

The New Era in Turkish Foreign Policy: Critiques and Challenges

MURAT YEŞİLTAŞ*

ABSTRACT *This article examines the critiques directed at Turkish foreign policy during the AK Party administration. There are three basic critiques leveled at the foreign policy that has been followed by the AK Party: Islamist ideology, geopolitical codes, and lack of capacity in foreign policy. These criticisms will be examined through a multi-layered approach, whereby they will be contextualized in terms of global fragmentation (macro level), regional disorder and fragmentation (meso level), and restoration in domestic politics and the opponents within Turkey towards these policies (micro level). A look at the challenges that Turkish foreign policy faces today and the search for a new foreign policy model will follow.*

Introduction

The Arab Spring has significantly destabilized the “geopolitical zone” surrounding Turkey. Although Turkey, at first, viewed these events as opportunities for “democratic restoration,” the Arab Spring has unleashed new dynamics that have turned Turkey’s region into a zone of chronic crisis. Indeed, a new “age of insecurity” has begun in the Middle East, as identity-based animosities and radical tendencies threaten nation-state borders and the principle of sovereignty. These conditions confront Turkish foreign policy with multidimensional challenges and pressures not witnessed during

the past decade. In light of President-elect Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s desire to more fully utilize the powers of the presidency to take a more active role in foreign policy, an evaluation of this new period has become necessary for tackling these challenges and generating practical responses to these pressures.

In this new period, Erdoğan’s first task entails forging a new model of foreign policy implementation without abandoning the foreign policy vision that characterized his tenure as prime minister, while employing the institutional suppleness of the presidency. Davutoğlu’s promotion from foreign minister to prime minister

* Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Sakarya University

Insight Turkey
Vol. 16 / No. 3 /
2014, pp. 25-36

can be read as a signal that Erdoğan will sustain even more resolutely the foreign policy discourse that has been consolidated over the past several years. However, the pair must answer several critiques that have recently been aimed at them and reestablish their “discursive superiority” on foreign policy issues. Surmounting these challenges is just as important as the new foreign policy model the pair must implement.

The Critique of Turkey's Foreign Policy

Over the past decade, the AK Party under Erdoğan has successfully produced solutions to many foreign policy challenges, and facilitated a continuity in the fundamental transformation that Turkish foreign policy has undergone. Both institutionally and ideationally, Erdoğan and his foreign policy team have instituted the most important foreign policy “revision” in the history of the Turkish Republic. Not only did this administration produce structural solutions to several of Turkey's chronic political problems, it has also “radically” recast how Turkey is perceived internationally. With its implementation of pro-growth economic policies, Turkey took its place as a “significant” actor on international platforms. Erdoğan devoted his energy to consolidating Turkey's democracy and reconstructing the domestic political order: from civil-military relations to the Kurdish problem to the relations between religion and state, he has confronted numerous challenges which are remnants from Tur-

key's early republican era. Through these policies, Erdoğan has played an important role in the last decade of an attempted “restoration” that stretches back over a century.

With these domestic political accomplishments and a new foreign policy vision, Erdoğan introduced to the global stage a Turkey situated in a very different position from previous eras, crafting a new image of Turkey in the foreign policy arena. However, the past two years have witnessed a new debate over the viability of the AK Party's foreign policy paradigm and choices it must make in the face of sudden and dramatic ruptures in the region. This difficult context has been exacerbated by the “political enmity” directed towards Erdoğan and his party during a period of extraordinary domestic conditions. Even more specifically newly elected Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu – the intellectual and practical architect of this foreign policy – has become the target of these criticisms.

