

Turkish Foreign Policy or AKP's Public Relations?

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As the geographic bridge between Europe and the Middle East, Turkey is challenged by “one of the most complex foreign policy situations in the world.”¹ During the past decade, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu have decisively shaped Turkey's foreign policy in ways that are rooted in their worldview and political aspirations. The combination of the pragmatic but unpredictable Erdoğan's flexibility, and the idealist but more predictable Davutoğlu's rigidity, has often made Turkey's foreign policy seem convoluted and opaque. Moreover, the uncertain future of the interaction between Erdoğan and Davutoğlu, as the Justice and Development Party (AKP) attempts to form a new government, adds to the complexity. The yawning gap between their political ambitions and Turkey's foreign policy capabilities has been increasingly reflected in Turkey's failure to achieve its foreign policy goals. Hence, the outcome of the AKP's efforts to form a new governing coalition will decisively influence the future direction of Turkish foreign policy.

It is still not clear what the new governing coalition will look like, however, any coalition is likely to tweak Turkey's foreign policy, presumably starting with the approach towards the Syrian civil war. What is more, almost all of the actors in opposition now believe the AKP used foreign policy as a tool to consolidate its domestic political power. Therefore, it is likely that they will do everything they can to deny the AKP exclusivity in foreign policy making. Considering the waning popularity of the AKP's foreign policy, this would appear to be an achievable goal. Nonetheless, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu are certain to retain influence, and it is also almost a given that some of the changes that AKP's policies introduced in Turkey's foreign policy, especially the ones pertaining to the so-called

¹ Barry Rubin, “Turkey: A Transformed International Role” in Barry Rubin and Kemal Kirişçi, eds., *Turkey in World Politics: An Emerging Multiregional Power* (London: Lynne Rienner, 2001), p. 1.

“democratization of Turkish foreign policy,”² will survive the AKP’s one party rule. These are mainly policies relating to Turkey’s perceived identity as a Sunni Muslim country, which under the AKP affected its relations with Israel and its approach to the Arab – Israeli conflict. In fact, what was dubbed as “democratization” of Turkey’s foreign policy was in fact populism propounded for the consolidation of AKP’s domestic political power.

As the possibility of a coalition government or renewed elections looms, Turkey’s foreign policy may be at a critical juncture. Notwithstanding the influence of Erdoğan and Davutoğlu on Turkey’s foreign policy, it is important to recognize that their options are constrained by limitations imposed by the regional and international systems. However, it is “human beings and not structures who come to embark on certain courses of action rather than others.”³ During the past decade of the AKP’s rule Turkey has experienced an increased weakening of institutional checks and balances and a radical consolidation of foreign policy decision-making processes around Erdoğan, leveraged by Davutoğlu’s theoretical constructs and their shared worldview. Therefore in the absence of drastic change in Turkey’s political landscape, their centrality to the policy making process potentially remains the most important influence on Turkey’s foreign policy. Hence, to understand the dynamics behind the demise of Turkish foreign policy and, more importantly, to envisage its future, it is important to understand the ideational basis of Turkish foreign policy during the last decade.⁴

Since coming to power, the AKP strived to ‘correct’ what it perceived to be an ahistorical understanding of Turkey’s national identity as Western and secular. The foreign policy orientation of the Kemalist Republic was considered to be an important part of this anomaly. The AKP approach is both exceptionalist and exclusivist. It is exceptionalist in that it assigns Turkey the historical role of reinstating the glory of Islamic civilization, based on its imperial Ottoman past. The exclusivist aspect is based on self-appraisal. The AKP perceives itself as the rightful heir of Turkish Islamism, having a singular ability to develop an insider

² For the conceptualization of AKP’s foreign policy as “democratization” see, Ziya Öniş and Şuhnaz Yılmaz, “Between Europeanization and Euro-Asianism: Foreign Policy Activism in Turkey during the AKP Era”, *Turkish Studies* 10: 1 (March 2009), 20.

³ Markus Kornprobst, “The *Agent’s* Logics of Action: Defining and Mapping Political Action,” *International Theory* 3: 1 (February 2011), 71.

