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Elite Framing and Conflict Transformation in Turkey
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ABSTRACT
This article examines the effects of elite framing on conflict transformation. It utilises debates from the Turkish Grand National Assembly as the main source of empirical evidence and demonstrates the differences in the way Turkish parliamentarians framed national and foreign policy issues in the 1990s. For the most part, elite framing of Kurdish issues was predominantly monolithic and adversarial towards ‘ethnic others’, demonstrating few challenges to dominant nationalist narratives and discourses, while framing of Greek–Turkish disputes was diverse, with moderates cautiously challenging hardliners on the necessity of cooperating with Greece. The article unravels these elite framing strategies and illustrates how framing becomes embedded in public identities, opportunity structures and definitions of national interest, influencing crisis escalation and conflict management in the Eastern Mediterranean region.

At the end of the 1990s, Turkey experienced conflict escalation with respect to the Kurdish issue, while disputes with Greece improved remarkably. Although the Kurdish and Greek–Turkish issues had a comparable and often interdependent trajectory throughout the decade, their routes diverted significantly in the year 1998–1999. Turkey came close to a war with Syria in 1998 on the Kurdish issue and threatened both Italy and Greece with reprisals after hosting the leader of the Kurdish Partiya Karkere Kurdistan (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan. However, only a year later, Turkey reached a consensus with Greece in the Helsinki European Council Summit of December 1999; through the agreement in Helsinki, Turkey acquired candidate status in the European Union (EU). This divergence was manifested in politics between the two governments, and also emerged at the level of ordinary citizens. In 1998, hundreds of thousands of Turkish citizens joined mass nationalist mobilisations to protest countries allegedly supporting PKK. A year later, following the devastating earthquakes in the region, the Turkish and Greek publics made an unprecedented pro-peace rapprochement aiming to transform their decades-old conflicts, thereby facilitating the signing of the Helsinki agreement. This article investigates how Turkish elites framed issues of national and foreign
policy-making rapprochement a politically available option with Greece while effectively unimaginable in the case of the Kurdish issue. There was no previous major event in Greek–Turkish relations that could justify a gradual transition towards the December 1999 Helsinki compromise. Quite the contrary, in fact, Greece-related conflicts appeared to be equally or arguably more complicated than other issues facing Turkey. Besides the Öcalan episode, mentioned above earlier, in January 1996, Turkey and Greece had confronted each other over the ownership of an uninhabited islet in the Aegean; this episode almost caused a war between the two NATO allies. Then, in 1997, Turkey issued a military ultimatum against Cyprus over the deployment of the Russian S-300 missiles. Another crisis took place in August 1996 after two Greek Cypriots were killed during demonstrations in the Green Line separating the two communities in Cyprus. For its part, in 1997, Greece spearheaded a movement in the EU Luxemburg Council to exclude Turkey from the enlarged Union. And, in response, witnessing the progress of Cyprus towards inclusion in the EU, Ankara hardened its position on Cyprus, moving from an acceptance of federation to demanding confederation.

From the perspective of the two governments, compromise in Helsinki was not an easy task. For one thing, although the conditions stipulated in Helsinki were both expected and reasonable, they could have played into the hands of Turkish nationalists, thus forcing the collapse of the coalition government before an agreement was reached. The Nationalist Action Party (MHP), in particular, owed its April 1999 electoral success to the capture of Öcalan and was categorically opposed to any concessions on ‘nationally sensitive’ issues, including Cyprus, the Aegean or the Kurdish issue. The extreme right, represented by MHP, was a coalition partner with the Centre Left DSP of ailing PM Bülent Ecevit who, unsurprisingly, enjoyed little sympathy in Greece, since he was seen as responsible for the events of 1974. Ecevit himself capitalised on the nationalist wave of the late 1990s and while in government, his coalition partners and himself were expected to sustain the nationalist ‘primed’ frame of mind that brought them to power. For Simitis’ government in Greece, compromise was not an easy task either, as his government faced upcoming elections and was pushing hard for more gains in the negotiations with Turkey. Finally, right before Helsinki, Turkish President Süleyman Demirel escalated threats against Greece; these threats were openly articulated in a number of interviews in the English-language Turkish Daily News.

The ‘carrot’ of EU enlargement could partly explain the variation across ‘Greek’ and ‘Kurdish’ issues in the Turkish national and foreign policy. It may have been a ‘rational’ decision for Turkey to satisfy some Greek demands, given that Greece was already a member of the EU and held veto power over the Turkish accession process. The ‘rational incentive’ approach, though, does not explain previous failures of the
two countries to turn confrontation into regional cooperation, the
delay in reaching a consensus in Greek–Turkish relations and the
general prevalence of hawkish politics in the pre-Helsinki era.
Moreover, the offer made to Turkey in Helsinki contained a number of
ambiguities and was seen as front-loaded in terms of conditions and
obligations, and as leaving rewards for Turkey, such as accession nego-
tiations, for much later. Moreover, following Helsinki, Greek–
Turkish detente remained stable for almost a decade despite instability
and ambiguity in Turkish–EU relations. Even if rational incentives
explain part of Turkey’s foreign policy, these have to be studied in con-
junction with other variables including successful communication and
framing strategies particularly because incentives, interests and security
threats can be interpreted in multiple ways. More broadly, without
understanding how the external environment is framed in the domestic
political discourse of a country such as Turkey, especially by political
elites, it is hard to demonstrate how these can affect foreign policy
shifts.

