

# Geopolitical Codes in Davutoğlu's Views toward the Middle East

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**ABSTRACT** *Critical geopolitics, which is a relatively new field of study for scholars of international relations, seeks to understand and analyze how politics is imagined spatially. To this end, it makes a distinction between three types of geopolitical reasoning: formal, practical, and popular geopolitics. Ahmet Davutoğlu is a very significant figure in terms of exploring the close relationship between formal and practical geopolitics in the context of Turkey due to his dual identities as an international relations professor and a foreign minister. Employing a critical geopolitical approach, this paper aims to discuss Davutoğlu's geopolitical ideas toward the Middle East by analyzing his writings and speeches to reveal the main images and narratives that shape his geopolitical understanding of this region.*

## Introduction

**C**ritical geopolitical approaches analyze how politics is imagined spatially and aim to reveal the politics behind the geography of global space. To this end, they make a distinction between three types of geopolitical reasoning. Formal geopolitics represents the geopolitical knowledge that is produced in strategic institutes, think tanks, and academia. Practical geopolitics refers to everyday forms of geopolitical reasoning that is utilized by political leaders and civil servants in explaining and legitimizing their foreign and security policies. Popular geopolitics is associated with the geopolitical narratives that are found in the mass media, cinema, novels, and cartoons. The first two categories are particularly important since most geopolitical reasoning takes place either in the formal or practical geopolitical spheres. Foreign policy decision-makers use practical geopolitical reasoning when they try to make spatial sense of the world, but they also frequently resort to formal forms of geopolitical knowledge to respond effectively to particular foreign policy questions.

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It is difficult to claim that critical geopolitics and especially its three types of geopolitical reasoning are reflected broadly enough in the academic discussions in Turkey. Although recently there has been a remarkable increase in the number of studies attempting to analyze the geopolitical discourses in Turkey by utilizing a critical approach, the field is still dominated by traditional ideas, which tend to associate geopolitics with realist concepts like national security, strategy, interest, and power.<sup>1</sup> The prevalence of such a realist approach in geopolitical studies in Turkey is astonishing, when one considers that critical theories have become nearly as influential as traditional ones in other major fields of the international relations discipline in the Turkish academia. In order to initiate a similar trend in the sphere of geopolitics, there is a need to deconstruct or at least reinterpret some of the popular geopolitical themes and concepts that are frequently used by Turkish scholars and policymakers.

Ahmet Davutoğlu, who has been Turkey's foreign minister since 2009, is a particularly important figure in terms of critically analyzing the forms of geopolitical reasoning in Turkey. This is because his ideas represent both formal and practical geopolitics due to his dual identities as a professor of international relations and a minister of foreign affairs. In the formal geopolitical sense, his seminal book *Strategic Depth: The International Position of Turkey* (2001) is still regarded as one of the most influential sources for scholars of post-Cold War Turkish foreign policy. In the practical geopolitical sense, even before his appointment as a foreign minister, he served as the chief foreign policy advisor to the Turkish governments under the Justice and Development Party (AK Party). His statements and writings, in this regard, provide very important indicators about the evolution of geopolitics in Turkey in the past decade. Employing a critical geopolitical approach, this paper aims to explore the formal and practical implications of Davutoğlu's ideas toward the Middle East. To this end, his writings and speeches will be critically analyzed and the images and narratives that shape his geopolitical understanding of this region will be identified.

## Formal, Practical, and Popular Geopolitics

The theory of "critical geopolitics" developed around the ideas of a group of political geographers working in the universities in North America and Europe who have been particularly interested in the post-structuralist discourse analysis methods of French political scientists like Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault.<sup>2</sup> Critical geopolitics rejects the deterministic view of traditional geopolitical approaches that regard geography as an independent variable governed by constant and unchangeable laws. Instead, it treats geography as a discourse, claiming that geographical assumptions and understandings are culturally constructed and politically sustained.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, it particular-

ly criticizes traditional geopolitical theories' tendency to reduce geography to something that should be conquered or controlled. It also rejects their excessive emphasis on the military/strategic aspects of interstate relations and defends a new geopolitical understanding that reflects the cultural, economic, and social changes in a globalizing world.

