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## İSMAİL CEM: A UNIQUE IMPRINT IN TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY\*

### İSMAİL CEM: TÜRK DIŞ POLİTİKASINDA BENZERSİZ BİR İZ

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#### ABSTRACT

The 1990s marked a significant turning point in international politics and Turkish foreign policy. İsmail Cem served as Türkiye's longest-serving foreign minister from 1997 to 2002 during this period of great change and transformation. Cem's historical perspective and realistic approach, which was peaceful but also based on interests, stood out from the first day he took office. He aimed to change the static structure of traditional Turkish foreign policy. During this period, İsmail Cem's vision shaped Türkiye's relations with its neighbours and allies, and this multidimensional foreign policy approach became a key motivation for Türkiye's post-Cold War foreign policy. This study will examine the foreign policy dynamics during İsmail Cem's tenure and his intellectual influence on Turkish foreign policy. It is argued that Cem aimed to create a multidimensional and realistic understanding of foreign policy, but his vision of Turkey's post-Cold War geopolitical posture differed from other visions, such as "neo-Ottomanism" or "Eurasianism", which excluded the West.

**Keywords:** Geopolitics, İsmail Cem, Multidimensionality, Social Democracy, Turkish Foreign Policy.

#### ÖZ

1990'lı yıllar hem uluslararası siyasette hem de Türk dış politikasında önemli bir dönüm noktası olarak görülmektedir. Bu büyük değişim ve dönüşüm döneminde İsmail Cem 1997-2002 yılları arasında Türkiye'nin en uzun süre görev yapan dışişleri bakanı oldu. Göreve geldiği ilk günden itibaren geleneksel Türk dış politikasının statik yapısını değiştirmeye çalışan Cem, barışçıl ama aynı zamanda çıkarlara dayalı tarihsel perspektifi ve gerçekçi yaklaşımıyla öne çıktı. Türkiye'nin hem komşularıyla hem de diğer müttefikleriyle ilişkileri bu dönemde Cem'in vizyonu ile şekillenmiş ve bu çok boyutlu dış politika yaklaşımı Türkiye'nin Soğuk Savaş sonrası dış politikasının temel motivasyonlarından biri haline gelmiştir. Bu çalışma İsmail Cem dönemindeki dış politika dinamiklerini ve Cem'in Türk dış politikası üzerindeki entelektüel etkisini inceleyecektir. Çalışmada Cem'in çok boyutlu ve gerçekçi bir dış politika anlayışı yaratmayı amaçladığı, ancak Türkiye'nin Soğuk Savaş sonrası jeopolitik duruşuna ilişkin vizyonunun, Batı'yı dışlayan "yeni Osmanlıcılık" veya "Avrasyacılık" gibi diğer vizyonlardan farklı olduğu ileri sürülmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Çok Boyutluluk, Jeopolitik, İsmail Cem, Sosyal Demokrasi, Türk Dış Politikası.

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## Introduction

The 1990s are seen as a major turning point in both international politics and Turkish foreign policy. In this environment of great change and transformation, İsmail Cem was the political figure who served as the longest-serving Foreign Minister during the period of frequently changing coalition governments in Türkiye until 2002. Cem began his career as a journalist in the late 1960s and early 1970s and became an influential figure in Türkiye's leftist intellectual circles through his books and columns. It is possible to observe the transformation of the world, of Türkiye, and of Cem himself in the 1980s and 1990s. Cem's socialist views of the 1970s became more liberal in the 1990s due to the end of the Cold War, the redefinition of the position of European socialists as a "third way" between capitalism and socialism, and the influence of the 12 September 1980 military coup. As a social democratic politician, Cem's most important contribution to Turkish politics was the promotion of liberal democratic rhetoric and attitudes in politics.

From 30 June 1997 to 11 July 2002, İsmail Cem served as Foreign Minister for five years in the 55th, 56th and 57th governments. He can be remembered as the last effective social democratic foreign minister in Türkiye, as Prof. Dr. Şükrü Sina Gürel, who served as foreign minister after Cem, lasted only four months. Since Gürel, no social democratic foreign minister has been appointed to the post.

From the first day he took office as Foreign Minister in 1997, Cem stood out for his historical perspective and realistic approach, which was peaceful but also based on interests, as he sought to change the static structure of traditional Turkish foreign policy. Türkiye's relations with both its neighbours and other allies were shaped by Cem's vision during this period, and this multidimensional foreign policy approach became one of the main motivations of Türkiye's post-Cold War foreign policy. The period during which Cem served as a minister was marked by both cooperation and significant conflicts and crises in Turkish foreign policy. However, Cem was able to leave his own unique mark on Turkish foreign policy by approaching crises from a different perspective than previous leaders.

This study examines the foreign policy dynamics during the tenure of İsmail Cem, who served as Türkiye's Foreign Minister between 1997 and 2002. It also analyzes Cem's liberal and social democratic foreign policy vision, his new geopolitical perspective and their impact on Turkish foreign policy.

### A career path from a journalist to a politician

İsmail Cem was born in İstanbul in 1940 to a wealthy family of immigrants from Thessaloniki. In 1959, he graduated from Robert College before pursuing his undergraduate studies in Switzerland. Four years later, he graduated from the Faculty of Law at the University of Lausanne.<sup>1</sup> During this time, Cem developed socialist views by closely following political debates in Europe.

After completing his undergraduate studies, Cem pursued a career in journalism. Upon returning to Türkiye, he started writing articles for Milliyet newspaper, where his cousin Abdi İpekçi was a manager, and later for Cumhuriyet newspaper. He worked as a foreign correspondent and editor-in-chief at Cumhuriyet and was president of the İstanbul branch of the Turkish Journalists' Union (TGS) between 1971 and 1974.<sup>2</sup>

Following the memorandum of 12 March 1971, Bülent Ecevit, the prime minister of the coalition government formed after the 1973 elections between the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi-CHP) and the National Salvation Party (Milli Selamet Partisi-MSP), appointed İsmail Cem as the Director General of the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) in February 1974. This position played an important role in Cem's career as it was his first bureaucratic experience. He would later describe his 500-day tenure in his book "TRT'de 500 Gün" (500 Days at TRT). During this period, Cem not only improved TRT's infrastructure, but also brought many innovations to the content of the broadcasts.<sup>3</sup> In particular, he won the public's appreciation for his accurate coverage of the events during the 1974 intervention in Cyprus.