Although the Greek and Kurdish issues feature comparable and even
interdependent trajectories, they differ in the extent to which they are
internalised in the domestic politics of Turkey. Although the Kurdish
issue is framed primarily as a domestic and, therefore, more immediate
issue, this does not necessarily mean that conflict management is more
difficult. On the one hand, national minorities could arguably pose an
immediate threat to territory (and one with remarkable cost in human
casualties), but on the other hand, a major threat could also lead to
appeasement and accommodation of the minority to avoid further con-
frontation. To this point, James Ron argues that countries facing both
internal and external challenges simultaneously, such as Serbia and
Israel, often demonstrate more confrontation outside their ‘borders’
than domestically, making external threats a primary pre-occupation.
Because of electoral, legal and other constraints, confronting ethnic
others across an international border is often more manageable than
confronting ethnic minorities (and voters) at home. To cite another
example, Indian nationalism seems to be primarily focused on Pakistan
rather than the domestic Muslim minorities, including the Kashmiri
Muslims, who enjoy substantial autonomy. Traditionally, this has
been the case with Turkish nationalism. Targeting Kurdish ethnona-
tionalism is a relatively recent phenomenon, while negative actions
and images of Greece have persisted in most parts of the twentieth
century.

Finally, the devastating earthquakes in Turkey and Greece of August
and September 1999 were a major turning point in Greek–Turkish
rapprochement, although few scholars would assign a direct causal
effect. The earthquakes provided an opportunity for positive communi-
cation across the Aegean and demonstrated not only the importance of
civil society in providing comfort but also the commitment of hundreds
of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) towards peace. Around that time, the ministries of foreign affairs of Greece and Turkey decided to monitor and report the activities of NGOs; they collected a list of more than 800 organisations promoting and sustaining Greek–Turkish cooperation for almost a decade.

While the earthquakes revealed the presence of a ‘peace constituency’ in the two countries, comparable humanitarian disasters in the region, or elsewhere, did not produce similar effects. For instance, the Kashmir earthquake caused only a few short-lived gestures of friendship between Pakistan and India, whereas the tsunami disaster in Sri Lanka and Indonesia triggered very different responses: a negotiated settlement with the Free Aceh Movement in Indonesia vs. escalation with Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka. These examples suggest that humanitarian emergencies alone are insufficient in explaining pro-peace initiatives, making it important to investigate other possibilities, including the role of elites in employing peace frames and identifying opportunities for reconciliation.

**Frames and the Turkish Parliament**

Erving Goffman introduced the concept of framing to denote ‘schemata of interpretation’ that enable individuals ‘to locate, perceive, identify and label’ occurrences within their life space and the world at large. Following Goffman, Bert Klandermans defined framing as a process in which social actors, media and members of a society jointly interpret, define and redefine states of affairs. Framing is often used interchangeably with other terms such as discourse, ideology, hegemonic beliefs or narratives; however, what distinguishes framing from other comparable terms is the degree of strategy involved, particularly in appropriating, challenging or negotiating the shared meaning of a given situation. From this definition, one might suggest that frames reflect the work of social agents, whether political leaders, civil society movements or media. In other words, frames imply agency, deliberation or even manipulation in the construction of new ‘realities’. In the making of foreign policy, framers aim to dominate or monopolise political communication, thereby shaping patterns of crisis behaviour, whether at state or civil society level.

Frames have two essential components: first, a diagnostic element, or a definition of the problem, its source, grievances, and more generally, the motives involved; and, second, a prognostic element, the identification of appropriate opportunities and strategies for redressing the problem, as well as the degree of efficacy of these strategies. Even when frames correlate to, or reflect, other causes commonly associated with mobilisation and conflict, these variables might remain unnoticed unless elites bring them to public attention and eliminate alternative interpretations. Ultimately, how causal variables are understood and framed in political discourse might be more important than the initial causes.
This article examines framing by looking at the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM), an institution historically central to, and well respected in, the country. Because parliaments are accountable to people, access to archives is generally easy. In Turkey, parliamentary sessions are available online or in hard copies in all major university libraries, thereby facilitating the testing and retesting of this article’s hypotheses and findings. For the most part and especially in the 1990s, the TBMM reflected the power dynamics among all key players in the Turkish political system, such as the president, the military and the executive. Finally, speeches in the Turkish parliament are representative of official government and opposition views because of the strong party discipline characterising the Turkish political culture. According to Ayata and Tütüncü ‘political parties prescribe and control the activities of their MPs and, more significantly, Turkish MPs rely on their parties for re-election, which, in turn, strengthens party discipline’. Admittedly, citizens do not follow the parliament closely, even after TRT3-Meclis TV begun to broadcast parliamentary sessions live in 1995. For this reason, this study selected and coded only ‘high impact’ parliamentary sessions using citations in the Turkish and international press, thus avoiding debates of minor significance. What this methodology emphasises is not the parliamentary framing itself, but samples of publicly endorsed elite thinking and acting.

Even though one could identify elite frames elsewhere, for example, in interviews and newspaper editorials, the parliament has several comparative advantages. Unlike interviews, which usually take place after a crisis, parliamentary debates do not allow framers to reconstruct their positions. Parliamentary speeches are unrefined and unedited by third parties—unlike an editor’s selection of news, whether for a local newspaper or a translated FBIS source. Moreover, there is no choice to be made and then justified on how to select electronic or print media for content analysis, since there is only one parliament in place.

Nonetheless, for present purposes, parliamentary debates were selected with the aid of news media, both Turkish and international, covered in retrieval databases, such as Lexis/Nexis, Factiva and FBIS. A particularly useful source was the BBC Summary of World Broadcasts (included in Lexis/Nexis), which covered the most important sessions in the Turkish parliament in the 1990s. As international media made references to only some debates, it was possible to identify the most important sessions in the Turkish parliament, and then, based on the dates, to search for and find the original transcripts. The following keywords were used to identify the relevant sessions: Turkish parliament, Turkey and Assembly, TBMM (Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi), and its translated acronym TGNA (Turkish Grand National Assembly). The sessions also were identified through references to Greece, Cyprus, Kurdish and Southeast Anatolia.
The Kurdish Issue

The parliamentary debates of the 1990s demonstrate how grievances were constructed against PKK and the countries supporting it, and how Turkish framers perceived the range of possible options against these threats. Briefly stated, in the years, months and weeks preceding the 1998 crisis, elite framing in the TGNA was predominantly adversarial towards ethnic ‘others’, and one could comfortably argue that there was no real dilemma in choosing whether or how to act confrontationally.