Though diverse, these critiques have been formed on three major dimensions, and seem likely to persist along these lines during the upcoming period. The first dimension is that of *ideology*, stemming from dissatisfactions with the political paradigm of the AK Party era. This criticism, commonplace among opposition currents, holds that Sunni Islam has been the ideological source of Turkey's foreign policy in the wake of the Arab Spring. Consequently, this ideological preference has been the root cause of the “failures” of the AK Party's foreign

policy. These opponents frame their critique in sectarian terms, and from this perspective, they regard the AK Party's policy as tied to Erdoğan and Davutoğlu's "essential" identity which is constructed around Islam. From this viewpoint, it is impossible to expect any foreign policy change in the upcoming period; the essentialism of these figures makes any change impossible. This issue of Islamism has, in fact, become more of a type of "labeling" than actually being an explicit argument.

The second critique relates to the *geopolitical tendencies* of the AK Party's foreign policy. While at their core these critiques, too, hew to the "ideological essence" issue, their main critique is that Turkey's new engagements have become the source of its troubles. As with the Islamism argument, this critique posits a basic driver of Turkish foreign policy, holding that this force is Turkey's "expansionary" impetus, which has developed into a hegemonic regional project, and thus an abandonment of Turkey's traditional alliance-based politics.

Such a hegemonic project, according to opponents, is not only unsustainable, it is nearly impossible to achieve. This sets the stage for the third critique, which holds that Turkey's leaders have "exaggerated" their foreign policy capacity, leading to "excessive self-confidence" in their ability to solve regional problems, as well as a "rigid political discourse." In other words, Turkey's lack of means to realize its ambition of "leading the transformation" of the Arab Spring, especially in Syria, has

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led to the failure of its foreign policy. Moreover, opponents argue that Turkey's foreign policy perspective has eschewed international support and approval, with the consequence of narrowing Turkey's room for maneuver in the Middle East and eroding its diplomatic prestige.

Taken together, the purveyors of these three critiques assert that the AK Party, embroiled in domestic political conflict, has "drifted from democratic discourse" at home, a trend which has weakened Turkey's potential as a model for the Middle East and undermined its "soft power." Also, by driving Turkey into "isolation," its current Middle East policy has rendered Turkey "unable to take initiative" in international affairs. Critics hold that the transition of Erdoğan and Davutoğlu to the presidency and prime ministry, respectively, will not lead to a fresh start and cite three basic arguments for this: a) ideological rationales, b) divergence from the West, and c) capacity limitations. For these reasons, while pessimism reigns among the opposition over Turkey's foreign policy, an "improvement" under the leadership of Erdoğan and Davutoğlu seems equally unlikely.

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The above critiques are far from being comprehensive and suffer from reductionism. Even if a narrowing is occurring in Turkish foreign policy, these trends must be analyzed on three levels: the international system (global fragmentation on the macro-scale); regional change (regional instability on the meso-scale); and domestic political conflict (micro-scale). An analysis on all three levels will allow us to better comprehend the problematic aspects of the above critiques, and to foresee the general contours of Turkish foreign policy in the coming period.

Global Fragmentation

As in the past, Turkey is directly impacted by dynamics in the international system and in its region. The international system is still in a state of *transition* following the end of the Cold War. A basic historical property of transitions is that the distribution of power in the system tends to be insufficiently consolidated, which does not permit the emergence of real powers, preventing the formation of a long term and stable balance-of-power. This tends to heighten revisionist tendencies. In other words, actors

discontent with their current position in the system, or seeking greater inclusion, take their short-term strategic interests into account and seek to expand their influence. Shortly after the Cold War, revisionist tendencies increased among small powers in regional subsystems, while today, these tendencies are prevalent among various middle and large powers. Russia's Ukraine policy, Iran's push to become a nuclear power, China's policies in the Asia-Pacific, the BRICS or MIKTA vision of an alternative world order – all of these developments both influence the international power distribution and raise the possibility over the medium term of engendering concrete repercussions at the systemic level.

