacy is evaluated through elections, the constitutional order and legal processes. The field data, however, reveal that among certain segments of society legitimacy is not explained solely through legal procedures. For participants, what is legitimate is at the same time the policy seen as compatible with national interests and social integrity. Even when a policy is legally legitimate, social support may weaken if it is thought to harm national integrity. This approach points to a more cultural and identity-based conception of legitimacy that goes beyond purely procedural legitimacy. That debates around identity, migration and brotherhood often move from a legal to a legitimacy ground demonstrates this in particular. The findings reveal that among certain segments of society there is a marked difference between what is legally possible and what is socially accepted. This difference is of critical importance for decision-makers, because policies lacking social acceptance may, in the long run, meet resistance even when their legal grounds are strong. The findings therefore show that the nation-state debate in Türkiye is at the same time a debate over legitimacy, and that future political projects should be evaluated not only in their legal but also in their social-legitimacy dimension.

Historical memory stands out as an axis that cuts across almost every dimension of the findings. A significant proportion of participants draw an analogy between the dissolution process of the late Ottoman period, the divisions in the Balkans and the experiences of imperial break-up, on the one hand, and present-day developments, on the other. How far these analogies are historically valid is debatable; but in terms of social memory they are extremely effective. It is known that national identities are shaped not only by historical facts but by historical narratives (Hobsbawm, 1990; Smith, 1998). The findings show that positive feelings towards the Ottoman past and anxiety over the idea that the same heritage might be reapplied today can coexist. This, at first sight contradictory, situation in fact stems from the multi-layered nature of social memory:

participants on the one hand regard the Ottoman heritage as a historical and cultural value, and on the other recall the risks the same experience produced for state integrity. The view that crowds interpret political events within emotional and symbolic frames rather than rational calculations also supports this effect of memory (Le Bon, 2001). For this reason historical references, even when used with the aim of producing social unity, may trigger unexpected anxieties; and the defence of the nation-state is produced largely through this historical memory.

The polysemic nature of political symbols is also clearly seen in the findings. Modern politics operates not only through programmes and institutions but also through symbols, historical narratives and collective memory (Edelman, 1988). Concepts such as the Ottomans, the millet system, brotherhood, the ummah, regional leadership and historical heritage are perceived by society as powerful symbols; but the meaning of these symbols is not the same for all segments. The same concept may be, for one segment, an indicator of historical power and self-confidence, and for another a sign of the risk of eroding the nation-state structure. The effect of political symbols therefore depends not only on the intention of the actors who use them but also on society's historical experience and collective memory. That a symbol can produce both hope and anxiety at once explains why the discourse of Neo-Ottomanism is so intensely debated. This also shows that the boundary between external and internal politics is becoming increasingly permeable at the level of social perception. Participants read the discourse of regional opening and the language used in external relations together with the identity debates conducted internally (Waltz, 1979; Wendt, 1999). Foreign-policy headings thus often become an extension of the nation-state debate; a strong bond is constructed between Türkiye's regional role and the future of national identity.

The case of Yugoslavia, which comes up frequently in the field data, deserves separate treatment for showing the power of historical analogy over political perception. Participants use the relatively rapid dissolution of a multi-religious and multi-ethnic state as proof, as it were, of their anxieties about a multi-identity political model. Academically, the limits of such analogies are clear; not every multi-identity society dissolves, and not every union breaks apart through the same dynamics. Given that national identities are nourished not only by historical facts but also by historical narratives, it is evident that Yugoslavia functions in the field not as a datum but as a warning symbol (Hobsbawm, 1990; Anderson, 2006). Yet the looseness of this analogy does not diminish its political effect. For societies most often make their decisions about the future not through meticulous comparisons but through examples that have left a strong mark on their memory. Analyses holding that the weakening of state capacity produces not only a security problem but also a problem of legitimacy and belonging explain why this warning symbol is so effective (Mann, 1986, 1993; Tilly, 1992). The research therefore renders the social function of the analogy visible, rather than debating its validity.

