

"The 'Davutoğlu Doctrine' under Pressure: Challenges for Turkish Foreign Policy in a Changing Middle East"



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Summary

The present paper examines the challenges that Turkish foreign policy has faced in the Middle East following the outbreak of the uprisings that have been collectively called “the Arab Spring.” It is argued that Turkish foreign policy has failed to play in the Middle East the pivotal role the “Davutoğlu Doctrine” had envisioned. Mounting problems in the Kurdish question and accusations of sectarianism in foreign policy have contributed to a decline of Turkey’s soft power in the Middle East, which was painstakingly accumulated after years of political reform and stellar economic performance. Instead of becoming a crisis mediator, Turkey may end up entangled in the Middle East imbroglio.

It was less than two years ago that Turkey’s star in the Middle East appeared to be on a steady rise. Turkey’s stellar economic performance and democratization steps in the last decade garnered appreciation across the globe. Particularly attracted to the Turkish achievements was the Middle East. Turkey’s Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan enjoyed spectacular popularity rates in the Arab public opinion, while his Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu advocated a “zero-problems policy with neighbours” and argued in favour of Turkey’s “order-constituting” role in the region. Nevertheless, following the outbreak of the series of uprisings that came to be called the “Arab Spring,” Turkey’s ability to lead the region or even improve its strategic weight has been questioned. Relations with countries like Iran, Iraq and Syria have become increasingly strained, while Turkey has been accused of taking an increasingly sectarian approach to regional conflicts. Developments on the domestic front have not been forthcoming, either. The lack of a lasting democratic

solution to Turkey’s own Kurdish issue and renewed escalation of PKK violence have brought to the fore Turkey’s own shortcomings in addressing minority rights and ethnic diversity, key issues in the context of the “Arab Spring” and democratic transition in the Middle East. Under these circumstances, Turkey’s soft power and potential to contribute to conflict resolution in the region appear curtailed. In particular, Turkey’s growing involvement in the Syrian crisis has exposed it to unprecedented risks both regarding its regional status as well as its domestic stability.

Whither The “Davutoğlu Doctrine”

According to what came to be known as “Davutoğlu Doctrine,” Turkey was more than a “bridge” between the West and the Muslim world; it was a “central power.” It professed multiple regional identities and was bound to develop a “multidimensional, proactive foreign policy commensurate to its historic and geographic significance, underwritten by its Ottoman legacy.” Resolving Turkey’s bilateral problems with its neighbours would unlock its

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unrealized strategic potential. In his own words,

Turkey enjoys multiple regional identities and thus has the capability as well as the responsibility to follow an integrated and multidimensional foreign policy. The unique combination of our history and geography brings with it a sense of responsibility. To contribute actively towards conflict resolution and international peace and security in all these areas is a call of duty arising from the depths of a multidimensional history for Turkey.¹

Turkey's rising role could be viewed in the context of the surging global influence of emerging economies. These have been referred to with the acronym BRIC, namely Brazil, Russia, India and China. As a "second-tier BRIC state," Turkey has enjoyed a stellar economic performance, which was linked to a sharp rise of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), single-digit inflation and growing trust in the national currency. These achievements underwrote its ambitions for a key regional and emerging global role, in line with the concomitant reconfiguration of strategic and diplomatic balances.

The political underpinnings of this success were also not negligible. In the early 2000s, Turkey went a long way into improving its democratic record and bringing its Kurdish question close to a solution. This improved both its appeal in the region as well as its self-confidence. Finding a balance in the "democracy vs. security" dilemma that has haunted policy analysts in the Middle East allowed Turkey to appear as a model state in the region and source of inspiration for Arab reformists.

¹ Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Turkish Foreign Policy and the EU in 2010", *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 8, no. 3 (2009), p. 12

Meanwhile, the normative aspect of Turkish foreign policy was thought to make a big difference. Accusing the West of double standards when dealing with international conflict in the Middle East and elsewhere, Erdoğan claimed that Turkey would bring a higher moral standard to global governance and politics and achieve a harmony of *Realpolitik* and norms-based foreign policy. He also enjoyed appearing as the defender of the dispossessed and the oppressed in the Middle East and beyond. In his words:

The communities that perceive themselves as the crushed, worn, propelled, victimized, and downtrodden, and the communities that have no belief in justice and sincerity, make it impossible to establish peace and stability on a global scale. This is what we have emphasized in our foreign policy. We defend justice, peace, law, and democracy in every area. We, as a conservative and democratic party, are struggling to hold both real and normative policy together.²

What would be the endgame? The stated aim was to turn Turkey into one of the ten biggest economies in the world by the year 2023, which is the centennial of the Republic of Turkey. In Davutoğlu's words,

By 2023 when the country will commemorate the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the republic, I envision a Turkey which is a full member of the EU after having completed all the necessary requirements, living

² Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, "The Changing Balances and the Rising Importance of Turkey", Paper presented at the Lecture delivered at the International Strategic Research Organization (USAK) (Ankara, 3/2/2010)

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in full peace with its neighbours, integrated with neighbouring basins in economic terms and for a common security vision, an effective player in setting orders in regions where our national interests lie, and active in all global affairs and among the top ten economies in the world.³

This appeared to be in line with the new normative dimension in Turkish foreign policy which aimed not to sacrifice human rights or justice for *Realpolitik* interests.