This conflictive and competitive fragmentation is occurring both at the systemic level and in rapidly diverging sub-systems, a trend that has supplanted “stable threats” with an “amorphous threat environment” and the proliferation of “new security” challenges. Because of the increasingly complex and unpredictable nature of the geopolitical order, revisionism at the regional sub-system level triggers unexpectedly acute crises. This narrows Turkey's foreign policy prerogatives, while in the short term, it could potentially encourage a consolidation of geopolitical flexibility. For this reason, developments at the macro level are a crucial variable, both as a “drag” on Turkish foreign policy, and as an influence on Turkey's geopolitical flexibility.

This geopolitical instability at the systemic level has two important im-



plications. First, as geopolitical competition diversifies, the likelihood increases of a return to status quo great power politics. Compared with the decade following the end of the Cold War, American unipolarity has waned and demands from rising powers for multipolarity have intensified. However, rather than herald a new era, this has led to a return to alliance behaviors typical of the Cold War period. For instance, the alignments over Syria represent a continuation of the Cold War power distribution. Secondly, the system's increasing competitiveness has turned the "collective action" of crisis solving into a problem of "global governance," thus taxing the functions of international institutions. This has diversified the strategic priorities of actors, and introduced considerable ambiguity as to precisely which issues qualify as security matters for the actors in particular and the system in general. Accordingly, major powers have become more selective in the ordering of their strate-

gic priorities, with the consequence of intensifying geopolitical competition in crisis zones and making conflict resolution more difficult and causing the conflicts to deepen.

For these reasons, a number of crises in the Middle East and North Africa – most notably Syria – have had longer durations as a consequence of global competition and, alternatively, their low status on the agenda of major actors. For example, because the US and EU privilege their strategic interests in Ukraine, they have left actors in the Middle East to face the acute crises in the region alone, thus allowing for more confrontation between regional actors. The dramatic developments in Iraq, for example, have put considerable pressure on its neighbors, and Iraq has become an arena for confrontation among them. Similarly, regional and global actors with differing strategic prerogatives have deepened the crisis in Syria, and foreign actors have removed Libya from

A member of Kurdish Peshmerga forces talks to a leader of a local Shiite community who praises the Kurdish Special Forces for protecting them from Sunni militants led by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) on June 21, 2014.

AFP / Rick Findler

their agendas following the NATO intervention. Though these actors were initially swift, Libya is now being permitted to collapse into a “failed state” – an outcome best explained by the shifting priorities of major actors. This trend makes it more difficult to approach global and regional security governance in tandem, and has enabled emerging crises to rapidly transcend the regional level. The Syrian, Libyan, and Iraqi crises of security governance are striking illustrations of this new trend. It applies as well to the US and international community’s stance on ISIS. As long as ISIS did not threaten Northern Iraq – a region ostensibly more stable than the remainder of the country – or Iraq’s religious minorities, Washington and the international community took no steps to contain the militant group. What steps have been taken represent a preference for short-term measures rather than developing a direct strategy against ISIS.

In a period of such rapid global fragmentation, it is reductionist to claim that Turkey’s regional policies are dictated solely by its ideological precepts. To approach Turkey’s Middle Eastern policy in its totality, attention must be paid to the stark conflict and fragmentation at the global system level. The ups-and-downs of Turkish foreign policy – results of the deepening Syrian crisis, the coup in Egypt, and the security crisis in Iraq – are a function of the global fragmentation discussed above. To wit, these three developments are all interrelated, and all are products of the international system’s fragmentation. If the Syrian crisis had

been resolved, the coup in Egypt may have been forestalled, and Iraq’s embroilment with ISIS could have been avoided. This fragmentation puts immediate constraints on Turkish foreign policy. More importantly, this fragmentation has prevented regional problems from reaching timely solutions, allowing them to metastasize to such an extent that they can no longer be solved through the efforts of a single actor. This has, in turn, brought Turkey into confrontation with other actors over these issues. It should be no surprise that Turkey has faced such foreign policy constraints, given the stark conflicts between global actors and actors seeking to exert a greater influence in world affairs, as well as the “indifference” of important actors to conflict resolution. These constraints are not directly related to either ideological preferences or to the constraints on Turkey’s foreign policy organization.