<sup>1</sup> Can Dündar, *Ben Böyle Veda Etmeliyim*, İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Yayınları, 2008, 6-22; Ozan Örmeci, *Bir Türk Sosyal Demokrati İsmail Cem*, Uşak: AKY Basım Yayın, 2011, 17-19.

<sup>2</sup> Dündar, *Ben Böyle Veda Etmeliyim*, 67.

<sup>3</sup> For example, during Cem's tenure, TRT broadcast Mevlud live for the first time and Turkey entered the Eurovision Song Contest. BBC Türkçe, Arşiv Odası: İsmail Cem, 1974. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOaumh6p2nM>. Erişim 05.04.2024.

On 31 March 1975, the 1st Nationalist Front Government was formed by the Justice Party (Adalet Partisi-AP), the MSP, the Republican Reliance Party (Cumhuriyetçi Güven Partisi-CGP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi-MHP). İsmail Cem faced harsh criticism and controversy during this period, which led to the end of his tenure as Director General in 1975. Following the assassination of Abdi İpekçi on 1 February 1979, he moved to Paris with his family in June 1980. While he was working as a researcher at UNESCO, the military coup of 12 September 1980 took place in Türkiye. After completing his Master's degree in Political Sociology at the École Libre des Sciences Politiques in Paris, he returned to Türkiye and began working at Güneş Newspaper.

Before entering politics, Cem occupied an important place in Turkish intellectual life through his writings. In the 1970s, he took a socialist line, but after the 1980s he began to advocate European-style liberal social democracy. In fact, Cem not only defended social democracy, but also wrote many books on the transformation of the left in the world and social democracy in Türkiye.

On his return to Türkiye, Cem became active in politics, joining the Social Democratic Populist Party (Sosyal Demokrat Halkçı Parti-SHP) in 1985. He later became the SHP's deputy for İstanbul in the 1987 general election. During this time, he ran for the party leadership alongside Erdal İnönü and Deniz Baykal in the 1988 SHP congress, but failed. He was re-elected as the SHP's İstanbul deputy in the 1991 general election.

One of Cem's most significant political moves was when he was elected deputy chairman of the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi-CHP) in 1992. Another was when he ran for the presidency with Süleyman Demirel, Lütfü Doğan and Kamran İnan after the sudden death of Turgut Özal in 1993. Cem's first experience of government came in 1995, when he was appointed Minister of Culture in the coalition government of the True Path Party (Doğru Yol Partisi-DYP) and the SHP, a post he held for only three months. During this short period, he organised concerts with 500 artists in eastern Anatolia and launched the celebration of the seven hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>4</sup>

After this brief ministerial experience, he joined the Democratic Left Party (Demokratik Sol Parti-DSP) and was elected as a DSP deputy for Kayseri in the 1995 general elections. Following the military intervention on 28 February 1997, he was appointed Foreign Minister by the Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi-ANAP)-Democratic Left Party-Democrat Türkiye Party (Demokrat Türkiye Partisi-DTP) (ANASOL-D) government on 30 June 1997.<sup>5</sup> After the 1999 general election, he remained in parliament as a DSP deputy for Kayseri and served as Foreign Minister in the newly formed DSP-ANAP-MHP coalition. When the economic crisis of 2001 and subsequent domestic political developments were compounded by the September 11 attacks and US plans to intervene in Iraq, he realised that the government would not last long. As a result, he resigned from the DSP in 2002 and founded the New Türkiye Party (Yeni Türkiye Partisi-YTP) with Hüsamettin Özkan and Kemal Derviş, but the party was unsuccessful in the 2002 general election and the 2004 local elections. He then rejoined the CHP and became an adviser to Deniz Baykal before retiring from politics to teach at İstanbul Bilgi University and write several books. He died on 24 January 2007 in İstanbul after losing his battle with lung cancer, which he was diagnosed with in 2004.

After a career in journalism, Cem continued as a bureaucrat and politician, and he is one of the rare intellectuals who has had the opportunity to apply his accumulated knowledge and views as a decision-maker in politics and foreign policy. During his time as a minister, Cem received numerous national and international awards, but what distinguishes him from his predecessors and successors is that he left behind a number of works related to Turkish politics and social democracy. Some of his works include "Türkiye'de Geri Kalmışlığın Tarihi" (The History of Türkiye's Backwardness), "Türkiye Üzerine Araştırmalar" (Studies on Türkiye), "12 Mart-Yazılar" (12 March - Essays), "12 Mart Değerlendirme/iki cilt" (12 March Evaluation/two volumes), "TRT'de 500 Gün" (500 Days at TRT), "Siyaset Yazıları" (Political Essays), "Geçiş Dönemi Türkiye'si" (Transition Period in Türkiye), "Sosyal Demokrasi ya da Demokratik Sosyalizm Nedir, Ne Değildir?" (What is Social Democracy or Democratic Socialism, What is Not? ), "Türkiye'de Sosyal Demokrasi" (Social Democracy in Türkiye), "Engeller ve Çözümler"

<sup>4</sup> Dündar, *Ben Böyle Veda Etmeliyim*, 662.

It was claimed that Prime Minister Ecevit had actually proposed Şükrü Sina Gürel, not İsmail Cem, as Foreign Minister, but that the then President Süleyman Demirel wanted Cem for the post instead of Gürel, to which Ecevit did not object. Fatih Altaylı, "İsmail Cem Demirel'in Adayı Olur", *Hürriyet*, 20.04.2000. <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/fatih-altayli-ismail-cem-demirelin-adayi-olur-39148648>. Erişim 05.04.2024.

(Obstacles and Solutions), “Yeni Sol” (New Left), “Soldaki Arayış” (Searching for the Left), “Gelecek İçin Denemeler” (Essays for the Future) and “Türkiye, Avrupa, Asya/iki cilt” (Türkiye, Europe, Asia/two volumes), among others. Many studies have also been conducted on Cem, and several master’s and Ph.D. theses and academic articles have been written about him.