The most important objective of critical geopolitics is to understand how "borders" are "spatialized" and how the "us and them" dichotomy is geopolitically represented, so that the real "geopolitical map of the world" as well as the geopolitical imaginations that influence the perception of this map can be examined.<sup>4</sup> For this purpose, it proposes a threefold typology in analyzing various forms of geopolitical reasoning. Formal geopolitics symbolizes the geopolitical reasoning that is produced by analysts, intellectuals, and scholars in academia, strategic institutes and think tanks. Practical geopolitics is to be found in the geopolitical discourses of government representatives and foreign policy bureaucrats. Popular geopolitics represents the geopolitical narratives that are reflected in the mass media, cinema, novels, and cartoons.<sup>5</sup>

These three categories of geopolitical reasoning are closely interrelated.<sup>6</sup> Academics and journalists have

regular contacts with each other as well as government officials and other state authorities. Such contacts reinforce an intensive exchange of ideas on many political and social issues. Geopolitical frameworks that are shaped during the course of this exchange are processed by the mass media and penetrate into popular culture. Metaphors such as the "iron curtain," "rogue states" or "axis of evil" aim to simplify international politics for the public and help people make the "us and them" or "friend and enemy" distinctions in a more simplified manner. These abstractions are frequently exploited by politicians to defend a particular policy. At the same time, they also initiate popular public debates of a geopolitical nature.

Due to the rapid improvement of communication technology, popular geopolitics has recently become the subject of an increasing number of academic studies.<sup>7</sup> Yet, it is argued that most geopolitical reasoning in world politics still takes place in the realm of formal and practical geopolitics. Formal geopolitics, which is based on the works of academics and think tanks, is also associated with "geopolitical thinking" or "geopolitical traditions".<sup>8</sup> The geopolitical tradition that has influenced world politics since the end of nineteenth century is based on the writings of political geographers, including Friedrich Ratzel, Rudolf Kjellen, Alfred T. Mahan, Halford J. Mackinder as well as Karl

### **In the past decade, the Middle East has become a region of major geopolitical importance in the foreign policy discourse of the AK Party governments**



Foreign Minister Davutoğlu attends the 50<sup>th</sup> Munich Security Conference.

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Haushofer's German school of *Geopolitik*.<sup>9</sup> After the Second World War, it has been carried into the next decades mainly by American writers like George Kennan and Nicholas Spykman. It has maintained its influence in the contemporary period with the books of Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski, who are also well known for their official positions within the US foreign policy bureaucracy. This geopolitical tradition is state-centric, accepts geography as static, places strong emphasis on size and other physical attributes, claims that geography can be dominated or at least controlled by traditional power factors like military force, and presents a rather simplified world map that is based on dichotomies like "East versus West" or "Land Power versus Sea Power." As argued earlier, critical geopolitics rejects this tradition's assumption that geography is governed by natural laws and asserts that complicated social-political processes cannot be reduced to simple geostrategic calculations.

At the national level, geopolitical traditions are also quite important since every state has one or more geopolitical tradition, which develops in accordance

with its unique historical, geographical, or cultural features. These traditions mainly represent the geopolitical reasoning of the scholars in that country. Each tradition, in this regard, is based on a distinct definition of national identity, state interest and friend-enemy distinction. Graham Smith, for instance, indicates three dominant geopolitical traditions in the Russian Federation: one viewing Russia as part of Europe, one believing that Russia is neither European nor Asian, and one suggesting that the country is a bridge between the two continents.<sup>10</sup> A similar study was conducted by Walter Russell Mead, who claimed that differences of national interest, social support base, and cultural identity produced four separate geopolitical traditions in the US.<sup>11</sup> Timothy Garton Ash, on the other hand, discovered four geopolitical traditions in the UK, which respectively defined the country as small Britain, cosmopolitan Britain, European Britain, and American Britain.<sup>12</sup>

Practical geopolitics, which is the second category in critical geopolitics, is closely related with formal geopolitics due to two factors. First, the theories and strategies formulated in the universities and think tanks aim to provide guidance to policymakers as well as legitimacy for their decisions. The most well known examples are the alleged influence of Haushofer's views on Hitler's policies and the US "containment policy" during the Cold War, which was largely based on the geopolitical ideas of Kennan and Spykman. Second, most scholars who contribute to the production of formal geopolitical knowledge usually also serve as advisors or sometimes even as ministers in national governments. Mackinder, for example, was not only an academic, but also a member of the British Parliament.