- b. "Emphasis on the fact that transition towards stable and legitimate democratic political structures can only be achieved via a balance between security and freedom"

Turkey appeared thus to seek a fine balance between its interest in regional stability and security and the need to address the reality that regime change in the Middle East could be realized even through violent means.

- c. "No contradiction between emphasis on democratic demands, which in some cases required confronting repressive regimes and foreign policy principle of zero problems with neighbours"

In this rather ambitious statement, Davutoğlu claimed that Turkey could maintain friendly relations with its neighbouring states while simultaneously promoting regime change in some of them.

- d. "Opposition to foreign intervention because this region's future has to be decided by its people"

In view of this, Turkey categorically opposed direct or indirect interventions by Western or other actors which could have a catalytic effect on the outcome of the Arab Spring

- e. "All people of the region are Turkey's "eternal brothers" irrespective of their background and saw it our duty to dampen sectarian tensions"

This was a clear pledge about Turkey opposition to sectarian politics and commitment to support the peaceful coexistence of diverse religious and ethnic groups in the Middle East. While these bold statements set a rather high bar for Turkish foreign policy, their operationalization has not always been successful.

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The "Arab Spring" Litmus Test

Ever since the self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor on 17 December 2010 resulted in the series of uprisings throughout the Arab world that were collectively called the "Arab Spring," seemingly impeccable authoritarian regimes have started crumbling. This historic moment provided a rare opportunity for the realization of the promises set out by the "Davutoğlu Doctrine." Turkey could prove its leadership claims in the Middle East, at a time leadership was more necessary than ever, and act as a catalyst in democratic transition in the region least affected by previous democratization waves. Nevertheless, its record has hitherto proven rather mixed. Relations with key states in the Middle East have sharply deteriorated, while Turkey has been accused of taking sides on sectarian grounds in regional conflicts rather than promoting peace, conflict resolution and democratic transition.

Turkey and the Arab Spring-Official Views

Turkey's official policy towards the "Arab Spring" has been outlined in a recent paper, authored by Foreign Minister Davutoğlu himself. This was said to consist of the following building blocks:⁴

- a. "Support for the people who rise to demand such basic human rights"

³ Abdullah Bozkurt, "Davutoğlu Sees Turkey among Top 10 World Players by 2023", *Today's Zaman*, 5/1/2010

⁴ Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Principles of Turkish Foreign Policy and Regional Political Structuring [Center for Strategic Research, Vision Paper No. 3] (Ankara: SAM, 2012), pp. 7-8*

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The Early Phase of the Arab Spring

Turkey was caught by surprise when the "Arab Spring" broke out and was not alone in that. While regime change in Tunisia proved easier than expected, the course of events in Libya and Egypt was different. Turkey had strong economic interests in Libya and was apprehensive of regime change. Initially it opposed any foreign intervention, which appeared to imply continued support for the Qaddafi regime. Nonetheless, the Turkish government gradually aligned its position with Western states and withdrew its support for the Qaddafi regime. An attack by a Libyan mob on the Turkish Consulate in Benghazi in April 2011 indicated that Turkey's position was becoming increasingly unpopular and unsustainable. Meanwhile, Turkey's reaction to the Egyptian uprising was equivocal. Taking a firm position against the Mubarak regime and promoting regime change took some time given concerns that a new Egyptian regime might attempt to challenge Turkey's regional influence. In the case of Bahrain, Turkey opted not to clash with Saudi determination to quell an uprising that threatened to move the country away from the bloc of Sunni Gulf monarchies and bring it closer to Iran. Such moves were understandable given Turkey's regional interests and security concerns. Yet they were in disharmony with the normative role that Turkey aspired to play in regional and global politics. Turkey appeared to fall into inconsistencies which underlined that *Realpolitik* was Turkey's main compass in the "Arab Spring," despite lofty statements to the opposite.⁵