### **Türkiye and the world in the 1990s**

The 1990s was a period of many debates, both intellectual and international, following the end of the Cold War. According to Baskın Oran, the third wave of globalization, which had laid its economic and technological foundations in the 1970s and 1980s, was completed in the 1990s with the collapse of the Soviet Union. In this sense, it was thought that there was no longer any rival that could provide an alternative to Western ideology and neoliberal economics.<sup>6</sup> In 1989, the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama published an article in the *National Interest* entitled “The End of History”, in which he argued that the ideological struggle of the Cold War had ended with the triumph of liberal democracy. According to Fukuyama, history had thus come to an end. This idea, based on the theory of democratic peace, implied that there would be no more major wars in the world. During the Gulf crisis in 1990, US President George H.W. Bush gave a speech to Congress in which he called this new period the “New World Order”. According to Bush, this new order would be “a new era-free from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice, and more secure in the quest for peace. An era in which the nations of the world, East and West, North and South, can prosper and live in harmony.”<sup>7</sup> However, the euphoria generated in liberal circles by Fukuyama’s “End of History” thesis was soon replaced by the pessimism of Samuel Huntington’s “The Clash of Civilizations”<sup>8</sup>, published in *Foreign Affairs* in 1993. In his article, Huntington argued that the end of the Cold War did not mean the end of conflicts in the world, but that these conflicts would now be between civilisations and would be based on identity rather than ideology and economics. After the Gulf War, which began with the US intervention in the region following Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait, and the bloody ethnic conflicts in the Balkans and Africa, it was thought that Fukuyama’s predictions had been largely falsified.

Bush’s “New World Order” was the first sign of a new American hegemony in the post-Cold War world. During this period, the collapse of the Soviet Union created a significant power vacuum in the Balkans, the Caucasus and Central Asia, while energy security became one of the most important issues on the international agenda. In the Middle East, the “dual containment” policy towards Iran and Iraq led to a tightening of US hegemony, while the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks initiated in the early 1990s brought a positive atmosphere to the region.

In Europe, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, the concept of a new social democracy compatible with a market economy began to be discussed. The transition to democracy in Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the enlargement of the European Union (EU) with the Maastricht Treaty in 1993 were the defining factors in the European political environment. The conflicts between Serbia and Croatia, as well as the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo, brought discussions about human rights, crimes against humanity and ethnic conflicts to the fore in various European countries.

Türkiye entered this uncertain environment with a severe economic crisis. The 1994 crisis and the subsequent 1997 Asian crisis left Türkiye’s economic structure very fragile. The ruling parties had to sign structural adjustment programmes with the IMF to prevent this fragile structure from collapsing. Although the pace of privatisation accelerated during this period, the resources generated by privatisation have not been sufficient to improve the economy.

Although Türkiye applied for full membership of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1987, its relations with Europe in the 1990s were problematic in many respects. The anti-EEC sentiment of the 1960s and 1970s was reversed in the 1990s, and the EU began to be seen as a saviour of human rights and freedoms by a large part of Türkiye’s social democratic movements. Türkiye joined the Customs Union in 1995, but did not make much progress towards EU membership. It became even more economically dependent on the EU.

In the 1980s, during the second Cold War, Türkiye and the US continued their close relations after the crises of the 1970s. The Turkish political elite, concerned about losing its strategic importance in the eyes of its ally,

<sup>6</sup> Baskın Oran, *Türk Dış Politikası: Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne Olgular, Belgeler, Yorumlar, Cilt II: 1980-2001*, İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2003, 204.

<sup>7</sup> George H.W. Bush, Address Before a Joint Session of Congress, 11 September 1990, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/september-11-1990-address-joint-session-congress>. Erişim 06.01.2023.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?”, *Foreign Affairs*, 72/3, (1993), 22-49. doi.org/10.2307/20045621. Erişim 05.03.2022.

unconditionally supported the US in the Gulf War. Issues such as energy security and Türkiye's desire to become a "model" for the newly independent Central Asian states were among the most important topics of cooperation between the two countries.<sup>9</sup>

In domestic politics, the "Turkish-Islamic synthesis" developed after the military coup of 12 September 1980 against the socialist and Kurdish movements began to bear fruit in the 1990s. When this ideological position combined with the economic crisis, Islamist Welfare Party (Refah Partisi-RP) achieved successive successes in local and general elections. In this political environment, the terrorism of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) also began to increase its influence, especially in the cities. This situation became one of Türkiye's biggest domestic and foreign policy problems. In this context, the decisions taken by the National Security Council on 28 February 1997 to combat "Islamic reactionism" and the events that followed can be seen as the beginning of the rupture of the 2000s. It was in this domestic and international context that İsmail Cem took office as Foreign Minister in June 1997.

### Turkish foreign policy from Cem's perspective

As mentioned above, it is necessary to understand Cem's ideological transformation in the context of the transformation of Türkiye and the world after 1980. It is known that Cem, who had a socialist stance in the 1970s, was greatly influenced by the famous Turkish novelist Kemal Tahir, his political stance and his understanding of history. In the Asiatic Mode of Production (ATÜT) debate, which was an important in left-wing discussion in Türkiye, Cem positioned himself closer to the side of Kemal Tahir, Sencer Divitçioğlu and Selahattin Hilav.<sup>10</sup>

In his articles and books, İsmail Cem presented a left perspective on Türkiye's historical depth. Especially in his book "The History of Backwardness in Türkiye", he analyzed the historical, economic, social, cultural, and political reasons of Türkiye's backwardness, reflecting the historical theses of Kemal Tahir.<sup>11</sup> According to Cem's analysis, "Türkiye can break the cycle of backwardness with a method that is suited to the structure of its people, does not contradict the economic realities both in the world and in the country, and is led by the masses; it can reach the place it deserves culturally and historically, as well as with its economic and social order."<sup>12</sup>

In the 1970s, Cem's socialist beliefs developed and, after the 1980 coup, he became actively involved in politics, adopting a new understanding of social democracy based on pluralism and a free market economy rather than socialism. After the end of the Cold War, Cem closely followed discussions in European left-wing politics and began to embrace the idea of a "third way" as a middle ground between socialism and capitalism. Through his books written in 1987<sup>13</sup>, 1989<sup>14</sup>, 1992<sup>15</sup>, and 1994<sup>16</sup>, he tried to define and question the concept of "social democracy", especially in the context of Türkiye.