In broader terms, practical geopolitics includes everyday forms of geopolitical reasoning that is used by foreign policy decision makers for explaining their policies to the public. These so-called "geopolitical codes" are different from the institutional or strategic knowledge produced within the framework of formal geopolitics in that they are based on common sense geopolitical narratives.<sup>13</sup> These narratives are taught via formal education in schools and used as instruments of socialization through the imposition of certain identity forms and historical/geographical notions.<sup>14</sup> They are used in political statements and appear both as ordinary and stereotypical discourses that make use of various dichotomies. For instance, the "white man's burden" discourse of the colonization period included dichotomies like "modern versus backward" and "Western versus non-Western."<sup>15</sup> US President Harry Truman's doctrine associating North America and Western Europe with freedom and the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe with fear, repression, and minority rule also attributed special meanings to geography by using similar dichotomies.<sup>16</sup> A more recent example is George W. Bush's "axis of evil" metaphor, which gave a new geopolitical meaning to countries like Iran, Iraq, and North Korea in the wake of the September 11 attacks.<sup>17</sup>

## The emphasis on the Islamic civilization and Ottoman Empire is very powerful in Davutoğlu's geopolitical depiction of the Middle East

Especially in the last few years, practical geopolitics has become increasingly appealing to the Turkish scholars who strived to explore the dynamics behind Turkey's foreign policy activism during the AK Party period. Focusing on the geopolitical discourse of the AK Party leaders in particular, some scholars started to argue that Turkish foreign policy was now guided by a "new geographic imagination" that accompanied the remarkable social, economic, and political transformations taking place in Turkey's domestic scene.<sup>18</sup> Largely defined in relation with the conservative-democratic identity perception of

the AK Party leaders, this geopolitical imagination, first of all, entailed a "constructive and much more active foreign policy behavior" in Turkey's Muslim neighborhood, which was previously viewed rather as a source of chaos and instability by the secular-minded Turkish foreign policy elites.<sup>19</sup>

This argument was also supported by other studies, which conducted a rigorous discourse analysis on the foreign policy statements of the leading AK Party figures and found out that "the perceptions and belief systems of policy-makers with respect to their internal and external environment are significant variables in accounting for foreign policy change."<sup>20</sup> Since most AK Party elites came from a conservative/Islamist political background, the geopolitical codes they used for making sense of Turkey's place in world politics have naturally been more focused on the Muslim world as well as the former Ottoman geocultural space – including the Middle East.<sup>21</sup> These geopolitical codes are best exemplified by Davutoğlu's discourse, which has been shaped by his dual identities as a professor of international relations (formal geopolitics) and a foreign minister (practical geopolitics).

### Geopolitical Representations of the Middle East in Davutoğlu's *Strategic Depth*

Although Davutoğlu's endeavors for re-conceptualizing international relations can be traced back to early 1990s, his seminal book *Strategic Depth* (2001), which is regarded as an impressive reassessment of traditional Western and Eastern geopolitical theories from the viewpoint of Turkey, provides the most significant clues about his ideas on world politics. The book is usually credited with its bold call to Turkish policymakers to make peace with the country's Ottoman past and Muslim roots.<sup>22</sup> This has prompted many political analysts in Turkey and abroad to claim that Davutoğlu represents a "Neo-Ottomanist" geopolitical vision – a vision that has been usually associated with the former Turkish president Turgut Özal.<sup>23</sup> Davutoğlu, however, firmly rejected such allegations.<sup>24</sup>

A number of scholars draw attention to Davutoğlu's special interest in the geo-cultural dynamics of world politics and argue that his discourse invokes "civilizational geopolitics" rather than Neo-Ottomanism. They indicate that such a discourse makes use of the "us versus them" dichotomy by emphasizing the religious differences not only between Turkey and the West, but also with some non-Muslim countries like Armenia and Israel.<sup>25</sup> Here, religion does not necessarily play a negative role and is rather used as a new instrument to justify Turkey's so-called "exceptional geopolitical importance."<sup>26</sup> Yet, it should be stated that in Davutoğlu's thinking this *exceptionalism* is based on Turkey's Muslim identity and Ottoman heritage, which together form the basis of his ideas on the emerging role of Turkey as a "central country" in world politics.<sup>27</sup>