To begin with, shortly before the closure of the pro-Kurdish HEP in 1994, an unusual debate took place in Turkey concerning Kurdish human rights. Majority Turks essentially associated multiculturalism with threats to the country’s territorial integrity. For instance, HEP MP Sedat Yurdas quoted a Turkish colleague, saying that ‘in Turkey those who are not Turks have only the right of keeping silence’. On another occasion, Islamist MP Cevat Ayhan argued against the accession of his country to the EU, because this could allow millions of Pontus Greeks to settle on Turkey’s Black Sea coast. And when HEP MP Mahmut Alinak addressed the parliament ‘not on behalf of Yeltsin, Kohl, or Mitterrand, but on behalf of Kurdish-Turkishness’, he received the reply that he was addressing the parliament on behalf of Apo (nom de guerre of Abdullah Öcalan). Another MP complained that the Kurdish people were ignored, their language was forbidden and they were not accepted ideologically as part of the country. Those who tried to develop an understanding of democracy and freedom, he concluded, ‘are being accused of being the dividers of the country, and they are seriously penalised’.

In the debates, rather than being presented as fighting against a group with an equal moral claim to the land, Turkey was portrayed as the victim of an international conspiracy. These views were shared across the Left–Right divide. The leader of the Leftist party SHP, Erdal İnönü saw both the UN and Europe as part of this conspiracy, while other MPs called for unity and asked the people to struggle against the external forces who were trying to divide the country. These conspiracies, and more specifically, the support of Turkey’s neighbours for PKK, were attributed to the ‘neighbours’ negative reactions to seeing Turkey increasing its regional power.

Before the brief 1995 invasion of Northern Iraq, Turkish MPs were categorical about their right to authorise this operation. As Conservative ANAP MP Eyüp Aşık argued, ‘Turkey has the right and the duty to fight against those who are aiming to divide itself’. At the same time, Leftist CHP MP Ali Dinçer considered that Turkey was justified in undertaking this operation without asking the permission of other states in the region or of the people living in Northern Iraq, because it had a right to self-preservation.
the incursion, Parliamentary Speaker Hüsamettin Cindoruk reasoned that Turkey had a right to launch cross-border operations if needed.\footnote{40}

In another important debate, right before the decision to issue an ultimatum against Syria in October 1998, Syria was featured as the primary source of PKK support. PM Mesut Yılmaz argued that Turkey had tried to convince Syria of its good intentions, but Syria had disregarded both bilateral and international agreements signed by the two countries. He said that ‘not only Turkey but also the US saw Syria as a state supporting terrorism’.\footnote{41} A recurring theme in the parliamentary debates was that Turkey had told Syria to stop, but Syria had not listened, and Turkey could no longer permit this.\footnote{42} It was argued that Turkey’s positive stance actually encouraged Syria’s aggression.\footnote{43} Conservative ANAP MP Kamran İnan called Syria ‘Muslim Greece’ and argued that Turkey had two difficult neighbours, one in the West and one in the South. He said that ‘the unchanging axis of Greek and Syrian foreign policies is Turkey and animosity towards the Turks’.\footnote{44}

These comments resonated well with Turkey’s national security syndrome (or the ‘Sèvres Syndrome’),\footnote{45} frequently a major reference point in national and foreign policy debates.\footnote{46} According to Ersel Aydınli, Turkish fears of being dismembered have often been substantiated with references to the aborted Sèvres treaty of 1920 that officially ended the Ottoman Empire and attempted to divide the Anatolian lands.\footnote{47} During the 1998 Apo crisis, the mass circulation Turkish daily Milliyet published a cartoon with an animated Abdullah Öcalan featured as the marionette in a puppet theatre labelled Sevr (Sèvres in Turkish).\footnote{48} Analysing Sèvres and Turkey’s national security syndrome, former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mümtaz Soysal, argued that the collective feeling of distrust, directed towards the European powers, in general, and towards its neighbours, in particular, is a determining factor in Turkish foreign policy.\footnote{49} With few exceptions, the national security syndrome is common across the political divide in Turkey.\footnote{50} In fact during times of crisis, the disagreement is not whether the country is facing a conspiracy, but what type of conspiracy it faces.\footnote{51}

An interesting exception during the Öcalan crisis was Abdullah Gül, 11th president of the Republic of Turkey, August 2007 to present. Gül opted in the midst of the October 1998 anti-Syrian frenzy to ask for additional information and evidence, implying that only then would he support the government.\footnote{52} He received a prompt knee-jerk reaction from a rival MP, who replied that it was Turkey Gül should be supporting. Other Islamist MPs, such as Recai Kutan, followed the mainstream nationalist framing, effectively downplaying the Muslim connection between Syria and Turkey and emphasising the distinction between the (primarily Sunni) Turkey and Alevi-dominated Syria that suppressed its overwhelming majority of Sunni citizens.\footnote{53}

Turkish parliamentarians were not only convinced that Turkey had the right to self-defence and external intervention in its war against
PKK, but were confident of the success of such interventions. For one thing, despite frequent grievances, Turkish elites showed confidence on the country’s international military connections; US surveillance planes provided the Turkish military with crucial intelligence support about guerrilla movements in the region. Moreover, the fact that PKK was increasingly recognised as a terrorist organisation in the West was perceived as an indication of its weakness and declining importance. Further to this, in the eyes of the Turkish politicians, previous military interventions in Northern Iraq had been successful. Finally, Western dependency on Turkish bases created a feeling of impunity, as demonstrated in the weak international reaction to the Turkish invasion of Iraq in March 1995. A Western journalist argued at the time that a threatened European arms embargo against Turkey would make the renewal of permission for Provide Comfort by the Turkish parliament much less likely.