That the debate over the multi-identity model is read in the field almost always through Iraq, Syria and Lebanon calls for a comparative note. Federalism or multi-layered governance has, in various regions of the world, also proved compatible with stable democracies; yet participants' pool of reference is not stable federal examples but examples of conflictual fragmentation. This selectivity is not accidental; geographical proximity, cross-border kinship and current security experience determine which example comes to mind. While the liberal pluralist literature argues that cultural recognition and asymmetric arrangements can strengthen democratic integration (Kymlicka, 1995; Taylor, 1994; Parekh, 2000), the nation-statist approach draws attention to the risk that the institutionalisation of ethnic representation erodes the bond of common citizenship (Fukuyama, 2014; Tilly, 1992). The social tendency the findings show is closer to the second approach; but the reason for this is not an abstract theoretical preference but a concrete regional experience. Participants oppose not the recognition of identities but the transformation of identities into separate, state-constituting units. This distinction shows that the identity debate in Türkiye proceeds on a ground different from the Western European examples; the boundary between recognition and fragmentation is drawn in the field through the experience of security.

The strong conviction that the peoples living in Türkiye are largely of common descent and intermingled directly concerns the debate among the different wings of nationalism theory. The modernist approach sees the nation as a structure produced by industrial society and the modern state (Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1990); the ethno-symbolist approach, by contrast, which emphasises that national identity is nourished by historical memory, shared myth and cultural continuity, argues that this structure is not wholly artificial (Smith, 1991, 1998). The emphasis on common descent in the field data falls at the intersection of these two wings: participants on the one hand acknowledge the existence of different origins and on the other regard these origins as melted into a common historical destiny. This reading is not a rejection of ethnic categories but an objection to their being formalised as separate political nations. When Anderson's concept of the imagined political community is considered together with Smith's emphasis on a historical-ethnic core, the stance in the field becomes coherent: shared belonging is experienced as a bond that is both constructed and historically grounded. For this reason official proposals of a multi-identity model are perceived not as the recognition of social reality but as the political division of an existing historical fusion.

That external actors' discourse is so quickly linked, in Türkiye, to nation-state anxiety is also related to an older intellectual background concerning the redrawing of regional borders. Assessments drawing attention to the historical fragility of the existing state structures in the Middle East, and debates foreseeing that the region might be reordered along ethnic and sectarian lines, have left strong marks on public opinion (Lewis, 1992; Peters, 2006). It is methodologically problematic to count these texts as official state policy; but public perception often does not observe this distinction. Debates over borders and maps generate strong reactions because they concern not only geographical lines but the future of states. An external actor's narrating the region through sub-identities rather than states, when merged with this intellectual background, may be read in the field as a direct intention of fragmentation. The task of an academic text here is to prevent the confusion of statement with interpretation: to read the region through social belongings is not the same as advocating the partition of a country. Yet the findings show that these two levels are easily linked in social perception, and that the capacity of external discourses to trigger internal anxieties is high.

In evaluating the study's findings, the methodological limits must also be stated clearly. The data rest on notes taken during unstructured interviews; while this approach allows participants to voice their own frames of meaning freely, it carries no claim of representation based on probability sampling. The proportions voiced should be read not as firm quantitative measurements but as qualitative signs showing the density of a particular field of social perception. Likewise, participants' opinions have been treated not as verified facts but as forms of meaning-making that emerge in the face of political developments. For this reason the findings cannot be generalised to the whole of Turkish society; they rather reflect perceptual patterns prominent in a particular period and a particular setting of interaction. The reliability of the study has been sought to be strengthened by evaluating the field data together with the literature and with the statements of political actors. Stating these limits clearly enables the conclusions to be interpreted without exaggeration but also without trivialisation. For the truth of a perception and its political effect are different things; even when an opinion is factually false, once it becomes widespread it may affect political behaviour and the state-society relationship. The contribution of the research lies precisely in rendering this effect visible.

When all these dimensions are evaluated together, the most comprehensive conclusion the findings reveal is that social perception operates not in a fragmented but in an integrated manner. A significant proportion of participants do not see Neo-Ottomanism, the Greater Middle East Project, migration, identity politics, the "Terror-Free Türkiye" discourse and regional developments as independent headings; they interpret them as different parts of a single grand narrative of transformation. Within this perceptual frame Neo-Ottomanism is associated with the promise of expansion and growth, migration with demographic transformation, identity politics with constitutional transformation, and regional developments with security risks. The view that social perceptions are most often organised not linearly but in the form of a network helps to explain this finding

(Castells, 2010). Another striking point is that, where the fundamental matters of the state are concerned, political polarisation recedes into the background: participants of different political views carry similar sensitivities on such headings as national unity, the continuity of the state and social stability. This shows that national identity can, under certain conditions, perform a unifying function above political divisions (Smith, 1991; Anderson, 2006). The field data therefore reveal that society contains not only tendencies towards division but also strong dynamics of integration.

