



# PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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**“Roads Not Taken: AKP Trajectories Since 2007”**  
**Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars**  
**1300 Pennsylvania Ave., NW**  
**Washington, DC 20004**  
**November 10, 2010 – 2:00 PM**

On Wednesday, Dr. **Nora Fisher Onar**, Professor of Politics and International Relations at Bahcesehir University in Istanbul and Visiting Research Fellow at Oxford University’s Centre for International Studies, spoke on differing schools of thought within Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) at the Woodrow Wilson Center.

Over the past ten years, Turkey has changed dramatically, **Onar** said. Most noticeably, the economy has improved significantly, a new elite composed of Central-Anatolian businessmen has supplanted the old urban business elite and AKP has taken control of the Turkish political system. During the same period, Turkish foreign policy has shifted. Turkish relations with traditional allies including the U.S. and Israel have deteriorated while Ankara has grown closer to Damascus and Tehran. Many commentators have described these developments as either “Neo-Ottomanization” or a sign that Turkey has shifted axes, both descriptions that Onar rejects.

**To understand Turkish foreign policy, Onar said, we must first look at the domestic politics.** Since AKP has consolidated its control over the Turkish political system, their internal political discussions are of particular importance. **In her research Onar has identified four different narratives that have emerged and, to varying degrees, are salient in AKP discourse.**

1. **Democratization – In this narrative, AKP has been a liberalizing force in Turkish politics.** Issues such as the wearing of headscarves in government buildings have been reframed as debates over freedom of expression and AKP politicians always emphasize that they speak “in the name of the people.” In line with this narrative, AKP has opened debate on the Kurdish issue, worked to improve relations with Armenia, and reopened a Greek monastery, Onar said. AKP leaders have also made extensive use of inclusive and democratic rhetoric in an attempt to frame the opposition as illiberal and backwards.
2. **Conservative Religious, Post-Islamist –** Because democratization has in many ways failed, Onar said, many have turned to a more conservative narrative that emphasizes family and religious values. **This collectivist narrative places Turkey as the leader of a Muslim bloc that borrows selectively from Western traditions but whose core is fundamentally based on Islamic thought.** Onar emphasized that subscribers to this narrative are largely limited to columnists and local AKP leaders.
3. **Ottomanism – This narrative is an attempt to re-imagine the Ottoman past for a domestic audience by focusing on Turkey’s position as an “historical epicenter.”** Those who accept this narrative believe Turkey should expand its influence in neighboring regions once again, this time

using soft power. This narrative is one of two central tenants in current Foreign Minister **Ahmet Davutoglu**'s "strategic depth" strategy.

4. **Power Politics – The second pillar of Davutoglu's strategy is the power politics narrative. This envisions Turkey as a key player in the region and emphasizes the uses of soft power.** This narrative emerged in large part because of impatience for the EU accession process. Turkey must deal with its neighbors in the meantime. According to Onar, this pragmatic narrative is supported by much of the current ruling elites and has a restraining effect on the other narratives.

Onar closed by saying that it is incredibly important that we differentiate between these narratives and their proponents when analyzing Turkish policy. **Many commentators instead simply and erroneously label AKP a "post-Islamist" or "neo-Ottoman" party without realizing that these ideas are part of a broader and often more pragmatic discourse.**