The emphasis on the Islamic civilization and Ottoman Empire is also very powerful in Davutoğlu's geopolitical depiction of the Middle East. In *Strategic Depth*, he states that the two basic features of the region are its "integrity founded around the Islamic religion and the common historical heritage of the Ottomans."<sup>28</sup> For him, the spread of Islam in the Middle East brought a geo-cultural – beyond mere geographical – integrity to the region and that this integrity was maintained by the Ottoman Empire for five centuries within the framework of a long lasting order "with minimum political risks."<sup>29</sup> His admiration for this cultural-political system also seems to be the main reason why he devotes a much longer section to the Middle East in comparison with the two other neighboring regions – Caucasus and Balkans – which together form what he calls the "close terrestrial basin" of Turkey.<sup>30</sup>

Despite his strong emphasis on Islam and the Ottoman heritage, however, Davutoğlu's affection with traditional Western geopolitical theories seems to be the real influence on his geopolitical ideas about the Middle East. Although he believes that a "new kind of geopolitics" is born following the collapse of the Soviet Union, he apparently does not refer to the critical geopolitical approaches, since the geopolitical views expressed in his book are mostly based on the works of traditional geopolitical theorists like Mackinder, Mahan, Haushofer, and Spykman. In this regard, his views on geography, which he believes to be one of the most "constant" factors in the formulation of a country's power, are actually quite deterministic.<sup>31</sup> Thus, it is no surprise that in many instances where he makes reference to the Middle East in *Strategic Depth*, he also resorts to traditional geopolitical concepts and metaphors, which treat the region as a "key" to world supremacy. At one point, for instance, he even likens the Middle East to a "Gordian knot" to be cut by any great power that seeks to dominate the continent of Afro-Eurasia.<sup>32</sup>

Since the concept of Afro-Eurasia itself strongly resembles Halford J. Mackinder's concept of the "world island" (i.e. the supercontinent formed by Europe,

Asia, and Africa), it can be claimed that the Middle East becomes almost a new “Heartland” in Davutoğlu’s geopolitical thinking.<sup>33</sup> It should also be noted in this regard that he claims that the Middle East is a key region both for geopolitics of the land (heartland) and geopolitics of the sea (rimland), defining it as “the intersection point of the world’s main continent,” and states that “the geopolitical structure of the Middle East is directly linked with its central position in the Afro-Eurasian continent.”<sup>34</sup>

Davutoğlu’s views toward the Middle East also seem to have been influenced by the geopolitical ideas of Alfred T. Mahan who emphasized the strategic significance of the “chokepoints” (narrow waterways) for achieving supremacy over the seas of the world. In several parts of *Strategic Depth*, Davutoğlu makes reference to the geopolitical importance of these chokepoints, most of which he believes are located within the borders of Muslim-populated countries.<sup>35</sup> He states more specifically that five out of the nine most strategic chokepoints

in the world are to be found in the Middle East – a feature that makes the region even more important for Davutoğlu in traditional geopolitical terms.<sup>36</sup>

It can be claimed that there are indeed some critical geopolitical elements in Davutoğlu’s ideas about

## Main trends of Turkish foreign policy during the AK Party period are described by some as “Middle Easternization” and “shift of axis”

the Middle East, as he frequently emphasizes the incompatibility between current political borders and geopolitical lines in the region.<sup>37</sup> He states for instance that the “borders in the Middle East resemble a wall which is built in an extremely bad fashion,” indicating the geopolitically inelaborate way the borders in the region were redrawn by the British and French rulers at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>38</sup> However, he immediately reverts to a traditional geopolitical thinking when he calls the Middle East an “inevitable hinterland” or a region of influence for Turkey.<sup>39</sup> In this regard, it seems that the main reason why he criticizes the manner the borders were redrawn in the Middle East is related with the region’s forceful detachment from the Ottoman Empire rather than a critical assessment of the very act of border drawing by the Western powers.

Turkey, which is the historical heir of the geopolitical, geocultural and geoeconomic integrity of the region, needs to develop a strategic approach that can overcome this geopolitical, geocultural and geoeconomic disintegration while embracing the region as a whole, and implement this approach in a gradual manner within a tactical flexibility. Such a strategic approach will not only increase Turkey’s influence over the region, but also help it assume a function between global and regional balances that cannot be disregarded by any actor.<sup>40</sup>

As also indicated by the passage above, Davutoğlu's views about geography, in general, and Turkey's role in the Middle East, in particular, are heavily influenced by a traditional geopolitical mentality which is based on concepts like balance, sphere of influence, axes, and rims. Although on the surface it makes a bold civilizational critique of the geopolitical patterns of contemporary world politics, such a mentality achieves little than reproducing the geopolitical maps of writers like Mackinder, Mahan, and the like.