Cem defined democracy as a way of life and believed that in order to strengthen democracy, it had to be embraced and internalized in all aspects of society.<sup>17</sup> He emphasized that the development of democracy in Türkiye was different from that in Western countries and that democratic values could not be institutionalized due to the dominance of bureaucratic institutions. In the 1970s, Cem emphasized Türkiye's "backwardness" and supported state-sponsored development models as a solution. After the 1980s, however, he began to support the idea that Türkiye could achieve European standards of democracy by joining the EU. According to Örmeci, Cem's transformation from an "Eastern socialist" to a "Western social democrat" was evident in his changing attitude towards Türkiye's backwardness.<sup>18</sup>

Following the 1980 coup, the CHP was closed down on 16 October 1981 along with all other political parties. When the CHP was re-established on 9 September 1992, İsmail Cem took on the role of deputy chairman in the

<sup>9</sup> Ayşe Ömür Atmaca, *Old Game in a New World: Turkey and the United States from Critical Perspective*. Doktora tezi, ODTÜ Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, 2011. 102-156.

<sup>10</sup> Sedat Gençer, "Az Gelişmişlik, Geri Kalmışlık ve Kalkınma: İsmail Cem Örneğinde 1960'lı Yıllarda Solun Tarih Kurgusu". *İnsan ve Toplum*, 3/6, (2013): 131. dx.doi.org/10.12658/human.society.3.6.M0068. Erişim 11.09.2022.

<sup>11</sup> İsmail Cem, *Türkiye'de Geri Kalmışlığın Tarihi*, İstanbul: Cem Yayınevi, 1975.

<sup>12</sup> Cem, *Türkiye'de Geri Kalmışlığın*, 556.

<sup>13</sup> İsmail Cem, *Türkiye'de Sosyal Demokrasi: Engeller ve Çözümler*, İstanbul: Cem Yayınevi, 1987.

<sup>14</sup> İsmail Cem, *Sosyal Demokrasi ya da Demokratik Sosyalizm Nedir, Ne Değildir... Ve Türkiye'de Olabilirliği*, İstanbul: Cem Yayınevi, 1989.

<sup>15</sup> İsmail Cem ve Deniz Baykal, *Yeni Sol*, İstanbul: Cem Yayınevi, 1992.

<sup>16</sup> İsmail Cem, *Soldaki Arayış*, İstanbul: Cem Yayınevi, 2000.

<sup>17</sup> İsmail Cem, *Siyaset Yazıları: "Geçiş Dönemi Türkiye" (1981-1984 Yılları)*, İstanbul: Cem Yayınevi, 1984, 13.

<sup>18</sup> Ozan Örmeci, *Portrait of a Turkish Social Democrat: İsmail Cem*. Doktora Tezi, Bilkent Üniversitesi, 2011.164.

party led by Deniz Baykal. His foreign policy perspective was clear in the foreign policy section of the party's 1994 program. The program emphasized the need for a "principled foreign policy" and stated that "Türkiye must change its patterns of behaviour in foreign policy. Instead of a passive and behind-the-scenes foreign policy, Türkiye must pursue a constructive and positive foreign policy that aims to influence the international relations system and its environment".<sup>19</sup> These statements outlined a new and multidimensional foreign policy vision. Similarly, the program declared that "Türkiye is both a Balkan and a Middle Eastern country. It has historical links with both regions. Relations with the countries of both regions should be developed with mutual interests, friendship and a lasting peace understanding."<sup>20</sup> This phrases emphasized Türkiye's Eastern and Western identities and its historical depth within its own geography, in line with Cem's understanding of foreign policy. İsmail Cem wrote about his thoughts on Turkish foreign policy during his time as Foreign Minister and afterwards in the following books: "Gelecek İçin Denemeler"<sup>21</sup> (Experiments for the Future), "Turkey in the New Century"<sup>22</sup>, "Türkiye, Avrupa, Avrasya Birinci Cilt: Strateji, Yunanistan, Kıbrıs"<sup>23</sup> (Türkiye, Europe, Eurasia Volume One: Strategy, Greece, Cyprus), and "Türkiye, Avrupa, Avrasya İkinci Cilt: Avrupa'nın "Birliği" ve Türkiye"<sup>24</sup> (Türkiye, Europe, Eurasia Volume Two: Europe's "Union" and Türkiye).

As the longest-serving social democratic foreign minister, İsmail Cem brought major innovations to Turkish foreign policy in the post-Cold War era. Of course, Turgut Özal's economic liberalization and multilateral foreign policy steps after the Cold War are significant and should not be overlooked. However, Turgut Özal's approach to foreign policy differed slightly from Cem's, as it was based more on economic interests.

During the period from February 1990 to June 1997, which witnessed significant changes in the world, Turkish foreign policy remained unstable with 11 foreign ministers serving for about 87 months. Although there were many social democratic foreign ministers in the 1990s, such as Hikmet Çetin, Murat Karayalçın, Mümtaz Soysal, Erdal İnönü and Deniz Baykal, their relatively short tenures did not allow them to have as great an impact on foreign policy as İsmail Cem.

When Cem was appointed, he did not know that he would be in office for such a long time, but he immediately made it clear that he intended to bring about a conceptual change in Turkish foreign policy. In his press conference immediately after his appointment as Foreign Minister on 30 June 1997, he declared: "We have begun the process of constructing and implementing a new foreign policy"<sup>25</sup>, which was one of the most significant signs of his intention.