Regional Disorder and Fragmentation

Another factor influencing Turkish foreign policy is regional disorder and fragmentation. Turkey’s foreign policy successes during the AK Party period stemmed from the consonance that its foreign policy principles and tools were in tandem with the regional order, which was previously apparently stable. In other words, as Turkey entered a period of revisionism with regard to its traditional politics, it found that the principles and mechanisms underpinning this revisionism resonated on

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the regional level. Although its policy aimed for an eventual reordering of the region, Turkey envisioned a gradual transition. The regional cataclysm of the Arab Spring chimed well with Turkey's normative foreign policy principles. Yet, this shock triggered a slew of nonconventional security challenges that directly impacted Turkey's foreign policy principles and mechanisms. What was originally foreseen as a gradual transition took a sharp turn with the outbreak of civil war in Syria, the coup in Egypt, instability in Libya, and the security crisis in Iraq, and the regional restoration to be experienced through democratization was interrupted. Democratization in the region stalled, and this necessarily brought Turkey – with its vision of regional democratization – into confrontation with regional actors that held to the security-centric status quo. The highly divergent visions both of regional and external actors has led to regional disorder and fragmentation.

This regional disorder and fragmentation has bred three basic problems.

First, non-state actors have begun to undermine the institutions, ideologies, and economic structures of sovereign states. As the Arab Spring transformed into a security crisis, non-state actors began to directly challenge the secular notion of the nation state by placing increasing pressure on the regional system with actions that have weakened the region's modern formal borders. As a result of these pressures, the borders established during the first quarter of the 20th century are now being called into question. Secondly, the historic political competitiveness in the region has radicalized to become "enmity." Conflicts that previously were waged between states have now steeped into societies, and modes of conflict over border security have penetrated deeper within borders, stoking new antagonisms. ISIS, as a non-state armed actor, serves as a striking illustration at the center of these repercussions.

The state's transformation from a security provider to a source of insecurity has pushed sub-national ethnic and religious groups to pursue their own security mechanisms. The resulting struggle of non-state groups to control territory has confronted the state with an acute crisis of security, turning many states into "failed states." In Iraq, for example, the Kurds, Turkmen, and Sunnis have turned to securing their own interests, as a consequence of the weakness of the Iraqi state and the government's transformation into a source of insecurity. Syria and Libya could also be included in the same category.

A Yemeni fully veiled youth, shows her fist sporting paints of flags of Arab countries which took part in what is known to be the “Arab Spring” and a slogan that reads: “We will win,” during a protest in Sanaa, October 26.

AFP / Marwan Naamani



Lastly, regional security governance has weakened. Tasked with exerting influence in conflict resolution efforts and sometimes functioning as constraints on states, regional security organizations (The Arab League, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, etc) have become ineffective in the face of states that are differentially impacted by conflicts, and hence, support incompatible responses to these conflicts. As a result of regional disorder and fragmentation, regional organizations have become dysfunctional and unable to address regional security challenges in Syria, Libya, Egypt, Iraq, and Gaza. These conditions are dismantling the mechanisms required for constructing regional order, forcing actors to turn to unilateral preferences or short-term alliances.

Against this background, pressures have mounted against the foreign pol-

icy methods and choices that Turkey established prior to the Arab Spring. Meanwhile, a tension has arisen between Turkey's means and its objectives due to the crisis in Syria and Iraq's fragmentation. The adoption of a foreign policy model that simultaneously engages with both non-state and state interlocutors has become a necessity, as the functional structures of certain states dissolve. For Turkish foreign policy, forging relations with the Kurdish Regional Government has become part of a general strategy aimed at preserving the integrity of the Iraqi state; the decision to include Sunnis and Kurds in Iraqi politics has been an outcome of this policy. Contrary to certain claims, this policy is not guided by ideology. Given Turkey's ultimate goal of preserving Iraq's integrity, preventing the exclusion of its Sunnis is quintessentially a rational approach. Indeed, Turkey's

position was a response to the Maliki government's pro-Shia policy, a form of politics that has cost Maliki his seat and increased Iraq's political and security fragility. In fact, ISIS's inroads in Iraq stands as a dramatic consequence of Maliki's sectarian politics. In this context, it is clear that charging Turkey with losing influence in Iraq loses sight of the developments that led to today's conditions, and underestimates Ankara's role in the negotiations over Iraq's new parliamentary chair and president.