## **Practical Geopolitical Implications of Davutoğlu's Discourse on the Middle East**

It is not easy to draw a clear line between the formal and practical geopolitical implications of Davutoğlu's discourse. As also stated earlier, his dual identities as an international relations scholar and a foreign policy decision maker have become largely intertwined since 2002 when he started to serve as the chief foreign policy advisor of the AK Party government. It is no surprise that a recent publication, which compiles Davutoğlu's speeches and interviews on Turkish foreign policy between 2002 and 2009, is titled *From Theory to Practice*. This can also be viewed as an acknowledgement that the practical geopolitical implications of his foreign policy discourse cannot be confined to the period that started with May 2009 when he was officially appointed as the foreign minister of Turkey.

The Middle East occupies a very central position in many of the speeches and texts delivered by Davutoğlu in the past decade, as indicated by the passage below, which is taken from one of his interviews in 2002:

Therefore, Turkey has to establish its relationship with all the global powers through the Middle East. In other words, the Middle East will be the most important parameter of the central country [depiction]. The more influential Turkey becomes in the Middle East, the greater bargaining power it will possess vis-à-vis the other powers. The more central its position becomes in the Middle East, the more persuasive it will become over the others.<sup>41</sup>

It is not surprising to view in this regard that Turkish foreign policy under the supervision of Davutoğlu has become increasingly engaged with the countries of the Middle East particularly in the second half of the 2000s. This is also why some political analysts and scholars have come up with new concepts like "Middle Easternization" and "shift of axis" in order to explain the main trends of Turkish foreign policy during the AK Party period.<sup>42</sup> In practical geopolitical terms, however, it can be argued that there are three major recurring themes in Davutoğlu's discourse on the Middle East: the artificial character of the present national borders which stands in the way of greater regional politi-

Prime Minister Erdoğan addressed the Union of European Turkish Democrats (UETD), showing Rabia sign.

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cal and economic integration, the “earthquake” analogy that is used in order to explain the political transformations taking place in the region, and Turkey’s “soft power” and regional leadership role in the Middle East.<sup>43</sup>

As also emphasized in *Strategic Depth*, Davutoğlu thinks that the artificial character of the borders is the most vital geopolitical issue that needs to be resolved in the Middle East.<sup>44</sup> He puts most of the blame on the shoulders of Britain and France for this situation and accuses them of drawing maps that divided the region along artificial borders during the First World War. The secret Franco-British Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 is particularly highlighted in this regard. However, Davutoğlu believes that the artificial division of the Middle East has been further consolidated by the geopolitical dynamics of the Cold War as well as the spread of mutually exclusive nationalist ideologies. Thus, in order to build a new future in the Middle East, he first proposes the redrawing of the borders:

A future cannot be built on emergent state conceptions that first came up with the Sykes-Picot maps and later with the artificially drawn maps of the colonialist governments ... We are going to break that pattern that was drawn for us by the Sykes-Picot [agreement].<sup>45</sup>

Davutoğlu believes that advancing political, social, and economic integration between the countries of the Middle East is the best way for overcoming the artificial borders and reuniting, for instance, the cities like Mardin and Urfa in southeastern Anatolia with the rest of Mesopotamia:

When you look at Mesopotamia from one of the houses in Mardin, it is impossible for you to understand where the Turkish-Syrian border begins. That plain extends along endlessly. That plain was unified throughout history and will continue to be that way. Nobody should assume that these borders will be permanent just because somebody drew borders there.<sup>46</sup>

In the practical foreign policy sphere, the idea of regional integration has been very influential on the establishment of high-level strategic cooperation councils between Turkey and the governments of Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Turkey has also founded a Quadruple High-Level Cooperation Council with Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon for facilitating a free economic zone as well as cooperation in fields like transport, energy, and tourism. The mutual abolition of visas with these countries has also been an important element of Davutoğlu's vision for reuniting the region.