Relations with Iran

Turkey's relations with Iran have been a key contention point in its relations with the West, in particular with reference to Iran's nuclear program. Turkey and Brazil took distance from

the United States and other Western states on the question of Iranian nuclear ambitions. In May 2010, they brokered an abortive "compromise agreement" voted against UN Security Council resolution regarding the Iranian nuclear enrichment program. The compromise deal was hailed by the Turkish Prime Minister and the Brazilian President Lula as a turning point. Yet they failed to convince the rest of the members of the UN Security Council. Its resolution, taken against the dissenting votes of Brazil and Turkey, raised speculation regarding Turkey's alignment with the West and the degree of its closeness to Iran. Following that highpoint, Iranian-Turkish relations have significantly cooled, and this trend has accelerated following the outbreak of the Arab Spring. Turkey and Iran found themselves on opposite sides in key confrontations, most importantly in Syria. While Turkey sided with opposition forces, Iran remained the single most important sponsor of the Assad regime. As the crisis went on, Iran intensified its support for the Assad regime and turned its survival into a primary objective of its foreign policy. Meanwhile, after long hesitations, Turkey agreed in September 2011 to the installation of a NATO anti-ballistic missile defense system against a potential Iranian attack near the eastern city of Malatya. Turkey's decision to allow this installation manifested the degree of alienation in bilateral relations. Mutual accusations of interference in Syrian domestic affairs in the context of the escalating Syrian civil war only added more tension to an already strained relationship. The possibility of an Israeli strike against Iran's nuclear facilities posed a formidable challenge to Turkey's Middle Eastern policy.

The Syrian Imbroglio

Until the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in January 2011, Syrian-Turkish relations appeared to be the best example of the "zero problems with neighbours" policy. While the two countries had come to the brink of war in 1998, they later developed an ever closer

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⁵ While irrelevant to the "Arab Spring", Turkey's consistent support for the al-Bashir regime in Sudan, despite the International Criminal Court prosecution of the Sudanese president due to genocide crimes committed in Darfur, is another contradiction to the high moral standards set by the Turkish government.

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economic and diplomatic relationship. Nevertheless, following the failure of Turkey's repeated attempts to mediate a compromise solution in the Syrian uprising, relations deteriorated sharply. Turkey turned into a key supporter for Syrian opposition forces which found safe haven in its adjacent to the Syrian border territory. In July 2012, Syrian forces shot down a Turkish aircraft offshore the Eastern Mediterranean coast under disputed conditions which indicated how damaged bilateral relations were. In September 2012, Prime Minister Erdoğan came to the point of calling Syria a "terrorist state" and comparing what has happened in Syria with what happened in Kerbela, a direct reference to the bitter battle that sealed the division of the Muslim world into Sunni and Shiite. In October 2012, a Syrian shell hit the Turkish border town of Akçakale killing five civilians and provoking Turkish retaliatory strikes, as well as a decision of the Turkish Parliament to authorize military action beyond the Turkish borders.

Nevertheless, developments have pointed toward the intrinsic nature of the Syrian conflict. The Assad regime did not quickly collapse as the Qaddafi one and was able to attract considerable support from a segment of the Syrian population. As the uprising was turning into an open civil war, Turkey was accused of getting involved in sectarian activities through its support for the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Turkey's increasing convergence with states such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar as far as its handling of the Syrian crisis was concerned, questioned its commitment to democratic transition and respect for human rights in post-Assad Syria. It also reinforced the views of those who argued that Turkey drifted towards a sectarian policy and supported the emergence of a Sunni Islamist regime. Moreover, the tactical retreat of Syrian government forces from the northeast of the country also allowed local Kurdish groups affiliated with the PKK to claim control. This appeared a shock to many in Turkey, as it

appeared that Kurdish nationalists were benefiting from the havoc wrought in Syria by civil war. As there was no clear end in sight in the Syrian crisis, Turkey was increasingly seen as a party in the Syrian conflict rather than a part of a solution.

Relations with Iraq

Turkey's relations with post-Saddam Hussein Iraq were inevitably affected by the March 2003 surprise decision of the Turkish Parliament not to allow the use of Turkish territory by invading US troops. Turkey ended up without any significant military presence and influence in post-war Iraq and became increasingly apprehensive of any developments that led to rising legitimacy of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq. While eventually relations with Iraqi Kurds and the KRG substantially improved, those with the Baghdad Shiite-controlled government deteriorated. Turkey was viewed as promoting sectarianism and decentralization in Iraq by promoting Sunni political parties and the KRG. Relations with the Nuri al-Maliki government in Baghdad have turned increasingly sour in recent months, and Turkey has been accused of meddling in the domestic affairs of Iraq. Turkey appeared to intervene in Iraqi domestic affairs even taking the side of the KRG against the Shiite administration in such critical issues such as oil export and internal borders. The August 2012 visit of Foreign Minister Davutoğlu to Northern Iraq and the city of Kirkuk, a city whose status remains disputed and has been claimed by the KRG and the federal government in Iraq has added more tension. Accusations of involvement in Iraqi domestic affairs were amplified with the flight of the Sunni former Iraqi Prime Minister al-Hashimi to Turkey in April 2012, following accusations of having organized death squads to foment sectarian violence. While al-Hashimi was tried *in absentia* in Iraq and was sentenced to death in September 2012, Prime Minister Erdoğan declared his determination to provide al-Hashimi safe haven in Turkey. This added one

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more obstacle to the already difficult relations between Iraq and Turkey. The perception that Erdoğan's decision to back al-Hashimi was influenced by their common Sunni faith remained strong both in Iraq and Turkey.