The same parameters apply to Turkey's Syria policy. It is fallacious to take Turkish "support" for the opposition in Syria simply as a given, or as a result of ideological preferences, without first analyzing the timing of Turkey's grant of support to the regime opponents, as well as what Turkey offered this support against. The basic methodological weakness of this criticism is its rush to generalize without first conducting an analysis of process. In fact, Turkey, which has always favored international coordination, was not the cause of the deepening of the Syrian crisis. Rather, the cause was the lack of a credible deterrent from an international coalition. The basic limitation on Turkey's deterrent ability is the divergent visions of regional and external actors. Similar conditions prevailed in Egypt. Support for Morsi was a continuation of the political preferences that informed Turkish calls for Mubarak to democratize. In this way, Turkey's stiff response to the military coup is in accordance with the pro-democracy normative position to which Tur-

key has subscribed throughout the Arab Spring. Thus, Turkey's differences on this issue were not the product of an Islamist policy of intrinsic support for the Muslim Brotherhood. Rather, the fissures grew from taking positions incompatible with regional and external actors bent on pursuing anti-Brotherhood policies. Important in this regard is the moral frame of reference Turkey used in legitimating its positions on Syria, Iraq, and Egypt. From the opposition's perspective, its Islamist overtones are unsettling, but this frame is actually congruent with that of the liberal international community.¹

In a similar fashion, Turkey's position on Hamas fits into these two dimensions. Turkey's Hamas policy is resonant with Hamas' growing role as a political actor, and reflects the reality in Palestine that a "solution without Hamas is impossible." This position places Turkey in contention with other regional actors. Approached this way, claiming that Turkey's Middle East policy is built on sectarian or religious foundations is a bold overstatement that displays a selective bias on the part of critics. Indeed, these assessments represent the use of foreign policy as a springboard for domestic power struggles. Stated more explicitly, these are less critiques than coded political language.

Restoration in Domestic Politics and Its Opponents

Domestic politics and its power struggles constitute the micro level of

analysis that enables foreign policy, and serves as a basis for criticism. The ideal and practice of “restoration,” outlined by Erdoğan and Davutoğlu, has both led to the consolidation of political blocs, and in other ways, to certain cross-cutting alignments. As for its reflection in foreign policy, this restoration process dissolved former paradigms, decentralizing the historically highly centralized techno-bureaucratic foreign policy elite, and enacting a “shift” in geopolitical discursive codes. This shift has relaxed Turkey’s historical placement in the West, leading to conflicts of “representation” in the power struggle over foreign affairs. Kemalism, especially, has suffered a crisis of representation with the waning of the domestic security-centric culture that informed the previous foreign policy paradigm’s emphasis.

Into the vacuum left by Kemalism’s “crisis of representation” entered a “renewal” in foreign policy, necessarily engendering a new struggle both in foreign policy discourse and in the field. In this sense, opposition to the current foreign policy has become both a tool for mobilizing opposition blocs, as well as part of an effort to delegitimize current foreign policy. For this reason, criticism of foreign policy on various dimensions should be understood as part of the opposition’s efforts at mobilization. For instance, the discursive coding of criticism toward Turkey’s Iran policy shares a basic similarity with the critiques mobilized on the axis of Islamism and sectarianism.