Finally, the point to be emphasised in this section is that the study is oriented towards understanding rather than verification. It is not claimed that all the assessments voiced in the field interviews represent objective reality. The aim is to reveal which perceptions are formed among particular segments of society, by which discourses these perceptions are nourished, and how they are made sense of. This methodological limit is important, because the confusion of the levels of claim, perception, interpretation and fact easily turns an academic text into polemic. The basic fact the findings show is that a significant proportion of society read political developments in an integrated manner—not only through current events but through historical memory, geopolitical anxieties, regional wars and identity debates. The same event can be interpreted entirely differently by different segments of society; in democratic societies this diversity should be regarded as natural. Yet for political stability to be preserved, it is also necessary that different segments be able to meet on a shared ground of reality, and the findings indicate that this shared ground has narrowed in some areas. The most critical conclusion to be drawn from this is that perception, independently of its truth, affects political behaviour. When a project is coded in the eyes of society as a threat, its official explanation alone does not persuade; legitimacy comes to depend less on intention than on how the intention is read.

When the discussion is considered as a whole, it is seen that the study's analytical axis is shaped around the relationship among the state, identity and legitimacy. The discourse of Neo-Ottomanism, the debates over the Greater Middle East Project, migration movements, proposals for a multi-identity political structure, security anxieties and the defence of the nation-state are not independent headings; they are evaluated, among certain segments of society, as parts of a single whole. These findings contribute to the literature at three levels. First, they bring together within a common analytical framework the fields of foreign policy, security and discourse-perception that are often treated separately. Second, through unstructured field interviews, they show that the perception of the nation-state formed in public opinion is not merely an elite debate but lives strongly among broad segments of society as well. Third, they reveal that debates over the future of the nation-state are conducted not only at the constitutional and institutional level but also at the perceptual, symbolic and emotional level. Within this framework the study shows that political legitimacy in Türkiye is shaped increasingly through perceptions of trust, belonging and a common future. It is therefore understood that debates conducted along the axis of state, identity and security will retain their importance in the coming period, and that these debates must be evaluated not only at the institutional level but also at the level of social memory and political perception.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study was conducted to reveal, within the regional framework drawn by the Greater Middle East Project, with which meanings the discourse of Neo-Ottomanism is received in Türkiye and how those meanings intertwine with anxieties about the future of the nation-state. The data compiled from the unstructured interviews converge on a single point: for a broad segment of the public, Neo-Ottomanism is not the language of an innocent longing for the past. Approximately 70 per cent of the one thousand people interviewed read this discourse as an instrument that legitimises the pulling of the Turkish nation-state towards a multi-identity political order. This proportion alone shows that the matter has ceased to be an ordinary foreign-policy debate and has turned into an identity debate touching the founding logic of the state. The silence of the roughly 17 per cent who refrained from expressing an opinion may be read in the same direction; for people most often prefer silence when they regard a subject as high-risk. The study's original contribution

at this point is that it does not leave the Neo-Ottomanism debate at the level of foreign policy or historical nostalgia but analyses it within the triangle of discourse, perception and legitimacy, together with the possibility of a redefinition of the nation-state model. Within this framework, the first and most fundamental conclusion reached is that Neo-Ottomanism has ceased to be an academic concept or a diplomatic slogan and has become a laden political sign that evokes, all at once, the anxieties of migration, citizenship, the constitution, local government and external intervention.

The picture the data draw points to a three-layered mechanism and also forms the core of the explanatory model the study proposes. At the first layer there is a discourse of growth and expansion presented to the public: the idea that Türkiye will grow by opening towards the supposed former Ottoman geography and peoples. At the second layer there is the real objective this discourse is thought to screen: the transformation of a state structure based on singular national identity into a looser order composed of different identities. At the third layer there is the perception management that binds these two together—that is, the rendering-acceptable of transformation through the feeling of growth. A significant proportion of participants interpret events precisely by considering these three layers together. For them, the discourse in the shop window and the objective in the background are not the same thing; the distance between the two also determines, in the public eye, the persuasiveness of the discourse. Given that politics consists not only of what is done but of how it is narrated and how it is understood by the public, this three-layered reading also explains why the study places discourse analysis at the centre.