The "Achilles Heel" of the Kurdish Issue

While "Arab Spring" developments often posed challenges to Turkish foreign policy, a key problem re-emerged within the Turkish borders. The escalation of the Kurdish conflict threatened a key precondition set by the "Davutoğlu Doctrine" for the realization of Turkey's strategic potential and questioned one of the biggest successes of the AKP administration. In the first years of its administration, the AKP had played a key role in promoting recognition of Kurdish rights and introducing a conflict resolution process. These peaked in November 2009, when thirty-four PKK members were allowed to return to Turkey, following an agreement with the government. This was the most courageous attempt by the Turkish government to promote reconciliation and possible amnesty for PKK members who would be willing to give up violence and return to their ordinary lives.

Yet the reaction of Turkish public opinion against the images of triumphant Kurdish celebrations during the repatriation of the PKK militants led to a government U-turn. Returnees were eventually arrested, while state pressure on Kurdish and pro-Kurdish political activists increased. Hundreds of Kurdish local leaders and intellectuals were prosecuted according to anti-terrorism legislation for being members of the Union of Communities in Kurdistan (*Koma Civakên Kurdistan-KCK*) and were detained for months before standing for trial. The pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi-DTP*) was closed following a decision of the Constitutional Court, while requests for primary education in Kurdish and decentralization expressed by its successor Peace and Democracy Party (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi-BDP*) have met with the

opposition of the Turkish government. Kurdish political activists requested bilingual state primary education in the Kurdish-inhabited provinces of Turkey. While Prime Minister Erdoğan requested the same right for Turkish immigrants in Germany and warned against the threat of assimilation, he appeared unwilling to grant this right to his own citizens of Kurdish descent. Eventually the key elements of the "democratic opening" were abandoned and replaced by a policy that undermined conflict resolution steps and favored a security-based approach of the Kurdish issue. The toll of this policy shift has been dismal: More than 750 people were killed in clashes between Turkish government forces and the PKK within the last fifteen months. The escalation of PKK violence and state operations is reminiscent of the pre-AKP period which has been remembered as one of the most violent and bloody periods in republican Turkish history.

Conclusions

Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East has faced formidable challenges since the outset of the "Arab Spring." Its support for "Arab Spring" revolts has not been unequivocal, and in some cases, it took long before Turkey switched from cautious regime support to outright support for the opposition. In other cases such as in Bahrain, Turkey remained silent until the final suppression of the uprising. While Foreign Minister Davutoğlu stood for the compatibility of its support for regime change with the "zero problems with neighbours" policy, one cannot ignore the sharp deterioration in Turkey's relations with all its Middle Eastern neighbours, Syria, Iraq and Iran. While opposition to external intervention was coined as a key principle of Turkey's "Arab Spring" policy, Turkey itself joined –albeit late– the NATO camp in Libya and has actively supported the armed insurgency of Syrian opposition. Finally, as far as Turkey's cordial relations with all ethnic and religious groups in the Middle East were concerned, this was also a hard position

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to defend: Turkey has been increasingly perceived as a supporter for Sunni political actors in the region. It has also been accused of taking a sectarian shift in its foreign policy and allying with non-democratic forces. Recent comparisons between Syria and Kerbela made by Prime Minister Erdoğan have reinforced such allegations. These have taken a toll on the country's soft power, which was painstakingly accumulated after years of political reform and starring economic performance.

In view of these, Turkey's ambition to play a major independent role has been compromised. Instead, Turkey has appeared more willing to seek common understanding with Western states and with the United States in particular. This entertains the opportunity of a rehabilitation of Turkish foreign policy within

the Western strategic environment. On the other hand, relations with Iran maintain a strong deterioration potential given the uncertain outcome of the Syrian civil war in which Turkey and Iran have held opposite sides, as well as the Iranian nuclear question. In addition, the deterioration of the Kurdish issue has become a serious check to the country's soft power potential. Renewed emphasis on the Kurdish issue with the aim to resuscitate the peace process appears crucial. Recognizing Kurdish cultural rights, similar to those Turkey demands from the German government for its own immigrants, would be a useful starting point. Otherwise, instead of becoming a crisis mediator and stability factor, Turkey may end up in the rather unhappy position of importing instability and insecurity from the Middle East.

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