

Report

Turkish Foreign Policy after Davutoglu: Continuity vs. Rupture

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Ahmet Davutoglu, Turkey's former Prime Minister, who resigned from his post amid reports of mounting tensions between the premier and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan [Reuters]

Abstract

The report examines aspects of diplomatic of continuity and discontinuity after Ahmet Davutoglu's exit from power. Davutoglu was the architect of Turkey's foreign policy for over a decade, first as advisor to the Foreign Minister in 2003 and then as Foreign Minister in 2009. In attempting to thaw relations with neighbours, Turkey has recently struck a deal for the restoration of its strained ties with Israel; it has taken a major step towards reconciling with Russia; and it has indicated its will-ingness to mend ties with Egypt. On the surface, these initiatives have given credence to the asser-tion that Turkey's foreign policy is undergoing a recalibration as a result of Davutoglu's departure from the high echelons of Turkish politics and diplomacy. In fact, there has been a reorientation of Turkish foreign policy. But this is not an outgrowth of Davutoglu's departure from the Turkish premiership and the AK Party's chairmanship. Such a reading would be very actor-centric; would miss the context in which this recalibration is occurring; and would represent a misunderstanding of the stocks of Turkey's political Islam's foreign policy projections. Instead this recalibration is more the result of dramatic contextual and structural changes in the regional/international political landscape. Thus the article argues that the recent reorientation of Turkish foreign policy has been much more context- and structure-driven than actor-driven.(1)

Introduction

At the end of June, Turkey and Israel reached a deal to restore ties, ending a six-year rift.(2) The rift was over the killing by Israeli commandos of ten Turks who formed part of the Turkish-owned Mavi Marmara ship which joined the flotilla that tried to break the Gaza blockade in May 2010. Prime Minister Binali Yildirim in Ankara and Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu in Rome simultaneously addressed the media to stress the

importance of the agreement for Middle East stability as well as for the security and economic well-being of their respective countries. To stifle a possible domestic criticism of the deal, Turkey also 'packaged' the deal as beneficial for the Palestinians. The Turkish side disclosed that the Palestinians were kept informed throughout the negotiations and approved it.

As part of normalisation of diplomatic relations, Israel would pay 20 million dollars in compensation. The deal would see the return of the two countries' ambassadors to their respective missions in Ankara and Tel Aviv.

The Palestinians would see Turkey's resuming badly needed aid to Gaza as well as building infra-structure projects in the besieged strip. These include the completion of the construction of a hospital, a desalination plant, and housing units. Turkey would also send aid to Gaza through the Israeli port of Ashdod.

In parallel with the above normalisation track with Israel, a Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told reporters⁽³⁾ that Russian President Vladimir Putin received a letter from Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan expressing his "deep condolences" to the family of the killed pilot.⁽⁴⁾ In the same letter, Erdogan also pledged that he would do "everything possible" to restore relations with Russia. Presidential spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin confirmed⁽⁵⁾ that Erdogan sent the letter saying he was "sorry" for the incident, which took place on November 24, 2015 when Turkey shot down the Russian jet violating its airspace and which culminated in the breakdown of bilateral relations.

In fact, this was not the first overture from the Turkish side to de-escalate the tension since the break-down of the relations. Immediately after the jet crisis, Turkey sought channels to repair the ties, to no avail. More recently, it has also emerged that President Erdoğan sent a letter to Russian President Vladimir Putin to celebrate Russia Day, a national event marked in the Russian Federation on June 12, containing an overture aimed at mending ties.

Later on Monday, Prime Minister Binali Yildirim indicated that a similar process of reconciliation could occur in Turkish - Egyptian relations. Relations between the two countries were strained after the Egyptian military, led by General Abdul Fattah El Sisi, toppled Egypt's democratically elected president Mohamed Morsi in July 2013, and heavily cracked down on the Muslim Brotherhood in a nation-wide political purge.

So it seemed that Turkey has been fully on reset mode since the end of June 2016. These developments seamlessly fit into the recent trajectory of Turkish foreign policy, which has strived to mend the ties with old foes.

These initiatives have been flanked by a new foreign policy discourse, recently adopted, amongst Turkey's political elites. It emphasises the necessity of gaining friends and placating foes.(6) Though the announcement of the deal and overture occurred very recently, they have a long history of arduous diplomatic endeavours behind them, particularly the Israeli file.