The most visible result of the model is that the same discourse produces two distinct feelings at once. On the one hand there is the promise of historical grandeur, regional influence and renewed contact with the old geography; on the other there is the fear that the state structure based on singular citizenship may loosen. The modern nation is already a political unity born not only of borders and institutions but of a shared imagining of the past, shared memory and the will to live together (Anderson, 2006; Gellner, 1983; Smith, 1991). When this shared ground is shaken, even the strongest institutions lose trust in the eyes of the public. The objection participants direct at the Ottoman past is aimed not at its being remembered but at which state model that past makes possible in today's political language. That the same symbol means, for one segment, historical self-confidence and, for another, the memory of dissolution, clearly shows that political discourse is not univocal and acquires a life independent of the intention of the actor who constructs it.

The place where this ambivalence is most concentrated is the analogy of the “mini Ottoman millet system”. In the Ottoman order the millet system was a historical model that provided for the governance of different religious communities with certain autonomies under imperial conditions; the modern nation-state, by contrast, rests on a different political logic based on the principle of equal citizenship. It is precisely for this reason that references to the Ottoman millet system are associated by a significant proportion of participants not with an innocent recollection of history but with the possibility of Türkiye being redefined through Turkish, Kurdish, Arab and other identities. The picture that takes shape in the public mind is clear: a structure composed of many nations had prepared a ground for dissolution upon the Ottoman state's loss of power—just as was later seen in Yugoslavia; and it is thought that the same mould is now being fitted onto Türkiye. In participants' eyes, the promise of becoming a great state embracing the Ottoman geography and peoples is an instrument of allure used to make a multi-identity substructure acceptable. This reading also overlaps with broader debates on the erosion of nation-states in the advanced phase of globalisation into tribes, sects and ethnic groups (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 2000; Castells, 2010). Approaches holding that inter-civilisational fault lines will determine the political order also constitute the theoretical background that feeds this anxiety (Huntington, 1996). The Ottoman heritage therefore carries one meaning when used as a soft-power element from the outside, and quite another when perceived as a model for the domestic political-identity order; in the second case it activates the fear of dissolution as much as the feeling of growth.

One of the study's most distinctive findings is that the anxiety in the field does not stem from a hostility

among peoples. Approximately 92 per cent of participants think that the communities living in Türkiye are largely of common historical descent, having intermingled through the marriages and shared life of the Seljuk, Ottoman and Republican periods. This high proportion shows that the public spontaneously draws a distinction between social brotherhood and political fragmentation. What people object to is not the coexistence of different origins but the possibility of those differences being transformed into separate, state-constituting “millet” categories. The tension long signalled by the literature on multiculturalism and recognition lies precisely here: on the one hand the recognition of identities and the protection of their rights, on the other the risk of weakening shared political belonging (Kymlicka, 1995; Parekh, 2000; Taylor, 1994; Young, 1990). In the Turkish case this tension is all the more laden; for the fact that, right next door, multi-identity structures such as Iraq and Syria are recalled together with war and de facto partition has left a strong warning sign in social memory. Approaches emphasising that national identity is constructed not through ethnic purity but through shared history, shared memory and a sense of common destiny also explain this picture (Hobsbawm, 1990; Smith, 1998). For this reason the public wishes to preserve the fine line between the recognition of identities and their elevation into state-founding categories.

An intriguing aspect of the anxiety in the field also concerns where the public locates responsibility. Approximately 56 per cent of participants think that the deep consequences of the drift towards a “mini Ottoman millet system” are not fully grasped by those who govern the state, and that they too are being steered through desires for historical grandeur. By contrast, about 23 per cent are of the opinion that the rulers are aware of this risk but cannot show open resistance because of pressure, threat or constraining external relations; a segment of about 21 per cent refrained from a firm judgement. This distribution is important, because the view of the great majority of the public is not an attitude that directly blames the rulers. It rather reflects a concern that a trap may have been fallen into—whether through being steered unawares or through being placed under pressure. Both forms of explanation arrive at the same conclusion: the conviction that a distance exists between discourse and the real objective. This perception of distance is itself a problem of trust, and it recalls that political legitimacy is nourished not only by institutional power but also by how society reads that power.