Davutoğlu likens the political, economic, and cultural re-unification between the countries of the Middle East to the "closing of a century-old parenthesis."<sup>47</sup> Analogies like these are quite important in understanding his geopolitical discourse. In this regard, the most significant analogy he uses in order to explain the world politics of the post-Cold War period is the "earthquake" analogy. He believes that there have been three great earthquakes in world politics in the last twenty-three years. The first was the geopolitical earthquake that took place with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The second was the security earthquake following the September 11 attacks in 2001. For Davutoğlu, the third earthquake is political-economic in nature and was represented simultaneously by the global financial crisis of the post-2008 period and the Arab uprisings taking place in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>48</sup>

He believes that as violent as it may seem, the third earthquake actually heralds a better future for the Middle East, and the Arab uprisings in this regard should be considered as a process of "normalization."<sup>49</sup> He thinks this process will not only positively affect the Arab nations of the Middle East, but also Turkey which was forcefully detached from the region by Western powers in the wake of the First World War. For him, the end of the Ottoman period meant the alienation of the peoples of the Middle East from each other – an argument, which once again glorifies the Ottoman legacy in the region.<sup>50</sup> In the new era that is going to take start after the Arab uprisings, however, Davutoğlu believes Turkey will replace the Ottoman Empire as the "protector" of the peoples of the Middle East:

A new Middle East is being born. We will continue to be the owner, pioneer and servant of this new Middle East. Instead of tyrannies, suppressions and dictatorships, the will of the people and the voice of the right and the just will rule in this new Middle East. Turkey will be the strong supporter of this voice everywhere.<sup>51</sup>

The depiction of Turkey as the pioneer of the winds of change in the Middle East is the third major recurring theme in Davutoğlu's discourse toward the region. This depiction is based on two pillars. The first one is what Davutoğlu calls "historical responsibility," which once again includes a heavy reference to the Ottoman past.<sup>52</sup> Regarding the latter point, he believes Turkey should use the opportunity to reunite with the "historical compatriots" in the Middle East. He describes historical compatriotship as a much more powerful bond than mere citizenship, since it is defined in cultural terms and binds the fate of Turkey with the peoples of the region.<sup>53</sup>

The second pillar in Davutoğlu's depiction of Turkey as a regional leader in the Middle East is based on the Turkish "soft power," which has both social and economic dimensions. In the social sphere, he believes that "in all the Middle Eastern communities, Turkey is not only viewed as a friendly and brotherly country, but also the leader of a new idea and regional order which has the power to determine the future."<sup>54</sup> This is at the same time an acknowledgement that "Turkey's success is determined not by the role that Turkey imagines for itself in the region, but by how the region perceives Turkey's role."<sup>55</sup>

Like historical compatriotship, a positive Turkish image in the Middle East is also extremely important in Davutoğlu's thinking, since he assumes that it is very hard to change such emotional bonds in comparison with the easily alterable regional power balances.<sup>56</sup> Although this assumption carries a hint of critical geopolitics, it should be indicated that the concept of "soft power" in Davutoğlu's ideas is also largely shaped by economic interests. In this regard, he constantly makes reference to Turkey's improving trade links with Middle Eastern countries, particularly highlighting the stagnation in its economic relations with the European Union in the post-2008 period, and states that reinforcing Turkish economic interests in the Middle East is crucial for "recovering the losses" that emerged in the course of the Arab uprisings.<sup>57</sup> As liberal as it may seem, such a strong preoccupation with advancing Turkey's "sphere of influence" in the region, however, once again draws Davutoğlu's geopolitical discourse on the Middle East closer to traditional rather than critical geopolitical approaches.

## Conclusion

In the past decade, the Middle East has become a region of major geopolitical importance in the foreign policy discourse of the AK Party governments. This has firstly been related with the AK Party elites' identity perceptions, which were largely shaped by their religious (i.e. Islamic) belief system and nostalgia for Turkey's Ottoman past. The Middle East quite naturally came to the forefront within the framework of such perceptions due to its traditionally

central importance in the definition of the borders of the so-called “Muslim world” and “post-Ottoman space.” Eventually, the depiction of Turkey as a “regional leader” or “regional protector” in the Middle East became one of the most salient geopolitical codes developed in Turkish foreign policy by the AK Party leaders.<sup>58</sup> More significantly, however, Turkey’s relations with the countries of the region were regarded as a cornerstone for the successful implementation of the “central country” strategy, which is sometimes alternatively called the “Strategic Depth doctrine” or “Davutoğlu doctrine.”<sup>59</sup> Such labels, however, are a clear indication of the powerful influence of Foreign Minister Davutoğlu’s ideas on the geopolitical representations of the Middle East in Turkey during the AK Party period.