Despite that, these policies, more specifically their concrete results, all gained high public visibility after their principal architect over the last decade, former Prime Minister and foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu, left office.(7) His departure was followed by the reassignment of most of his foreign policy aids to less central positions in Turkey's diplomatic corps.(8) On the surface, these occurrences have given credence to the assertion that Turkey's foreign policy is undergoing a recalibration as a result of Davutoglu and his team's departure from the high echelons of Turkish politics and diplomacy. To an extent, this is true: there has been a reorientation of Turkish foreign policy. But this is not an outgrowth of Davutoglu's departure from the Turkish premiership and the AK Party's chairmanship. Such a reading would be very actor-centric; it would miss the context in which this recalibration is occurring; and it would represent a misunderstanding of the stocks of Turkey's political Islam's foreign policy projections.

Davutoglu's place in reimagining Turkey's place in international system

Davutoglu was a colossal figure in terms of his impact on redirecting Turkish foreign policy. He had a grand vision for Turkey's place in the international system, believing that his country's history, geography, human resources and social capital necessitated, if not destined, it to play a larger role in international affairs. He also laid this out in sophisticated theoretical frameworks. But he wasn't alone in imagining such a grand role for Turkey in world affairs. In fact, one of the hallmarks of political Islam in Turkey has been an ambitious foreign policy agenda. Its aim is for Turkey to play a much more active role. This Islamist foreign policy agenda is more ambitious than previous policies pursued by the more cautious and status quo-abiding secularist Kemalist establishment.

Evolution of Turkey's Political Islam's foreign policy vision

During the short-lived tenure of the pro-Islamic Welfare Party (Refah Party) and the premiership of its leader Necmettin Erbakan, the founding figure of political Islam in modern Turkey, between 1996-1997, the party attempted to reorient Turkey's foreign policy. In particular, it set out to rebalance its overwhelmingly Western-centric orientation. To that end, the Refah Party, as the senior partner of a coalition government, together with the center-right True Path Party (DYP), undertook major foreign policy initiatives targeted at the wider Muslim world. Erbakan himself used to constantly stress the necessity of closer economic and political cooperation among Muslim countries in order to attain a higher level of economic development, and hence

break free of Western hegemony. On 22 October 1996, he spearheaded the establishment of the Developing Eight Countries (D-8) summit, modeled on the G-8, which he saw as exclusively serving Western economic and political interests at the expense of the rest of the world, and particularly the Islamic world.⁽⁹⁾ The members of the D-8 were all Muslim-majority countries—Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, Egypt, and Nigeria—and the D-8 was designed to serve as a platform for closer cooperation amongst its member nations, particularly in trade, technology, and industry.

In a sense, seeing no future recognition for Turkey's historical grandeur in the current international system, Erbakan aimed to establish a parallel international system,⁽¹⁰⁾ underpinned by the values of the Islamic civilization.⁽¹¹⁾

AK Party's search for Turkey's grandeur in international affairs

Since coming to power in 2002, the AK Party has reviewed the means by which Turkey should strive to achieve greater prominence in international affairs, but it has kept political Islam's vision of carving out a prominent role for Turkey internationally by cultivating closer ties with the wider Muslim world.⁽¹²⁾ For instance, it abandoned the Refah Party's search for the creation of a parallel, more Islamic international system. Instead, the AKP has sought to attain a more influential role for itself in the existing international system.⁽¹³⁾ That is why, unlike Erbakan, Erdogan opposes the injustices of the current international system; he does not problematise the purported Judeo-Christian values that underpin the present international system. The AKP lambasts this system for being a construct of the post-World War II settlement, and for increasingly being detached from the reality of the present. Erdogan's catchphrase "the world is bigger than five", refers to the dominant position of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council in the international system.⁽¹⁴⁾

Davutoglu, therefore, may have expressed this grand vision more eloquently and put it into more sophisticated theoretical frameworks. However, Turkish foreign policy was by no means solely the product of Davutoglu's vision. It was more or less a shared vision of Turkish political Islam. President Erdogan was a firm believer in and supporter of the most part of Davutoglu's foreign policy vision and actions.