During this period, he tried to break the traditional mould and bring a breath of fresh air to Turkish foreign policy. Yet, this era was full of crises for Turkish foreign policy, such as the Kardak crisis in 1995, the exclusion of Türkiye from the EU at the Luxembourg summit in 1997, the security crisis with Syria in October 1998, the Jerusalem Night crisis with Iran in 1997 and the September 11 attacks on the United States in 2001. Cem tried to solve many of these crises that Türkiye faced with his foreign policy understanding, diplomatic means and peaceful methods. In fact, the historic rapprochement that took place in Turkish-Greek relations after the Gölcük earthquake in August 1999, and the Athens earthquake in September of the same year, as well as Türkiye's acquisition of EU candidate status at the 1999 Helsinki Summit, are among Cem's most prominent diplomatic successes. Similarly, managing the process of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan's capture in Kenya, Türkiye's position on the Afghanistan operation after the September 11 attacks, managing the S-300 missile crisis with the Greek Cypriot administration between 1997 and 1998, negotiating the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, signing the Adana Protocol with Syria, and turning around cooperation with Iran after the tensions of the Jerusalem night were other important diplomatic successes during his tenure. Finally, the Latin America Initiative, which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched in order to expand and diversify its areas of activity, should also be mentioned in this context.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>19</sup> CHP Program, 1994, [http://library.fes.de/fulltext/ialhi/90111/chp\\_prog.htm](http://library.fes.de/fulltext/ialhi/90111/chp_prog.htm). Erişim 22.01.2023.

<sup>20</sup> CHP Program, 1994, [http://library.fes.de/fulltext/ialhi/90111/chp\\_prog.htm](http://library.fes.de/fulltext/ialhi/90111/chp_prog.htm). Erişim 22.01.2023.

<sup>21</sup> İsmail Cem, *Gelecek İçin Denemeler*, İstanbul: İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> İsmail Cem, *Turkey in the New Century*, Mersin: Rüstem Publishing, 2001.

<sup>23</sup> İsmail Cem, *Türkiye, Avrupa, Avrasya, Birinci Cilt: Strateji Yunanistan Kıbrıs*, İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2004.

<sup>24</sup> İsmail Cem, *Türkiye, Avrupa, Avrasya, İkinci Cilt: Avrupa'nın "Birliği" ve Türkiye*, İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2005.

<sup>25</sup> Cem, *Turkey in the New Century*, 2.

<sup>26</sup> Oran, *Türk Dış Politikası*, 225-240.

In the 1990s, Türkiye's relations with the US developed in line with Cem's foreign policy vision. Although the Turkish-US alliance was damaged by the Cyprus crisis and the US arms embargo on Türkiye in the 1960s and 1970s, "strategic" cooperation between the two countries continued after the end of the Cold War.<sup>27</sup> Located at the heart of Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Middle East and the Balkans, Türkiye was concerned about losing its strategic importance to the US after the Cold War. However, in this new environment, it was in a better position to pursue a multidimensional and active foreign policy. Cem assessed Türkiye's relations with the US from a pragmatic and realistic perspective and emphasized the necessity of these relations. Indeed, Türkiye worked closely with the US to assess the power vacuum in Central Asia and to ensure the safe transfer of Caspian oil to Western markets. After the 11 September attacks, Türkiye again stood by the US, but made various diplomatic efforts to prevent the US from intervening in Iraq.<sup>28</sup>

İsmail Cem shaped Türkiye's foreign policy based on "respect for human rights, contribution to peace and strengthening of cultural and historical ties", and during this period, regional cooperation and a peace-oriented approach were adopted in Turkish foreign policy. As a result of this approach, Türkiye actively participated in regional cooperation platforms by developing its relations with neighbouring countries. Within this framework, Cem emphasized the importance of the role of international organisations in diplomacy and gained international recognition by organizing the OIC-EU Joint Forum in İstanbul in February 2002. During this period, Türkiye also played an active role in solving regional problems such as the Cyprus problem and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>29</sup>

Cem also underlined the importance of public diplomacy and believed that cultural and economic diplomacy should be used more effectively. In line with this, Türkiye has made significant efforts in the fields of culture and tourism to promote Türkiye's historical and cultural richness and make them better known to the world, while also pursuing an active foreign policy to promote economic cooperation and attract foreign investment.

Finally, it should be added that Cem attached great importance to personal relations in foreign policy in order to pursue a peaceful policy. His close relations with Greek Foreign Minister Papandreou, Dutch Foreign Minister Van Aartsen, French Foreign Minister Védrine and US Secretary of State Albright positively influenced Türkiye's relations with these countries during his tenure.<sup>30</sup>

### **What is new in Cem's foreign policy?**

From his first day in office, Cem criticized traditional Turkish foreign policy and tried to define a new understanding of foreign policy. According to him, traditional Turkish foreign policy is two-dimensional, with sharp lines and a lack of cultural and historical depth.<sup>31</sup> Türkiye has an "extraordinary culture and civilization history", but its foreign policy, especially during the Cold War, was condemned to a binary structure with no room for manoeuvre. Like Özal, who emphasized the importance of being ambitious in world politics, Cem stressed the need to reshape Turkish foreign policy in this direction.<sup>32</sup>

According to Cem, Türkiye's goal should be to become a "Global State" that acts as a role model with its democracy, secularism, respect for human rights, and traditional characteristic of tolerance. Türkiye should also compete with the best in the realms of science, technology, and economy and become one of the major centers of attraction with its historical record, cultural richness, humanism, and sense of identity with all contemporary values. He believed that Türkiye has a duty to complement and blend its original identity and purpose with contemporary values and ideals in order to contribute to the grand walk of humanity.<sup>33</sup>

Cem's understanding of foreign policy was historically deeper and multidimensional, and he had a new and different geopolitical vision from his predecessors. The following sections examine İsmail Cem's innovations and intellectual imprint on Turkish foreign policy.

<sup>27</sup> Ayşe Ömür Atmaca, "Soğuk Savaş Sonrası Yeni Jeopolitik Dengeler: 1990'lı Yıllarda Türk-Amerikan İlişkileri", Der. Gökhan Erdem, *A. Haluk Ülman'a Armağan*. Ankara: Ankara Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi Yayınları, 2013, 118.