As also stated by scholars like Walker, the main significance of Davutoğlu’s *Strategic Depth* for Turkish foreign policy is that it “seeks to reposition Turkey from the periphery of international relations to the center as an actor sitting at the intersection of multiple regions.”<sup>60</sup> From a critical geopolitical perspective, this actually means that Turkey’s previous subject positions in world politics are replaced by a new subject position, which is identified, above all, with its exceptional geographical importance as “a central country with multiple regional identities.”<sup>61</sup> It should be especially noted that the “central country” metaphor denotes “activeness” in contrast to the “passive” character of the previous geopolitical depiction of Turkey as a “Western country” or “bridge” between Europe and Asia. The latter, in particular, is an important geopolitical code developed by the Turkish foreign policymakers in the immediate post-Cold War period. In this regard, it can be argued that the Middle East became a major focus of Turkish foreign policy during the AK Party period mainly because a real breakthrough in Turkey’s relations with the countries of the region promised not only a stark contrast with the past policies, but also remarkable opportunities for the demonstration of the new “active” role(s) of Turkey in regional and global politics.

Davutoğlu’s vision directed toward the Middle East is usually evaluated within the framework of an “alternative perspective” that is based on a sharp critique of Turkey’s previous isolationist and passive traditional foreign policy toward the region.<sup>62</sup> It can be argued that this perspective is geopolitically built on two main pillars. The first pillar is a civilizational approach



**Davutoğlu’s vision of the Middle East is usually evaluated within the framework of an “alternative perspective” that is based on a sharp critique of Turkey’s previous isolationist foreign policy toward the region**

that highlights Islam as the major driving force in the region. This is closely related with the second pillar, which depicts the Middle East as the “heartland” of the Ottoman geocultural realm. Islam and the Ottoman heritage are inter-

woven in Davutoğlu’s geopolitical ideas about the religious/cultural features of the Middle East.

## **Davutoğlu believes that advancing political, social, and economic integration between the countries of the Middle East is the best way for overcoming the artificial borders**

Yet, it should be indicated that “alternative” does not mean “critical” in Davutoğlu’s geopolitical discourse. On the contrary, as also argued by scholars like Bilgin, “Davutoğlu’s argument is no less

deterministic than prevalent approaches to foreign policy analysis... The only difference between Davutoğlu’s account and prevalent approaches to foreign policy analysis consists of putting culture and identity in place of military threat, taken as pre-given.”<sup>63</sup> To put it in a different way, the powerful emphasis on geocultural factors in his discourse at first glance may suggest that Davutoğlu’s ideas are more in line with critical geopolitics. However, it should be noted that this “geocultural” discourse rather serves to reproduce traditional geopolitical narratives like “balance of power,” “sphere of influence,” “heartland” and “hinterland.” ■

### **Endnotes**

1. For a number of studies which reflect a critical geopolitical perspective see Pinar Tank, “Dressing for the Occasion: Reconstructing Turkey’s Identity,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (2006), pp. 463-478; Pinar Bilgin, “‘Only Strong States Can Survive in Turkey’s Geography’: The Uses of ‘Geopolitical Truths’ in Turkey,” *Political Geography*, Vol. 26, No. 7 (2007), pp. 740-756; Lerna Yanik, “The Metamorphosis of Metaphors of Vision: ‘Bridging’ Turkey’s Location, Role and Identity after the End of the Cold War,” *Geopolitics*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (2009), pp. 531-549.
2. One of the earliest studies making reference to “critical geopolitics” is the doctoral thesis written by Gearóid Ó Tuathail in 1989 under the supervision of John Agnew in the Syracuse University. See V. D. Mamadouh, “Geopolitics in the Nineties: One Flag, Many Meanings,” *GeoJournal*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (1998), p. 244.
3. Gearóid Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 46; Klaus Dodds and David Atkinson, *Geopolitical Traditions: A Century of Geopolitical Thought* (London, New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 9.
4. Mamadouh, “Geopolitics in the Nineties,” p. 244.
5. Gearóid Ó Tuathail, “Understanding Critical Geopolitics: Geopolitics and Risk Society,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 2/3 (1999), pp. 107-124.
6. See for example James Derrick Sidaway, “What is in a Gulf?: From the ‘Arc of Crisis’ to the Gulf War,” Gearóid Ó Tuathail and Simon Dalby (eds.), *Rethinking Geopolitics* (London, New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 224-239.
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15. John Agnew and Stuart Corbridge, *Mastering Space: Hegemony, Territory and International Political Economy* (London, New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 48.