Elite consensus on these issues made it much easier for the masses to adopt the elite views uncritically and mobilise in ways that strengthened nationalism in the country, creating a vicious cycle between domestic politics and foreign policy objectives. Showing determination in confronting anyone supporting the PKK became an unquestioned, even unquestionable strategy, and was increasingly and actively supported by the public. During the Syrian crisis debates in the Turkish parliament, a poll was conducted to assess popular support of the actions of the Turkish government. The daily *Hürriyet* reported that an impressive 74 per cent of the Turkish public supported government actions against Damascus. The demonstration of resolve attracted favourable international attention to Turkey’s PKK problem: in fact, Egypt’s President Hosny Mubarak immediately intervened to mediate between Syria and Turkey. This strategy of increasing leverage in negotiations was applied elsewhere as well, as, for example, in December 1997, when İsmail Cem declared that the S-300 missiles had not arrived in Cyprus because of a Turkish campaign against the Greek Cypriot missile purchase. (Previous popular mobilisations were also particularly effective on the Armenian and Kurdish issues.)

The Öcalan incident both required and ‘benefited’ from nationalist mobilisations. The international community and press were divided on the issue, with some supporting Öcalan’s extradition to Turkey, others supporting the Kurdish struggle, and the rest avoiding taking a position. Producing images of Turkish citizens mobilising in order to counter the arguments of their antagonists was projected as a very effective strategy to win the undecided in the international community. But any gains had to be achieved before Öcalan secured internationally recognised status, an argument that added urgency to the mobilisation processes of Turkish society and policy circles. Emphasising this point, Abdullah Gül argued that Turkish mobilisation was happening at exactly the right time: the PKK had become completely disorganised...
and could be prevented from pulling itself together again. To fulfil the ends of the mobilisation, MPs called everyone to contribute his/her own share, labelling the whole incident ‘a public opinion war’. Winning such a war against the Kurds required state and society to work together, side by side. It was not enough for Öcalan to be recognised as a terrorist in Turkey: the whole world had to understand and endorse the Turkish point of view.

To this effect, popular mobilisations on the Öcalan affair reached a record number of two million people. Protesters gathered outside the Italian embassy in Ankara for days, waving placards bearing such slogans as ‘Terrorist Italy’, while the MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli addressed his party, saying, ‘We will know how to burn Rome’. Meanwhile, only black clothing was on display in the 171 shop fronts of the famous Italian brand Benetton. Some shop owners festooned their windows with black ribbons, while the only splash of colour permitted was the red Turkish flag. Turkey’s populist newspaper Hürriyet added, ‘Italy will finish on its knees and hide in its boot’, while Turkish telecom company Telsim began an emotional TV campaign, ‘Keep Your Pasta Clean’, which featured graphic details of children slaughtered by the PKK, with blood dripping onto a bowl of Italian pasta, and ending with the phrase: ‘Don’t let terror ruin your appetite’. Newspapers presented poignant pictures of children and parents of victims left behind, taxi drivers parading in the middle of cities with Turkish flags on their cars and ordinary citizens, including blind people, mobilising against Italy.

The media were certainly important in mobilising public discontent at the time of the crisis; however, it is doubtful whether media could mobilise citizens in the absence of pre-existing shared understandings of the given situation. Moreover, political elites are central because of their control of state and media resources as well as their capacity to read public expectations. Arguably, politicians know or learn through their engagement with daily politics what to say that fits public expectations and how far to stretch an argument without losing appeal or credibility. In most cases, new information technologies offer great advantages to the framers and their communication advisers, by providing them with available tools for polling their constituencies, identifying preferences and then selecting information on successful strategies used elsewhere to achieve their own political ends.

The Helsinki Dilemma

Oddly enough, although grievances dominated discussions over Greece, there was no clear monopoly on discourse. Some attributed the negative Greek attitude towards Turkey to the nature of their ‘neighbourliness’, others to domestic politics in Greece, while some even referred to the Megali Idea and the fact that ‘Greece had invaded half of Turkey immediately after WWI’. Although grievances were being
framed with regard to the Aegean, Western Thrace and Cyprus, these were presented within the framework of Turkey’s European and international relations, often indirectly recognising the high costs of maintaining Greek–Turkish confrontations. An ultimatum issued against Greece in June 1995 concerning the Aegean was scarcely debated in the Turkish parliament, and MPs did not mobilise public opinion as they did in the case of Syria. Nevertheless, following the Imia-Kardak crisis, Turkish Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz accused Greece of destroying the Lausanne treaty and militarising illegally the Aegean islands across Turkey. And after Luxemburg, Turkish framing of Greece worsened. To cite one blatant example, MP Sedat Aoğlu stated, ‘Greece is a chronic problem for Turkey. Greece has an irrational obsession with Turkey and sees whatever is positive for Turkey and sees whatever is positive for Turkey as negative for itself’.

Following the capture of Öcalan in Kenya in February 1999, MPs started describing Greece as a terrorist country. ANAP MP Ülkü Güney said: ‘For years Turkey has shown with evidence that Greece was supporting terrorism. We called upon them to give up this inhuman attitude. The scene of Öcalan with Greece was horrible, and this has shown that the country is stuck in the mud of terrorism up to her throat’. Others argued that Greece had lost its position as a reliable interlocutor for Turkey. Still others generalised grievances by pointing out that from Greece to the West, there was no country that did not support terrorism against Turkey. As the events leading to the capture of the PKK-leader were unclear, with the Kurds themselves pointing the finger at Greek politicians for secretly helping Turkey to capture Öcalan, Turkish elites generally refrained from mobilising the public against Greece the way they did against Italy. Especially after the capture of the PKK leader, there was a certain amount of relief and even satisfaction was gained by watching two old foes, PKK and Greece, accusing and confronting each other. Popular Turkish daily *Milliyet* published a cartoon depicting a caricatured Greek man dressed in national uniform first feeding a hawk called PKK and then losing his eye from an attack by the greedy bird.