⁴ At this point, the concept of “logic of action” becomes an important tool for analysis. It is defined as the underlying “cognitive framework that guide” the actors “behavior” *vis a vis* “his or her own specific ends and his or her own specific means.” See: Samuel B. Bacharach, Peter Bamberger, William J. Sonnenstuhl, *Administrative Science Quarterly* 41:3 (Sept. 1996), 477. As such, logic of action functions as a link from actions to goals. It is also a dynamic concept suggesting adaptive behavior sensitive to experience. See: David A. Buchanan, “The Logic of Political Action: An Experiment with the Epistemology of the Particular,” *British Journal of Management* 10: Issue Supplement S1 (Sept. 1999), S75. Within the process, heuristics-based action dominates, and disincentivizes the search for alternative approaches. See: Kornprobst, *Ibid*, 73.

understanding of the Middle East/Islam. Its leaders argue that the political roots of Turkish Islamism permitted, encouraged, and enabled the intellectual preservation of the political tradition and cultural heritage of Islam and Ottoman statecraft.

The AKP believe that by eradicating Turkey's Islamic/Ottoman heritage and identity, the Kemalists forfeited the potential influence, responsibilities, and rights that Turkey's imperial history conferred upon it. Therefore, Turkey is able to fulfill its "responsibilities" only if a revivalist AKP governs it.

Foreign policy decision-making during the AKP era was not shaped by traditional notions of Turkey's national interest. Decision making was not guided by considerations related to Turkey's international standing and power, but rather by a calculation of how each decision would affect the ability of the AKP to remain in power.⁵ The AKP leadership conveys the message that the only way to put Turkey on the 'right' historical path is to perpetuate AKP rule. The ideational legitimacy of this logic was also 'irrefutable' because of the premium that AKP leaders and its core constituency put on the notion of the *ummah* (community of Muslim believers). This point has been a consistent theme in the AKP's rhetoric and a source of pride.

In practice, the AKP leadership conceived foreign policy to be a crucial area through which the traditional elites, first and foremost the Armed Forces, could be removed from their central position in domestic politics.⁶ The AKP tried to undermine the Armed Forces claim to domestic legitimacy, which was based on the idea that it was the 'gate-keeper' of a country that was surrounded by an unstable and hostile neighborhood and was ready to fight, in the popular jargon of the 1990s, "Two and a Half Wars."⁷ To serve this end, the AKP promoted a "zero-problems with its neighbors" motto that sought to displace traditional élites by de-securitizing Turkey's foreign policy. The AKP's "zero problems" approach was successful in reducing the "outside confirmation" that Turkey's traditional elites received from its NATO security partners, as well as undermining the legitimacy of the Kemalist institutions, such as the Armed Forces.⁸ Hence, foreign policy was conceived as a tool for domestic power transformation and progression. Accordingly, Turkey's foreign policy decisions were primarily weighed, prioritized, and made according to domestic political

⁵ For the theoretical model of omnibalancing used here, see: Steven R. David, "Explaining Third World Alignments," *World Politics* 43:2 (January 1991), 238.

⁶ This argument is clearly stated in Ali Balcı, "Komşularla sıfır sorun sadece bir dış politika ilkesi mi?," *Star*, Açık görüş, Sept 5, 2012. Balcı is considered to be one of the academics in Davutoğlu's inner circle

⁷ Şükrü Elekdag, "2 1/2 War Strategy," *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs* 1:1, 1996, 33–57.

⁸ Balcı, *Ibid.*

considerations, not according to their effect on the country's international position. In other words, Turkish foreign policy was a prisoner of day-to-day domestic politics. Until the 2011 Syrian uprising, the AKP successfully used this foreign policy approach to consolidate its domination in domestic politics. If the same approach continues after the new government is formed, it is conceivable that domestically oriented action will continue to dominate, and distort, Turkey's foreign policy decision-making.

The AKP identifies Turkey with Islamic civilization, and this is another way it distorts Turkey's foreign policy. The AKP considers itself part of a civilization that acts in solidarity with religious and ideological transnational actors of a certain Islamic creed. The AKP's identification with region-wide Muslim Brotherhood branches and its policy choices on Syria are cases in point. The AKP consistently strives to accumulate domestic political capital in its approach to Middle East crises and its relations with transnational Islamist actors. The stand that AKP takes on the Middle East, and its rhetoric, which is an extension of the domestic political discourse, also enables it to build credibility for leadership of the transnational Islamist actors close to its ideology, like the Muslim Brotherhood, and harness prestige that can be used for leadership of potential future political blocs that may emerge in the region. Hence, the AKP has made Turkey's foreign policy more about the AKP's public relations than it has about Turkey's foreign relations.⁹ The AKP's logic of action leads it to making foreign policy decisions based on the virtue of their domestic political benefits and this exacts a high price. It reduces the government's options during a crisis and makes it harder to adapt to changing circumstances, while exposing Turkish foreign policy to risks of uncontrollable escalation.