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18. See Bülent Aras and Hakan Fidan, "Turkey and Eurasia: Frontiers of a New Geographic Imagination," *New Perspectives on Turkey*, No. 40 (2009) pp. 202-203. Also see İbrahim Kalın, "Debating Turkey in the Middle East: The Dawn of a New Geo-Political Imagination?," *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2009), pp. 83-96.

19. Ali Aslan, "The Foreign Policy-Hegemony Nexus: Turkey's Search for a 'New' Subjectivity in World Politics and Its Implications for US-Turkish Relations," *Perceptions*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (2012), p. 164; Fuat Keyman, "Globalization, Modernity and Democracy: In Search of a Viable Domestic Polity for a Sustainable Turkish Foreign Policy," *New Perspectives on Turkey*, No. 40 (2009), p. 9.

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21. Yeşiltaş positions the "conservative and Islamist" geopolitical discourse of the AKP leaders against what he calls the "defensive geopolitics" of the secular-minded Turkish ruling elite of the previous period. See Murat Yeşiltaş, "The Transformation of the Geopolitical Vision in Turkish Foreign Policy," *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (2013), p. 679.

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24. See *Today's Zaman*, November 25, 2009.

25. Pınar Bilgin and Ali Bilgiç, "Turkey's 'New' Foreign Policy toward Eurasia," *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (2011), pp. 180 and 192.

26. Lerna Yanık, "Constructing Turkish 'Exceptionalism': Discourses of Liminality and Hybridity in Post-Cold War Turkish Foreign Policy," *Political Geography*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2011), p. 86.
27. Also see Şaban Kardaş, "Türk Dış Politikasında Eksen Kayması mı?," *Akademik Ortadoğu*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2011), p. 30.
28. Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* (Istanbul: Küre, 2001), p. 132.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 132 and 331.
30. He devotes 130 pages to the Middle East alone, while the Balkans, Central Asia and Europe altogether occupy 125 pages in the book.
31. Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik*, p. 17.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
33. Halford J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1944), p. 113.
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35. *Ibid.*, pp. 162 and 255. The same argument can also be found in one of Davutoğlu's earlier articles. See Ahmet Davutoğlu, "The Clash of Interests: An Explanation of the World (Dis)Order," *Intellectual Discourse*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1994), pp. 114-115.
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37. *Ibid.*, p. 140.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 323.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 129.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 451.
41. Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Teoriden Pratiğe: Türk Dış Politikası Üzerine Konuşmalar* (Istanbul: Küre, 2013), p. 83.
42. See for example Tarık Oğuzlu, "Middle Easternization of Turkey's Foreign Policy: Does Turkey Dissociate from the West?," *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2008), pp. 3-20; Burhanettin Duran, "Türk Dış Politikası Ortadoğululaşılıyor mu?," Kemal İnat, Muhittin Ataman and Burhanettin Duran (eds.), *Ortadoğu Yılı 2009* (Istanbul: Küre, 2009), pp. 385-402; Cengiz Çandar, "Türk Dış Politikasında 'Eksen' Tartışmaları: Çok Kutuplu Dünya İçin Yeni Bir Vizyon," *SETA Analiz*, No. 10 (January 2010).
43. In their study about the practical geopolitical implications of Davutoğlu's discourse toward the Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) region, Güney and Mandacı emphasize four main geopolitical codes: a) Proactive involvement in securing BMENA as a soft power, b) Turkey as 'de-securitizer' and 'zero problems with the neighbors', c) Turkey as a 'regional protector' of BMENA, d) Turkey as 'democracy promoter' and an 'integrative power' in BMENA. Aylin Güney and Nazif Mandacı, "The Meta-Geography of the Middle East and North Africa in Turkey's New Geopolitical Imagination," *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 44, No. 5-6 (2013), pp. 437-441.
44. Also see Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Küresel Bunalım: 11 Eylül Konuşmaları* (Istanbul: Küre, 2002), p. 121.
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