As for the Greek–Turkish disputes themselves, parliamentarians suggested that a settlement in Cyprus and the Aegean was possible, with some putting forward more conciliatory conditions than had been presented at the time in the press. Following the August 1999 earthquakes, although the discourse improved, it remained mixed. On the one hand, MHP MP Oktay Vural attributed Greece’s attitude to a tactical move to restore the credibility of the country after the Öcalan incident, while Conservative ANAP MP Kamran Inan attributed the change to energy policies and EU interests in the Middle East. On the other hand, Leftist DSP MP Ali Tekin said that in international relations, friendship and enmity should not be strictly measured, and that the earthquake friendship provided the two nations an opportunity
to improve their relations, while another MP from the same party, Esvet Özdöğu, pointed out that ‘during these catastrophic days, their neighbour Greece had showed a kind and beautiful approach towards Turkey’. Meanwhile, enthusiasm in the Turkish and Greek media for rapprochement was unparalleled, with the media reframing bilateral relations and adding moving titles to their editorials, often in each other’s language, such as Eueharisto Poli File (Thank you very much friend) and Hepimiz Türküz (We are all Turks).

In an important speech in October 1999, Minister of Foreign Affairs İsmail Cem cautiously identified opportunities for co-operation with Greece. He informed the parliament that third parties, such as the USA, were paying close attention to issues in Greece and Turkey. He argued that the problems between Greece and Turkey were not easy to resolve; had they been, they would already have been resolved. He added that both countries had their own versions of the truth, which they were not going to give up, but he suggested that the trick was to identify common interests. Cem further argued that previously ‘Greek foreign policy had been based on an understanding that Greece would gain when it was in opposition to Turkey, while now, Greek foreign policy was based on the idea of avoiding opposition and decreasing tension’.

Frames and Influence in Policy

The illustration of different types of elite framing in Turkey raises two interrelated questions; first, how framing itself is shaped and by what factors, and second, whether framing merely reflects institutional or structural factors or takes on a life of its own, exerting an independent influence on policy making. In Turkey, the role of the state has been particularly central in determining the ‘reference frame’ of the political elite, the media and the public, particularly through education and law. In his study of Turkey’s Kurdish policy and official ideology, Cumhur Keskin argues that one could have been beaten up merely by saying the words ‘Kurdish problem’ in the parliament. ‘Indoctrination’ has also been a central process in the Kemalist ideology during the Republican years. According to Kemal Karpat, ‘Mustafa Kemal used all communication media intensively to win over the public’. ‘Indoctrination and information’, in Atatürk’s view, ‘was very important, as important as the question of the army, and even more important than the army’. States create paths upon which subsequent policy outcomes are dependent. Yet, path dependency is not necessarily an irreversible process. Even in states with a tradition of conformity to and respect for state institutions, it is often possible for frame challengers to identify windows of opportunity to confront hegemonic beliefs. For instance, following the earthquakes, state institutions in Turkey were largely discredited, allowing an opportunity for civil society to experiment with new shared understandings, including its own influence on neighbourhood policies.
Moreover, even though frames might reflect many structural or other variables, often these conditions collide, leaving space for agency and ingenuity at the level of identity construction. Past memories of war and conflict with Greece collide with strong motivations to build friendship across the Aegean and noticeable commonalities in culture, food and art. Likewise, grievances aimed at the PKK clash with motives for democratisation and interethic harmony. More importantly, elites need to identify opportunities in addressing a conflict that might vary on interpretation. In Turkey, constraints and opportunities are related to domestic politics, such as the rise of right wing parties, democratisation processes, the effects of domestic and international institutions, regional power dynamics, such as the Turkish/Israeli alliance, and mutually hurtful stalemates resulting from previous rejections of Turkey’s accession bid and arms races. In some cases, structural variables might determine framing in a certain direction; in other cases, framing might predominantly result from agents’ initiatives.

The overview of elite framing in the Turkish parliament demonstrates that mixed framing preceded the Helsinki compromise, whereas the Kurdish crisis with Syria and Italy was preceded by a predominantly adversarial framing towards ethnic ‘others’. On the one hand, mixed frames can be transformed more easily, particularly when there is a significant mass of people, resources and ideas to bolster or to change a failing policy paradigm. On the other hand, predominantly adversarial framing, in this case the framing of the Kurdish question, should be a matter for concern. As demonstrated above, elite consensus makes it easier for the masses to mobilise and further entrench nationalist views. Leaders themselves often argue that previous experience guides their judgement, and they frequently use historical analogies to justify their decisions. Moreover, the influence of frames is often demonstrated in the mechanisms they set in motion or which they sustain over a long period of time.

To begin with, conflict frames narrow definitions of national interest and limit available options for resolving issues. Once a construction of reality is made and priorities are set, it is difficult and sometimes politically risky to reconstruct these or to replace them with new ones. In Turkey, all major political figures of the past three decades tried at some point of their political career to identify solutions to the Kurdish question, albeit with no success. A rare admission of the severity of the Kurdish question was published after President Özal’s death in 1993. Özal had written a confidential letter to PM Süleyman Demirel in which he pointed out, ‘The Turkish Republic is facing its gravest threat yet. A social earthquake could cut one part of Turkey off from the rest, and we could all be buried beneath it’.