The ongoing military build-up at the Syrian border is a potential litmus test for the new government that is due to be formed following the June 7 parliamentary election. It offers an opportunity to help transform Turkey from increasingly looking like part of the problem to becoming part of the solution in the Middle East. Some observers are concerned about the possibility that Turkey will initiate a "diversionary war."¹⁰ Such a confrontation would have the potential to turn Turkey's political agenda away from allegations of corruption, or arguments over economic mismanagement that cost AKP votes and Erdoğan his dream of an

⁹ A strategic foreign policy should firstly increase the latitude of choices available to the country in question. Secondly, such a policy should minimize the opportunity costs of adaptation. Thirdly, it should also reduce the exposure to predictability by adversaries, which is somehow structural due to intrinsic path dependency. Lastly, decisions associated with such a foreign policy should lend themselves to efficient management of associated risks, as much as possible.

¹⁰ This was voiced before the war by former AKP founder Dengir Mir Mehmet Fırat who is now a member of parliament of HDP and that Party's candidate for speaker of parliament. "HDP'li Fırat'tan korkutan yorum: 'AKP seçimi erteletmek için Suriye'ye savaş ilan edebilir,' *Taraf*, April 29, 2015.

executive presidency, by elevating nationalism and enabling political solidarity in response to an external threat. Others argue that the military build-up and accompanying hard-line rhetoric were calculated to achieve political ends by escalating Turkey's confrontation with Syria's Kurds and their affiliated groups.¹¹ These political ends are seemingly related to dissuading Syrian Kurds and their allies in Turkey contemplating state-hood, or at least autonomy, in northern Syria and increasing the current government's leverage against Turkey's Kurdish political movement.

"The aggressive policy towards the Assad regime is very much the creation of" Erdoğan and the AKP and is widely unpopular.¹² The hostile rhetoric used by Erdoğan, and to a lesser extent Davutoğlu, against the Asad regime has deepened divides in Turkish society. The military is profoundly reluctant to go to war for a lame duck government on the basis of a resolution that is valid only until October 4, 2015 and was confirmed by the previous parliament.¹³ Under a new coalition government and the possibility of new elections, the military will probably be reluctant to target Asad's regime in Syria in the absence of a direct confrontation. What is more, a comprehensive and sustained intervention might prove to be beyond Turkey's military capabilities, and picking a fight in Syria will lead to escalating violence in Turkey, either with Islamist extremists or the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and other organizations affiliated with it. This probably represents the kind of escalation that Turkey would find hard to manage. In the event that new elections are declared, if the AKP tries to subordinate foreign policy to domestic politics in the name of rallying its political base around Sunni/nationalist identity politics, it could find itself risking even more domestic political capital than it hopes to gain. It may lose more Kurdish votes, as well as those of the broader public, over concerns about heightened domestic tensions, or face the cannibalization of the AKP's nationalist leaning votes by MHP, a fate that it already suffered on June 7. Ironically, though, one thing is clear: the issue of Turkish intervention in Syria will mainly be decided according to domestic political concerns, and if intervention is indeed the choice, it will be a hard sell for Erdoğan and Davutoğlu. Perhaps there is a limit, after all, to the principle that "all politics is local."

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¹¹ At least one observer concludes that the government has secured its aim, see: Mensur Akgün, "Ben yine de dikkat derim...", *Star*, July 5, 2015.

¹² Patrick Cockburn, "Turkey elections: A coalition looks likely – but what kind of coalition, and how will affect the war in Syria?," *The Independent*, June 8, 2015.

¹³ Murat Yetkin, "Hükümet Suriye'ye müdahale istiyor, asker çekiniyor," *Radikal*, June 27, 2015; Deniz Zeyrek, "Asker sivil anlaşmazlığının perde arkası," *Hürriyet*, June 27, 2015.

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