<sup>28</sup> Dündar, *Ben Böyle Veda Etmeliyim*, 214-215.

<sup>29</sup> Meliha Altunışık, "Worldviews and Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East", *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 40, (2009): 186-187. doi:10.1017/S0896634600005264. Erişim 19.10.2022.

<sup>30</sup> Dündar, *Ben Böyle Veda Etmeliyim*, 209-210.

<sup>31</sup> Cem, *Turkey in the New Century*, 2-3.

<sup>32</sup> Cem, *Turkey in the New Century*, 11.

<sup>33</sup> İsmail Cem, "Turkey: Setting Sail to the 21st Century", *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs*, 2/3, (1997).

### **A foreign policy with historical depth**

Almost all studies of İsmail Cem emphasize his contribution to Türkiye foreign policy by incorporating the missing historical and cultural dimensions. The emphasis on history and culture in Cem's political analyzes can be clearly seen in his books and columns in the 1970s, as well as during his tenure as Director General of TRT and Minister of Culture.

Although Cem's ideas about socialism had changed considerably by the 1990s, perhaps the most constant element in his views was his emphasis on history and culture. In this sense, he criticized traditional Turkish foreign policy for being ahistorical. According to him, Türkiye's history should be evaluated not only within its borders but also in the context of world history. Türkiye, cut off from its historical and cultural ties, needed to benefit from the Ottoman Empire and even the Ionian, Trojan, Byzantine and Seljuk civilizations in order to have a personality and a multidimensional foreign policy.<sup>34</sup> Cem explained that his most important original contribution to foreign policy was to provide historical and cultural depth: "I have always considered history as a decisive factor in defining Turkey's past and present. I believe it's our most valuable asset. I also believe that we have never made good use of our historical and cultural specificities. I tried to bring up this point in some of my books and essays. Actually, I am making ample use of this asset in designing our policies. In fact, the much-delayed introduction of the "historical dimension" to our geo-strategy is what I consider as my modest contribution to Turkish foreign policy."<sup>35</sup>

According to Cem's understanding of history, events and developments in Türkiye's past should be seen in their global and regional context. Rather than a conservative understanding of history, he has a realistic, pragmatic and dynamic approach, arguing that history is an important textbook and that historical events and decisions have a significant impact on current political and social decisions. For Tuğtan, Cem saw history and culture as powerful elements of a foreign policy conducted with a realist understanding, with Eurasia as its geographical focus, and he saw no contradiction between belonging to a civilization and universalism in terms of values.<sup>36</sup>

In this context, Cem stated that Turkey's role in the post-Cold War region is not only political and economic but also cultural and historical. He believed that Türkiye's historical and cultural ties needed to be strengthened in order to develop cooperation and relations with other countries in the region, and he advocated Türkiye's active presence in its "historical geography", not only with the West, but also with the Balkan countries, North Africa, the Middle East and the Caucasus, with which it has shared historical ties for centuries.

Similarly, for Cem, culture is as important an element as history. He emphasized that historical awareness is essential to help people understand their identity and culture, and that understanding and interpreting history requires a multifaceted perspective. In his book "Turkey in the New Century", Cem often refers to this emphasis on history and culture, stating that "Contemporary Turkish Republic should consider its identity as the expression of all cultures, which have thrived in our land; as the possessor of a great cultural heritage that can be traced to Ion, Byzantium, Central Asia, the Seljuks, and the Ottomans. In a historical dimension, our present day republic should be the representative and bearer of all these cultures that have flourished within our geography. Thus, what seems to me as the main factor of identity of Turkish culture might appear in a clearer vision: To be an original culture and to be specific to our geography on one hand; and, on the other, to be the cultural expression, the means of cultural dialogue and interaction, sometimes of synthesis of a much wider geography extending from Central Asia to the shores of the Aegean, to the Balkans, and to Central Europe."<sup>37</sup>

### **A multidimensional foreign policy**

From his first days as Foreign Minister, İsmail Cem criticized Türkiye's traditional two-dimensional foreign policy and sought to give it historical depth and geographical breadth. With this vision, he is considered one of the most important practitioners of the multidimensional foreign policy first signalled by Özal after the end of the Cold War. In fact, it can be said that there is an intellectual continuity in Cem's foreign policy orientation, as it overlaps with the "fully independent" foreign policy approach of the left in the 1970s. This view, which argued that Türkiye

<sup>34</sup> Cem, "Turkey: Setting Sail", 51.

<sup>35</sup> Cem, "Turkey: Setting Sail", 49.

<sup>36</sup> Mehmet Ali Tuğtan, "Kültürel Değişkenlerin Dış Politikadaki Yeri: İsmail Cem ve Ahmet Davutoğlu", *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, 13/49, (2016): 12. doi.org/10.33458/uidergisi.463054. Erişim 02.11.2022.

<sup>37</sup> Cem, *Turkey in the New Century*, 52.



should not remain dependent only on the West and Western alliances, found its practical application in the 1990s with the changing international environment.

Cem's multidimensional foreign policy has two basic components: thematic and geographical. According to Cem, thematic multidimensional foreign policy refers to the diversity and flexibility of Türkiye's foreign policy choices, enabling the country to best protect and promote its interests by acting simultaneously in different areas. In this framework, foreign policy should not be limited to political and military dimensions as in previous periods, but should also include economic, cultural, social, humanitarian and environmental dimensions. During his tenure, he aimed to protect Türkiye's interests in various areas such as EU membership, regional cooperation and peace, strengthening cultural and historical ties, cultural diplomacy, economic diplomacy and the Cyprus issue by cooperating with various actors. This approach contributed to Türkiye playing a more proactive role in foreign policy and gaining a respected position in the international arena.

Cem also criticized Türkiye's emphasis on its relations with the West and argued that Turkish foreign policy should be multidimensional in geographical terms. According to him, Türkiye is both a European and an Asian country, which he often emphasized in his speeches and writings, and after the end of the Cold War its new geographical center should be Eurasia. He believed that "Eurasia will be the center of global development in the 21st century, (...) and most of the wealth will come from Eurasia"<sup>38</sup>, and therefore, there was a "strong belief that Turkey's strategic future is linked to the emergence of Eurasia."<sup>39</sup> However, Cem's emphasis on Eurasia did not exclude relations with the West.