Another telling admission was made in 1993, when PM Tansu Çiller allegedly proposed the use of the Basque model for solving the conflict in the Southeast, something she later denied. Her long-time political
opponent, Mesut Yilmaz, stated on another occasion that the Kurdish language should become the second official language in Turkey. Then, in a 1992 speech in Rize, a Black Sea city in Northeastern Turkey, current PM Erdoğan questioned publicly the efficacy of military solutions to Kurdish/PKK problem. (His criticism was rebroadcast a decade later to question his loyalty to the major tenets of Turkish nationalism.) Finally, in early 2007, a Turkish prosecutor initiated a criminal inquiry against former President Kenan Evren, for making the argument that Turkey could become a federation.

For one thing, these statements indicate that Turkey’s national interests might not necessarily correspond with the dominant frames and state policies on the Kurdish question. For another, these examples confirm findings demonstrated elsewhere, pointing to elite entrapment by means of which frames become embedded in the social norms, electoral politics and judicial practices of a country.

It should also be noted that through framing, elites may instigate actions that subsequently change structures making their initial frames a self-fulfilling prophecy. Ankara academic Doğu Ergil has shown in his high-profile TOBB survey that the Kurdish minority in Turkey is primarily interested in human rights and not secession. Yet, countries often deny human and community rights, fearing that these will lead to secession, forcing populations hitherto less interested in secession to armed conflict, thus confirming their own initial predictions. As Mehmet Ali Birand admitted in 1992, with respect to PKK, ‘We are harvesting what we have sown’. If security reasons were the only factors driving foreign policy, these considerations, particularly the failure to eradicate the PKK or to win the international opinion war, would have led to more diverse strategies in fighting political violence. Framing prevents the adoption of these strategies by eliminating the repertoire of available or desirable options. More importantly, a view of the regional environment as threatening affects the way others (i.e. Greece, Syria) see Turkey, leading to a spiral of actions and reactions, which has ultimately confirmed Turkey’s original fears. Once they initiate those spirals, nationalists can boast that their predictions were correct, further undermining the credibility and judgement of their pro-peace opponents.

In contrast to the framing of the Kurdish question, Helsinki was preceded by a mixed discourse. The discourse made adaptation to new conditions easier, because a much smaller critical mass of undecided actors had to be won by the pro-deal forces once a win–win formula was agreed on. As mentioned earlier, Helsinki was crafted around the principle of constructive ambiguity, a form of terminological acrobatics that avoided direct conflict with the perceived interests and declarations of each side. In this instance, constructive ambiguity allowed actors to perceive and frame the agreement as the first step towards achieving their own major goals, rather than a final or
irreversible compromise. For example, with respect to the conditions of
the Cypriot membership in the EU, Ecevit claimed that Turkey had
received candidacy status, even though Europeans knew of Turkey’s
determination to protect Cyprus and oppose the island’s accession. In
this way, partners in the Ecevit leftist–nationalist coalition maintained their previous discourse,
while at the same time, keeping their domestic cohesion untouched.
Thus, Helsinki with its entrenched ambiguity was a suitable match to
the mixed parliamentary discourse that preceded it.

Conclusions

Even though it served the mixed orientation of Ecevit allies at the time,
Helsinki gave pro-deal forces time to prepare the ground for serious
shifts in Turkey’s foreign policy. In fact, following the Helsinki com-
promise, Turkey significantly improved its chances of joining the EU,
and the Turkish crisis rhetoric on Cyprus gave way to confidence-
building measures, such as the opening of the Green Line in Cyprus in
April 2003, as well as the Turkish endorsement of the Annan plan in
April 2004 and various other agreements between Greek and Turkish
Cypriot leaders thereafter. Threats to isolate Turkey from the EU,
annex Northern Cyprus, or start a new confrontation with Greece did
not materialize. Despite its ambiguous wording, the Helsinki compro-
mise locked Greece and Turkey into a process of non-confrontation for
almost a decade. This process survived political instability and changes
in governments in both Greece and Turkey and cycles of worsening
Turkey–EU relations but proved to be insufficient in catalysing a settle-
ment in Cyprus.

A resolution of the Cyprus question requires a commitment that goes
beyond mixed or ambivalent elite framings/commitments in either
Turkey or Greece. In fact, the Northern Irish case suggests the import-
ance of strong commitments in both kin states shared by key players in
their domestic scene that might come to power during negotiations or
while implementing a peace deal. In the Greek–Turkish case pro-peace
consensus in the motherlands could facilitate compromise in Cyprus by
making commitments in the negotiations more credible especially since
implementation of any future agreement would take decades particu-
larly on the issues of Turkish troop withdrawal and return of Greek
Cypriot refugees. Each side is apprehensive of potential spoilers
coming to power and failing to implement parts of the agreement. In
particular, surveys following the aborted 2004 Annan plan referendum
showed that the majority of Greek Cypriots (61.9 per cent) stated they
would support the plan if concerns on security and implementation
were guaranteed. Shaping a consensus for peace in both Turkey and
Greece will help minimise fears on security and implementation and facilitate an agreement in the island.

Concerning the Kurdish dilemmas, shifts in Turkish foreign policy will continue to be difficult. The study of the Turkish parliament demonstrates the absence of a culture of accommodation involving collective rights for minorities in Turkey despite admittedly some progress on cultural rights for the Kurds in the past decade.111 With Kurdish ethnonationalists expecting more than the Turkish leadership is willing or able to deliver, the two sides in the conflict will continue to mismanage the Kurdish question. The conflict might become particularly acute if one takes into consideration the history of mutual grievances, the poor economic condition of the Kurdish populations and a likely US withdrawal from Iraq after the 2008 elections. Political instability in Iraq and the use of the former’s territory by PKK for attacks in urban Turkey are certain to rekindle nationalism in the country, leading to new crises in the region. Finally, tensions between the AKP government and the secular establishment including the military create a domestic environment of mutual mistrust. This uneasy relationship makes efforts to reframe the Kurdish issue difficult and neutralises the potentially positive effect of Kurdish vote for the ruling AKP government as manifested in the July 2007 elections.112