It has also been clearly seen that the Greater Middle East Project does not remain, in the public mind, merely a foreign-policy heading. A significant proportion of participants read this project not through the language of democracy, reform and regional cooperation but through borders, identities, energy lines, water resources and the internal fault lines of states. In this mode of reading, Iraq and Syria function not as abstract examples but as a concrete possibility for Türkiye. According to the narrative, the division in those countries began first as a crisis of political representation and security, then deepened through debates over external intervention and partition. Türkiye’s NATO membership does not reduce this anxiety; on the contrary, a segment of participants think that the multi-identity structure reached through civil war in Iraq and Syria is being sought in Türkiye without civil war being unleashed—that is, through quieter instruments such as discourse, migration, constitutional regulation, local government and the steering of public opinion. At this point the study’s methodological stance is decisive: these assessments have been treated not as firm judgements but as social perception. The task of academic research is not to disregard the suspicions present in the field but to separate them by the levels of fact, perception and interpretation (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998). When this distinction is preserved, the GMEP appears, in the eyes of a broad segment, to have turned into a security and identity matter directly bound to the future of the nation-state.

A dimension of the field narrative that deserves attention is the widespread conviction concerning external interest calculations. Approximately 78 per cent of participants believe that the process named “Terror-Free Türkiye” will ultimately serve Israel’s regional interests; about 9 per cent think the process may genuinely be to the country’s benefit, and 13 per cent did not express an opinion. This conviction brings together several headings in the public mind: the bringing under control of the rich water resources rising from Eastern and

South-Eastern Anatolia, especially the Euphrates and Tigris basins; the division of the region into looser, community-based units in place of nation-states; and the replacement of the combative interpretation of Islam by a “moderate” model conception. Texts addressing the redrawing of Middle Eastern borders, long debated, are counted among the external sources on which this reading draws (Lewis, 1992; Peters, 2006; Yinon, 1982). Here too the study’s stance is clear: the existence of these texts is a fact, but the intention attributed to them is an interpretation, and the research does not pronounce on the truth of that interpretation. Even so, the fact that this conviction is voiced so widely is in itself a finding; for when a large segment of a society sees a deep gulf between the visible aim of a security policy and the aim it attributes to it, the legitimacy ground of that policy weakens independently of its content.

The common denominator of all these headings is that Neo-Ottomanism operates as a field of perception management. A significant proportion of participants accept that this discourse lends Türkiye a feeling of historical depth and regional leadership; yet they think that the same feeling may be used to make a looser, multi-identity model acceptable domestically. It has long been known that powerful political concepts do not merely carry information but at the same time manage hopes and fears (Edelman, 1988; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Lasswell, 1927). Neo-Ottomanism works exactly thus; it produces continuity and pride in one segment and, in another, uncertainty about the founding identity of the state. This uncertainty is concentrated in particular around the question, “is Türkiye being defined as a new political unity composed of Turkish, Kurdish and Arab elements?”; indeed, expressions in high-level discourse to the effect that Türkiye is composed of Turkish, Kurdish and Arab nations have fed, in about 75 per cent of participants, the perception that the nation-state is being reconfigured on an identity basis. That the public reads such words not as an ordinary message of unity but as the harbinger of a possible constitutional and political transformation is in itself a political reality. For when a society falls into doubt about the fundamental identity of the state, even the best-intentioned language of reform struggles to produce trust. The first recommendation that follows is clear: the language of the state must avoid ambivalent and vague expressions on the subjects of common citizenship, the unitary structure and national unity, and must construct a consistent, clear and trust-building frame. Otherwise the emphasis on historical grandeur may, contrary to what is intended, magnify social unease.

The study’s methodological choice is also important for the conclusions. Unstructured interviews enabled people not only to answer ready-made questions but to bring to the conversation their own agendas, fears and frames of interpretation. The connections participants spontaneously constructed among Neo-Ottomanism, the GMEP, migration, “Terror-Free Türkiye”, the Kurdish question, the statements of external actors and narratives of global blackmail thereby became visible. What is decisive here is not the factual verification of all these connections but the place they hold in the public’s manner of making sense of the political world. Indeed, that 375 of the one thousand people interviewed spontaneously explained the sudden reconciliation of some politically opposed actors through the possibility of “threat”, “blackmail” or a “honey trap” is, more than a concrete accusation of crime, an indicator of a deepened crisis of trust. This study has carefully avoided turning these narratives into evidence-free accusations against any person or institution; mindful of the subject’s sensitivity, it has kept these approaches outside its evaluation and regarded them only as a sign of social distrust and the erosion of legitimacy. Given that discourses do not merely convey information but also produce meaning and shape political reality, such connections are valuable for understanding how social reality is constructed (Foucault, 1980; Fairclough, 2003; van Dijk, 2006). Wherever trust declines, people’s search for hidden reasons behind visible explanations is not peculiar to Türkiye; it is a general tendency of a fluidising and uncertain age (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 2000; Castells, 2010).