Contextual and structural roots of Turkey's foreign policy's recalibration

Turkey's foreign policy has and will continue to experience change and recalibration. However, this has little to do with Davutoglu's departure. Nonetheless, his departure provides the government with discursive convenience to present this recalibration to domestic and international audience. Instead it is more the result of dramatic contextual and structural changes in the regional/international political landscape. These changes include the derailing of uprisings in the Arab world, in which Turkey had

invested much political capital and hope, and the emergence of new domestic challenges, mostly as a result of the crumbling of Turkey's once-hopeful Kurdish peace process and the concomitant return of the Kurdish issue in its conflictual form, with regional implications. Particularly the externalities of the Syrian Crisis, be it in the form of the radicalism, burgeoning number of the refugees, further 'secterianisation' of the regional politics, and the PKK's militancy, has severely limited Turkey's capacity of maneuver, with its options. Furthermore, Iran, Turkey's historical rival, appeared to have gained from the regional turmoil, extending its sphere of influence, at the expense of the region's major countries, including Turkey. Iran's expansionist policy forced Turkey to seek alternative alliances to counter the Islamic Republic's rise in regional politics. Lastly, the rift with Russia has dramatically diminished Turkey's options in its surrounding region, particularly Syria, and made Turkey vulnerable to the whims of the United States and NATO. The prospect of the emergence of a down the road internationally recognised Syrian Kurdish entity primarily administered by the PYD, the PKK's sister organisation, has become a real possibility. This has aggravated Turkey's deep-rooted fear of the Kurdish secessionism and irredentism both within and outside of its border. On top of this threat perception, the breakdown of relations with Russia has cost Turkey dearly economically. For, Russia is Turkey's largest energy provider and one of the countries that sends the highest number of tourists to Turkey, a major source of the revenue for an increasingly cash-starving economy.

These factors account for the question as to why Turkey's foreign policy is being recalibrated through the mending of ties with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates; the signaling of an initiative towards Egypt; the downsizing of foreign policy ambitions; and the rethinking of its foreign policy through its domestic political challenges. But every one of these policies was already in gestation prior to Davutoglu's departure. Davutoglu must be credited with this positive reorientation of Turkey's foreign policy.

Conscious of the new regional political picture and emerging challenges and trends, President Erdogan voiced his desire to increase the number of Turkey's allies and decrease the number of its foes. This was clear in his speech at the opening session of the 13th Islamic Summit of the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Istanbul in April 2016⁽¹⁵⁾, prior to Davutoglu's departure. In his first address to the AK Party group meeting on May 24, new Prime Minister Yildirim also put forward the same principle.⁽¹⁶⁾ But these utterances do not represent a rupture in Turkish foreign policy. Rather, they must be viewed as continuation of a 'model' initiated by Davutoglu. What is certain in all of this is that recalibration of Turkish foreign policy has been much more context- and structure-driven than actor-driven.

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Endnotes

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- (5) Ibid.
- (6) "Erdoğan sends letter to Putin, celebrates Russia Day in first contact since jet crisis," Daily Sa-bah, 14 June 2016, <http://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2016/06/14/erdogan-sends-letter-to-putin-celebrates-russia-day-in-first-contact-since-jet-crisis> (retrieved: 27 June 2016)
- (7) Akif Beki, "Standing ovation for Erdoğan," Hurriyet Daily News, 16 April 2016, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/standing-ovation-for-erdogan-.aspx?PageID=238&NID=97884&NewsCatID=518> (retrieved: 25 June 2016)
- (8) Ashley Cowburn and Lizzie Dearden, "Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu announces resignation after falling out with President Erdogan," Independent, 5 May 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/turkish-prime-minister-ahmet-davutoglu-announces-resignation-after-falling-out-with-president-a7014801.html> (retrieved: 25 June 2016)
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- (10) "A Global Economic Group Developing 8 Countries," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/d-8_en.mfa (retrieved: 22 June 2016)
- (11) Galip Dalay and Dov Friedman, "The AK Party and the Evolution of Turkish Political Islam's Foreign Policy," *Insight Turkey* 15 (2) (2013): 123–139
- (12) Ibid.
- (13) For a better understanding of the early period of the AKP's foreign policy, see Kemal Kirişçi, "The transformation of Turkish foreign policy: The rise of the trading state," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 40 (Spring) (2009): 29–56; Galip Dalay and Dov Friedman, "The AK Party and the Evolution of Turkish Political Islam's Foreign Policy," *Insight Turkey* 15 (2) (2013): 123–139; Joerg Baudner, "The Evolution of Turkey's Foreign Policy under the AK Party Government," *Insight Turkey* 16 (3) (2014): 79–100.

Galip Dalay and Dov Friedman, "The AK Party and the Evolution of Turkish Political Islam's Foreign Policy," *Insight Turkey* 15 (2) (2013): 123–139

- (14) "World is Bigger Than Five..." "Dünya, 5'ten büyüktür."! Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan B.M. Genel Kurulu'nda.", Erdogan's speech at the United Nations, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dTR8xkxITcg> (retrieved: 22 June 2016)
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