From the present discussion, several theoretical insights and public policy prescriptions can be derived with respect to communication strategies in conflict management and escalation. For one thing, it is possible to identify primary sources of framing and talk about its effects. Adversarial framing takes on a life of its own when entrenched in domestic politics, nationalist thinking and institutions of a country and, more importantly, it often narrows the options of policy makers. For another, adversarial framing can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, instigating actions that transform the external environment of a given country or enabling a problem to match the initial interpretation of nationalist framers. This implies that moderates in deeply divided societies should prevent anti-deal or nationalist forces from monopolising foreign policy discourse aiming to shape instead a new consensus on peace and stability. Finally, it is possible to identify early warning signs of crisis escalation and opportunities for compromise by investigating and analysing the way dilemmas are framed in parliamentary democracies. Ignoring these warning or welcoming signs is partly the reason for the mismanagement of contemporary conflicts and alliances in the Eastern Mediterranean and elsewhere.

Drawing on the successful compromise in Helsinki, the article also demonstrates how moderation in public statements can have a positive effect on subsequent deal-making. Framing analysis in official state institutions, such as the Turkish parliament, offers mediators insight into what is possible or impossible when they are negotiating conflict transformation in the region. Framing analysis in the 1990s provides
an explanation of why Greek–Turkish rapprochement has become politically available while why it has failed on the Kurdish issue. Helsinki specifically demonstrates the importance of linking the ‘right’ negotiation formula with the ‘right’ frame, often employing the use of win–win gains, redefinition of national interests and ‘constructive ambiguities’ serving the long-term interests of both sides. Given the rarity of such compromises, Helsinki and peace framing in the Eastern Mediterranean require the attention of scholars and policy makers alike.

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6 Candidacy status came with two conditions for Turkey. For one thing, Turkey committed to accepting the jurisdiction of the International Court in The Hague concerning the Aegean disputes by 2004 at the latest. For another, Turkey failed to prevent Cypriot accession to the EU that implied the possibility of future vetoes by the Greek Cypriot leadership against Turkey’s accession. ‘Presidency Conclusions’, see Helsinki European Council, 10 and 11 December 1999, http://europa.eu.int/council/ off/conclu/dec99/dec99_en.htm.


8 The Conqueror of Cyprus Becomes the Captor of Apo’, Milliyet, 17 February 1999, p. 15.


10 See W. Jonasson, “Politics–EU: ‘Constructive Ambiguity’ for Turkey, Greece and Cyprus”, IPS—Inter Press Service, 13 December 1999. Concerning the Aegean dispute, The Times report that ‘it was constructive ambiguity that saved the day’ and ‘that a cunning comma, inserted in the relevant clause, enabled him [Javier Solana] to convince the Turks that the phrase “by the end of 2004” referred to the date of the EU’s review of the situation, not the deadline for the settlement of disputes between Athens and Ankara’, ‘Finnish Olives—A bold message from Helsinki for the eastern Mediterranean’, The Times, 15 December 1999.
An important distinction is that the former was a largely domestic political issue while ‘Greek’ issues belonged to the foreign policy domain. Yet, this distinction is often subject to changing nationalist discourses about ‘borders’ and perceived entitlements. See S. Suvarierol, ‘The Cyprus Obstacle on Turkey’s Road to Membership in the European Union’, in Ali Çarkoglu and Barry Rubin (eds), *Turkey and the European Union: Domestic Politics, Economic Integration, and International Dynamics*, Frank Cass, 2003, p. 56. Moreover, here ‘Kurdish’ refers to problems with the PKK, the Kurdish minority in Turkey and Kurdish Iraq while ‘Greek’ refers to issues with Greek–Turkish minorities in Istanbul and Western Thrace, the Aegean disputes, Cyprus and the capacity of Greece to influence Turkey’s EU accession. Thus, the internal/external variable, although important, has many qualifications.