The picture in the field is not uniform; on some headings society clearly converges, while on others it is split almost in two. For example, the idea of supporting the establishment of a state by Kurdish communities outside Türkiye in Iraq and the admission of such a structure to the Organization of Turkic States is viewed positively by about 46 per cent of participants, while about 50 per cent find it problematic; this is an area where

shared conviction ends and delicate balances begin. By contrast, on the question of with which actors the process is to be conducted, society looks largely in the same direction: about 91 per cent of participants found it mistaken for the “Terror-Free Türkiye” process to be conducted through the terrorist organisation and the structures seen as its political extension, while about 83 per cent regarded as correct a Turkish–Kurdish brotherhood established with such persons left outside it. Read together, these two findings show that the public objects not to the idea of brotherhood but to the ground and the actors through which brotherhood is to be constructed. The study’s reporting of these distinctions as they are is important both for rendering visible the plurality in the field and for avoiding a one-sided reading.

The general conclusion rising above all these patterns is that the idea of the nation-state still carries a strong social counterpart in Türkiye. Approximately 86 per cent of participants are in favour of preserving the unitary structure; about 8 per cent see no harm in the establishment of autonomous regions, and 6 per cent did not express an opinion. This high level of support does not mean the denial of differences. People regard differences as natural but find their transformation into a ground of political division objectionable. For them the nation-state is not an abstract constitutional concept but means border, security, public order, common citizenship and resistance to external intervention. Approaches emphasising that the modern state is not merely an administrative apparatus but also the ground of social integration and security accord with this picture (Mann, 1986, 1993; Tilly, 1992; Fukuyama, 2014). When warnings that the risks of external intervention, proxy relations and internal division increase as central authority weakens are joined to the examples of Iraq, Syria and Yugoslavia, they cease, in participants’ eyes, to be a theoretical debate and turn into a concrete unease (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979). For this reason any identity policy to be proposed for Türkiye must not erode the ground of common citizenship; otherwise a process begun with the claim of protecting identities may weaken the shared political roof. What Türkiye needs is not an updated copy of the Ottoman millet system but a political language that does not exclude different origins, yet does not turn the state into an arena of bargaining among identity groups, and that strengthens the Republic’s principle of common citizenship.

Within this framework the study’s recommendations may be gathered under several complementary headings. First, identity politics must not be used so as to erode the founding backbone of the state; demands for recognition must not be severed from the ground of common citizenship. Second, migration and citizenship policies must be conducted not behind closed doors but on a transparent, measured ground that heeds social sensitivities, supported by regular mechanisms of public information. If one recalls that about 69 per cent of participants read intense migration and expanding citizenship practices as a dilution of the nation-state, it is better understood how quickly an information void in this area fills with rumour and speculation; whereas transparency both increases trust and narrows the circulation of false information. Third, the struggle against terror and the discourse of brotherhood must not be confused. The great majority of participants are not against Turkish–Kurdish brotherhood; what they object to is brotherhood being constructed through actors associated with the terrorist organisation. Brotherhood must therefore be built directly through inter-people coexistence and common citizenship, without giving the impression of rendering structures with an armed past legitimate interlocutors. Fourth, when emphasis is placed on historical grandeur in foreign policy, clear assurance must be given domestically that the nation-state will be preserved; for, for a significant segment of society, the real issue is not the splendour of the past but with what state model the Republic of Türkiye will live in the future. Fifth, strategic headings such as water resources and energy corridors must be treated not as technical matters detached from the identity debate but as inseparable parts of national sovereignty. Finally, strengthening public-diplomacy and information capacity on foreign-policy and strategic matters will reduce the risk of international developments being over-interpreted and distorted.