For Cem, Europe has played a significant role in Türkiye's historical development, and the relationship between Türkiye and Europe has evolved over time. The Ottoman Turkish presence in Europe during the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries brought forward new ideals and patterns of social relationships, introducing human values and a highly egalitarian, efficient, and sophisticated organization in an era when feudalism prevailed. As modern times approached, interaction with the West contributed to institutional reformation in Türkiye during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The external environment and its dynamics, including interaction with Europe, have been among the decisive factors in Türkiye's historical development.<sup>40</sup>

Cem's European vision was also reflected in Türkiye's EU membership aspirations. He emphasized the importance of relations with the EU, stressing that these multidimensional foreign policy efforts should not be seen as an alternative to Türkiye's EU candidacy, but rather as complementary. According to him, while Türkiye should see EU membership as a goal, it should not become "an obsessive fixation".<sup>41</sup> In this context, EU membership and "being a determinant in Eurasia" were defined as two of the most important foreign policy goals, complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

Accordingly, Türkiye, which had serious problems with its neighbours at the time of his inauguration in 1997, has had an impressive improvement in its relations with Greece, Iran and its Black Sea neighbours. Turkish-Greek relations were particularly strained in the mid-1990s over the Aegean and Cyprus issues, and the 1995 crisis over the Kardak islands brought the two countries to the brink of war. Especially after 1999, the foreign ministers of the two countries, İsmail Cem and Yorgo Papandreu, opened a new channel of dialogue based on peace and friendship, and the dimensions of the relationship changed with the friendship initiatives of the two ministers.

Türkiye, seeking to improve its relations with the "Islamic world" and its Middle Eastern neighbours, first tried to resolve the crisis with Syria. Although Cem's diplomatic initiatives sometimes met with a response, the two countries faced the possibility of war in 1998. After Öcalan's capture and extradition to Türkiye, however, relations began to soften. Similarly, Türkiye, which had problems with Iran in the early 1990s, strengthened its diplomatic relations with that country despite the army's criticism. Cem's balanced policy in the region, which he described as a "model" for the countries of the Middle East, led Türkiye to act as a mediator in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict during this period.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Cem, *Türkiye, Avrupa, Avrasya, Birinci Cilt*, 73.

<sup>39</sup> Cem, *Turkey in the New Century*, 67.

<sup>40</sup> İsmail Cem, "Turkey and Europe: Looking to the Future from a Historical Perspective", *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs*, 5/2, (2000): 1.

<sup>41</sup> Cem, *Türkiye, Avrupa, Avrasya, İkinci Cilt*, 10.

<sup>42</sup> Altunışık, "Worldviews and Turkish foreign policy", 186-187.

During this period, Cem developed relations with African and Latin American countries beyond what he described as Türkiye's "historical geography". In this context, he emphasized the importance of economic relations, stressing the importance of relations with global economic powers such as China, India and Russia, as well as the Atlantic and Pacific basins.

All of Cem's views on foreign policy were reflected in the election manifesto of the DSP in 1999, when he was a member of parliament. The basic framework of his multidimensional foreign policy approach can be clearly seen in the foreign policy section of the election manifesto: "Türkiye has a unique geopolitical position in the world. Historically, geographically and culturally, Türkiye is a European and Balkan country, a Mediterranean and Middle Eastern country, and a Caucasian and Asian country. With the end of the bipolar world and the beginning of the integration between Europe and Asia under the concept of 'Eurasia', Türkiye's multidimensional geopolitical position has become much more functional than before. If Türkiye can evaluate this position without delay and revive the 'region-centred' foreign policy of the 1920s and 1930s, it can regain the opportunities it has missed in recent years, albeit a little late. Türkiye can become a leading country in the region without confronting Russia or the Western allies. Türkiye was able to solve the Cyprus problem by balancing its relations with the Soviet Union and the West, even during the bipolar world. The only reason for the pressure we have faced in our region and the world in recent years, our loneliness and our ineffectiveness is that Türkiye's power has not been evaluated by those who govern it and the opportunities we have to create a region-centred and broad foreign policy have not been used. The most important condition for Türkiye to revive a region-centred and wide-ranging foreign policy is to get out of the political deadlock and the economic crisis it has been plunged into in recent years, and to address the shortcomings of democracy. A democratic Türkiye that becomes stronger and a leader in its own region will open the doors of the West."<sup>43</sup>

#### **A foreign policy with a new geopolitical vision**

It was not possible for Türkiye to remain unaffected by the new and evolving geopolitical discourse being reproduced and shaped in the post-Cold War international system. During his tenure, İsmail Cem was one of the most important politicians who changed and shaped Türkiye's geopolitical vision. His geopolitical vision aimed to enable Türkiye to play a more active role in the international arena by making the best use of the country's "strategic position" and "geographical advantages". According to him, Türkiye's unique position at the crossroads of civilizations, religions, and trade has had a significant impact on its interactions with Europe and the wider world.<sup>44</sup> Türkiye's this geopolitical position and historical background had "strategic" significance on the world political map and could make Türkiye a "regional" and "global power" if this advantage was used correctly.

Cem was aware that Türkiye is not independent of what happens around it and is directly affected by what happens in the countries around it. Therefore, he emphasized the importance of Türkiye establishing good relations with neighbouring countries to ensure regional stability and positioning itself as an element of peace, cooperation and security in the region, not only for Türkiye but also for the security and stability of the entire region.

During this period, Cem often emphasized Turkey's unique position as a country with both Asian and European identities. He believed that Eurasia would be the centre of the 21st century. In this period, when Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis defined Türkiye as a torn country, culturally divided between Western and Islamic civilizations, Cem made a similar identity definition but tried to determine Türkiye's foreign policy orientation more towards the "alliance of civilizations" discourse proposed against Huntington's theory.