20 See several related articles online at http://www.disasterdiplomacy.org/.


24 R.D. Benford and D.A. Snow, *op. cit*.


31 It was an unusual debate, given that ethnic Kurdish representatives who claimed to be ‘Kurds’ did not make it to the parliament before or after Kurdish HEP. For past failed attempts to discuss the Kurdish issue, see TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 31 October 1985; TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 19 January 1988.
33 See Islamist RP, MP C. Ayhan, TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 7 June 1995, p. 70.
34 See TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 3 March 1994, p. 375.
37 Speech by conservative DYP MP O. Kılıçgözlu, in TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 18 December 1994, p. 975; see also DSP MP A. Günay, TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 7 October 1998, p. 25.
39 Ibid., p. 18.
40 ‘Speaker Says Iraq Withdrawal to Be Completed in May’, BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 5 May 1995.
41 See Prime Minister M. Yılmaz, TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 7 October 1998, pp. 9–11.
44 K. İnan, TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 7 October 1998, p. 11.
45 In August 1920, the Sèvres treaty was signed between the defeated Ottoman Empire and the victorious WWI allies. The short-lived agreement called for the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire in favour of Christian, Kurdish and Arab populations, as well as the imperial great powers. Anatolia was divided among the victors: an independent Armenia and an autonomous Kurdistan were proposed for the East. Greece received Thrace, and the right to occupy Izmir and a hinterland whose final status was to be decided in a plebiscite after five years. The British and the French created their own spheres of influence, Italy took the Dodecanese Islands, and the Bosporus straits were internationalised. The Allies applied to the Ottoman lands the same principles and methods used in their partition of Africa. See B. Jelavich, History of the Balkans: Twentieth Century, vol. 2, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 130–31.
49 M. Soysal, ‘The Future of Turkish Foreign Policy’ in L.G. Martin and D. Keridis (eds), The Future of Turkish Foreign Policy, MIT Press, 2004, pp. 37–47.
50 See more recent statements on Sèvres by Leftist DSP MP C. Yazar, TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 27 November 2001; on human rights destroying the national treasure of Turkey, see nationalist MHP MP, İ. Kose, TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 27 November 2001; on Turkey standing on a ‘satanic triangle’ with enemies trying to divide it along Sunni-Alevi lines, see Islamist SP MP, Ö. V. Hatipoğlu, TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 27 November 2001; for references to the EU trying to separate Turkey and turn third-world countries into weak entities, see conservative AKP MP H. Çelik, TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 27 November 2001, p. 225.
51 Specific references to Sèvres are primarily (but not exclusively) made by the Kemalists. For a contemporaneous comparison of the Kemalist and non-Kemalist approaches to history, see M. Guida, ‘The Sèvres Syndrome and “Komplò” Theories in the Islamist and Secular Press’, Turkish Studies, 9, 2007, 37–52; D. Jung, ‘The Sèvres Syndrome: Turkish Foreign Policy and its Historical Legacies’, www.american diplomacy.org.
53 Gül’s fairly moderate comment was not reported in the Turkish or international media, unlike the speech by the hawkish Islamist leader Recai Kutan, which was published by Ankara Anatolia Agency. Kutan said that Syria’s Alevi minority dominated the 90 per cent Sunni majority, and had a perverted mentality. See A. Anatolia, ‘Kutan Faults Syria, Calls for TNGA Debate on Tension’, FBIS Translated Text, 6 October 1998.
54 This was the primary reason for Turkey to continue supporting this operation; see M. Karayalçın, TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 18 December 1994.
55 Interestingly enough, this frame contradicts popular conspiracy frames described above which attribute PKK’s actions to outsiders’ support see O. Kılıçgözlu, TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 21 March 1995, p.30.


See I. Cem, TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 20 December 1997, p.46; Cem was probably referring to the decision of Cyprus President Cleridis to delay the missile purchase for 16 months, and then to send S-300 to Crete. See ‘Resources on the Missile Crisis over Cyprus’, Center for Non-Proliferation Studies, http://cns.miis.edu/research/cyprus/.


“'Hot Potato' Scolds Europe”, *Turkish Daily News*, 30 November 1998.


A Turkish daily reported that two million people participated in an email campaign; see *Hürriyet*, 24 November, 24, p. 25. The state TV reported a figure of one million people in various mobilisations; see ‘More Anti-Italian Demonstrations Held in “TRNC” Turkey’, Ankara TRT Television, 24 November 1998, *FBIS Translated Text*.


ANSA Reports, *op. cit*.


According to Homer-Dixon ‘new technologies are particularly potent when coupled with new techniques—including scientific polling, direct marketing, and image management—for mobilizing and manipulating public opinion to support specific causes’ in T. Homer-Dixon, *The Ingenuity Gap (How Can We Solve the Problems of the Future?)*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2000, p. 327.


See S. Demirel, TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 1 October 1995, p. 7. Exactly 3 years later, President Demirel expressed the belief that the two neighbours could resolve their disputes; see TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 1 October 1998, p. 26.

This was the interpretation of I. Tez of the Leftist Party SHP, TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 21 December 1994, p. 393.

See the speech by Islamist RP MP C. Ayhan in TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 21 December 1994, p. 410; see also debates on those events and the Pontiac genocide in TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 1 March 1994.

On Turkey’s willingness to co-operate with the UN, see President K. Evren, TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 7 December 1983. Interestingly, in his speech, Evren reveals that his government had no prior knowledge of the TRNC declaration a month earlier; see also all party representatives, TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 17 June 1993.


See Prime Minister M. Yılmaz, TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 17 April 1996, p. 66. For a similar speech on the Aegean, see Minister of Foreign Affairs I. Cem, TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 20 December 1997, pp. 47–9.


See TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 13 March 1999, p. 20.

Conservative DYP MP, H. Kozakçuoğlu, TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 13 March 1999, p. 17. Criticisms of impartiality were directed primarily against the UN on Cyprus and to a lesser degree the Greek Cypriots; see, for instance, Conservative ANAP MP, K. Inan, TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 17 June 1993, p. 500; left-wing CHP MP, D. Baykal, TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 17 June 1993, p. 512.


For example, compare SHP with ANAP, in TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 21 December 1994, pp. 395–9; see S. Demirel, TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 1 October 1995, pp. 7–8.


A. Tekin, TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 12 October 1999, p. 17.

See E. Özdöğu, TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 26 October 1999, p. 29.


TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 12 October 1999, pp. 10–12.

E. Copeaux, ‘Otherness in the Turkish Historical Discourse: General Considerations’ in C. Koulouri (ed.), *Clio in the Balkans: The Politics of History Education*, Center for Democracy and

90 Courts have been instrumental in silencing dissent on various occasions including civil society organisations; see T. Bora, ‘Professional Champions and Non-Voluntary Organizations: The Intersection of Public, Civil and National’ in S. Yerasimos, S. Günter and K. Vorhoff (eds), *Civil Society in the Grip of Nationalism*, Institut Francais D’Etudes Anatoliennes, 2000, pp. 99–143.


100 Former chief of staff and president, leader of the 12 September 1980 military coup.


104 D. Ergil, *Türkiye Odalar Birliği: Doğu Sorunu Tesisi ve Tespitleri* [The Eastern Question: Diagnosis and Findings], TOBB, 1995. Ergil is the president and director of the Center for the Research of Societal Problems (TOSAV), one of Ankara’s few non-governmental organisation created to address the tensions between Turks and Kurds. In studies such as the ‘TOBB Report’, he shows that Kurds demand human rights, not secession (Ergil, 2000). See also Interview with Doğu Ergil, 22 December 2001.