At the theoretical level the study’s contribution is that it renders visible, in the Turkish case, the relationship between discourse and political structure, and models this relationship through the triangle of the discourse of growth, the objective of transformation and perception management. The distance between the

“visible aim” and the meaning the public attaches to that aim is directly related to the debates holding that political power is sustained not only through coercion but also through the production of consent (Gramsci, 1971; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). External analyses that treat the Kurdish question not as a matter of security alone but as one of identity recognition and political participation offer, from the outside, an intelligible framework of pluralism; yet the same framework may be read by certain segments in the field as the loosening of the nation-state (Fuller & Barkey, 2017). This disconnect recalls that hegemony is a process determined not only by what the rulers construct but also by how the ruled read it; when a significant segment of society ceases to find certain discourses persuasive, the manufacture of consent becomes difficult. The findings point precisely to such a difficulty. On the other hand, contrary to the classical expectation that globalisation inevitably weakens the nation-state, the regaining of strength by national belonging in periods of security crisis and geopolitical uncertainty is also consistent with the Turkish data (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 2000; Smith, 1991). The theoretical lesson to be drawn from this is that Türkiye needs neither withdrawal nor boundless integration but a balanced model that preserves sovereignty while remaining open to cooperation.

Like every qualitative study, this research too must have its limits stated clearly. The data rest on notes taken during unstructured, conversational interviews; while this method allows people to voice their own agendas freely, it offers neither a standard measurement nor probability sampling. The proportions here are therefore not a statistical generalisation but a description of the social tendencies observed in a particular period and a particular set of interviews. Because in studies based on unstructured interviews there is a risk that the researcher’s own interpretation will shape the data, the analysis in this study was deliberately kept at the level of perception; participants’ words were conveyed within their own worlds of meaning, and the researcher’s personal assessment was not substituted for the findings. Within this frame, throughout the study it was not the truth of the claims voiced but their prevalence and manner of being made sense of that was examined; in particular, sensitive narratives such as blackmail and threat were, mindful of the subject’s sensitivity, left outside the evaluation and were not turned into accusations against any person or institution. The interviews were conducted without collecting personal identity information, on a voluntary basis and with participants’ anonymity preserved. A field study of this nature—based on notes taken in a conversational setting and involving no intervention upon participants—does not, by the criteria in force, require ethics committee approval; no ethical violation was committed during the research.

These limits also open a fertile field for future studies. The qualitative patterns here may be tested through quantitative research conducted with broader, probability-based samples; the perception of Neo-Ottomanism, the conception of the nation-state, attitudes towards migration and citizenship and views on regional projects may be compared across different age groups and different regions. The effect of media-use habits on these perceptions is a research subject in its own right; for in the digital age the diversification of information sources also changes the manner in which political perception is formed (Castells, 2010). Longitudinal designs may be used to see how the distance between discourse and perception changes over time, and how the same discourse is re-made-sense-of in different political periods. The point at which headings such as water security, energy corridors and demographic change intersect with identity perceptions may be deepened separately through an interdisciplinary framework. Finally, the question of which elements strengthen or weaken the idea of common citizenship carries particular importance for both education policy and public communication. Such an agenda would not only contribute theoretically to the field but also assist the development of public policy on a sounder ground.

In conclusion, this research has shown that the bond between the discourse of Neo-Ottomanism and the future of the Turkish nation-state, within the context of the Greater Middle East Project, is constructed strongly by a broad segment of society. The public regards this discourse neither as a merely historical recollection nor as a purely foreign-policy vision; it evaluates it together with debates over national identity, state structure, migration and regional transformation. The model of the discourse of growth, the objective of transformation

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and perception management proposed by the study helps to explain why this combined reading is so widespread and so consistent. The common feature of the findings is that the idea of the nation-state still carries a strong social legitimacy in Türkiye, while the same society also wishes for the broadening of democratic participation, the protection of cultural differences and the strengthening of justice. Türkiye's principal task is therefore to construct a sustainable balance between national integrity and democratic pluralism. When this balance is achieved, differences may turn into a richness; when it is not, identity tensions may deepen. The clearest message of the field data is that the great majority of society are in favour of unity over fragmentation, of stability over conflict, and of predictability over uncertainty. For this reason, beyond the debates centred on Neo-Ottomanism and the GMEP, the real question that will determine the future in Türkiye is how shared national belonging is to be preserved. A clear and trust-building answer to this question will make it possible for all other political debates, too, to be conducted on a healthier ground.

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