Cem's geopolitical vision was not to reject the West but to emphasize the importance of Türkiye's relations with the West. According to him, Türkiye should establish good relations with both the West and the East in order to ensure balance and diversity. In this way, Türkiye could become a bridge between the West and the East in terms of political, economic, and cultural terms. Speaking about Türkiye's both Asian and European identity, Cem said: "Türkiye does not have to choose between being Asian or European: Türkiye has the privilege of being both Asian and European. This is our strength."<sup>45</sup> With this phrase, he emphasized the need to turn these identities into an asset for Türkiye.

<sup>43</sup> Democratic Left Party 1999 Election Manifesto, <https://acikerisim.tbmm.gov.tr/xmlui/handle/11543/696>. Erişim 22.01.2023.

<sup>44</sup> Cem, "Turkey and Europe", 1.

<sup>45</sup> Cem, *Türkiye, Avrupa, Avrasya, İkinci Cilt*, 332.

In his speeches and writings during this period, Cem can clearly be seen reflecting his ideological line in his geopolitical vision by using various geopolitical concepts. For example, the region he refers to in his works as Türkiye's "historical geography" is a broad geography consisting of the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus and Anatolia, with which Türkiye interacts historically, culturally and geographically. According to Cem, Türkiye's historical geography is also crucial in terms of human history. This region has been home to many civilizations and is a crossroads for many civilizations. Emphasizing the richness and cultural diversity of this historical geography, Cem stated that Türkiye's historical ties with this region are strong as follows: "Most of Türkiye's historical ties are not limited to fifty or a hundred years, but go back hundreds of years. When considering cultural characteristics such as the Middle East, the Caucasus, North Africa, Sudan, Yemen, etc., Central Asia is also a part of this 'Historical Geography'."<sup>46</sup>

Cem also used different geopolitical metaphors such as "pivot state", "central state", "key state", "model state", "terminal state" and "bridge state". He aimed to make Türkiye a "world state" in the 21st century, explaining this concept as "A 'world state,' positioned among the major centers of the world and representing a unique blend of civilizational assets, historical experiences and strategic attributes. A 'world state,' one that is not a sole importer of foreign science and technology but contributes as well to science and technology. One that is not a mere observer of others' success stories but it has its own achievements that sometimes make them envious as well. One that consistently develops its special relations with the regions with which it shares a common history. One that, in line with Atatürk's legacy, constitutes a role model for nations with parallel cultural backgrounds."<sup>47</sup> According to Cem's vision of the future, "Turkey embarks upon the 21st century with a new sense of her global mission.... Turkey is moving away from being simply 'transit corridor' or a 'bridge over which Asia and Europe trade with one another and move their goods.' Instead, Turkey in the 2000s will become increasingly more a 'terminus' and a 'destination' country."<sup>48</sup>

Cem insisted that Türkiye was a "model" country and explained what this means as follows: "among the countries with over a billion people and a tradition of Islam, Türkiye is the primary example with sensitivities and claims such as 'democracy, human rights, sharing the era, gender equality, and secularism'. It is a 'model'. Taking ownership of the Turkish Model and turning it into a peaceful promotional phenomenon that can be an example for other societies rather than a 'demand' or an exported product will be an important contribution of Türkiye to the Islamic world."<sup>49</sup>

In fact, this new vision that is being created appears to be a manifestation of continuity in Turkish foreign policy. Türkiye, which saw Westernization as a panacea in the 1950s, intellectually questioned and criticized this stance in the 1960s and 1970s. Although there was a search for alternative foreign policies during this period, the conditions of the Cold War did not allow Türkiye any room for manoeuvre. The process that began with Prime Minister Özal in the 1990s gained depth, philosophy and identity during Cem's tenure within the framework of interests and geopolitical concerns. Cem, who developed a policy based on peace and cooperation rather than conflict by emphasizing Türkiye's liminality, differs in this sense from the imperial vision of his successor, Ahmet Davutoğlu.

## Conclusion

When İsmail Cem, one of Türkiye's young socialist intellectuals of the 1970s, became foreign minister in the second half of the 1990s, the *zeitgeist*<sup>50</sup> was very different. Given the emergence and debate of multipolarity, plurality, social democracy, identity politics, and new geopolitical understandings, it was inevitable that Cem's views would be influenced by these discussions.

As mentioned above, when Cem entered left-wing politics in the 1970s, he questioned the reasons for Türkiye's backwardness and emphasized the country's historical and cultural significance in his writings. After the 1980s, his worldview underwent a transformation in line with the global conjuncture, defined as "the Third Way" or "the New Left" within the framework of the neoliberal economic order. In the 1990s, Cem was influenced by the

<sup>46</sup> Cem, *Türkiye, Avrupa, Avrasya, Birinci Cilt*, 15

<sup>47</sup> Cem, *Turkey in the New Century*, 21.

<sup>48</sup> Cem, *Turkey in the New Century*, 42.

<sup>49</sup> Cem, *Türkiye, Avrupa, Avrasya, İkinci Cilt*, 332.

<sup>50</sup> Spirit of the age.

zeitgeist and shaped his intellectual accumulation in this direction, leaving a significant mark on Turkish foreign policy.

As Foreign Minister between 1997 and 2002, İsmail Cem represented a break with classical Turkish foreign policy, both conceptually and practically. He was the intellectual force behind Turkish foreign policy, conceptualizing its policies and actions in a sophisticated way through his writings and speeches. During his tenure, he presented a new vision that broke the traditional boundaries of Turkish foreign policy, which faced existential problems after the end of the Cold War as it entered the 21st century. Emphasizing that Turkish foreign policy had been detached from its historical past and cultural roots, and that Türkiye needed to be replaced by a new understanding in order to become a more active and flexible actor in international politics, Cem sought to create a multidimensional and realistic understanding of foreign policy in practice. According to him, Türkiye is both Eastern and Western, Asian and European, Muslim and secular, and these identities need not exclude each other; on the contrary, they form the basis of Türkiye's power in world politics. In this sense, Cem sought to change Türkiye's post-Cold War geopolitical vision, but he took a different stance from alternative geopolitical visions that excluded the West, such as "neo-Ottomanism" or "Eurasianism".

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