Against this background, although the nation-state has preserved its existence as a unit in foreign policy, its reference codes have undergone an important transformation, leading to the construction in Turkey of a new “territorial state identity.” This new identity has kept as much distance as possible from Islam, while also altering the previous foreign policy that steeped its roots in nationalism. It is no coincidence that Erdoğan’s presidency has witnessed the dissemination of the “Türkiyeli-lik (being from Turkey; broader and inclusive understanding of Turkish identity)” discursive coding. Such an image of identity renders the static nation-state ideal unfeasible for foreign policy. In terms of material interests, the modern nation-state construction may have retained its validity (material power and security), but on the normative level, it is impossible to reconsolidate the unfolding regional transformation and fragmentation with the idea of the nation-state. For this reason, opponents are often guilty of a contradiction: they wage criticisms at the AK Party’s supple nation-state based foreign policy, but they do so through a rigid conception of the nation-state. Clearing up this contradiction in the short-term appears unlikely. More broadly, with a foreign policy renewal that has shifted the point of reference from the state to the civilization, Turkey seeks to address its ethno-religious chronic issues using a “melting pot” approach. Only in this context is it possible to understand religion’s role in Turkish foreign policy. Ahmet Davutoğlu has

revived this understanding under the “restoration” heading – increasing the likelihood that foreign policy debates become bound up with domestic political contests.

Turkey’s shift from markers of identity built around the state to those built on civilization have also impacted its regional and global position. On the regional level, Turkey has been wise to cast itself as the historical source of order, and attempts at integrating this role into the international system are a natural product of this move. Otherwise, Turkey would have carried a “hybrid” identity, which would have clashed with the visions of Erdoğan and Davutoğlu. Worse, opposition calls for such a hybrid are out of step with regional dynamics. Consequently, points of antagonism in Turkey’s domestic power struggle are directly related to competition over “identity representation,” a pattern that will continue in the coming period.

Challenges and the Search for a New Foreign Policy Model

Opposition criticisms are a far cry from depicting a “critical horizon” for evaluating current foreign policy and are problematic on three counts.

First, the criticisms fail to present a comprehensive analysis. By drawing artificial distinctions between the levels of analysis, they neglect the integrated dynamics wrought by fragmentation at the global level, negative developments at the regional level, and domestic power struggles.

For Turkish foreign policy, forging relations with the Kurdish Regional Government has become part of a general strategy aimed at preserving the integrity of Iraq

Second, they engage in “selective bias” by waging critiques that legitimize their own arguments. Generally, such critiques intentionally ignore the context, opting instead to focus on an isolated event for the purposes of launching an attack on the entire enterprise of Turkish foreign policy. In other words, these critiques are reductionist. For instance, a paper on Davutoğlu’s “intellectual world” will rely on generalizations culled from columns he wrote during the 1990s, and it will select these materials in such a way as to confirm the argument to which the author has already committed. This sort of critique misuses the theories pulled up to support the author, and they slant the “data” to support their claim.

Third, these criticisms are also “agent-centric,” thereby reducing the effects of regional geopolitical ruptures and instability to either the ideologies of decision makers or their policies. Such interpretations abstract the behavioral and ideological positions from the dynamic of foreign policy. And by placing these individual properties at the center of the analysis, they present these ideol-

ogies as the essence of foreign policy outcomes.

Overall, Turkey's geopolitical flexibility will continue in the coming period, despite its challenges, in concert with: a) institutional integration on the global level, b) taking the lead as a "satisfactory" actor on the regional level with regard to stability and state prerogatives, and c) the continuation of reformist stability in domestic politics. For these reasons, expecting a radical divergence in foreign policy during the Erdoğan presidency would be a wild exaggeration. Still, Davutoğlu's position as prime minister could foster greater confidence in the future. For this reason, while it would be incorrect to expect a radical shift in Turkish foreign policy, it is possible to contend that Turkey may seek to intensify its geopolitical flexibility.

In light of Ahmet Davutoğlu's "restoration" perspective, the interrelations between domestic and foreign policy may increasingly need to be approached together. This interrelatedness has the potential to shape the political processes that lay ahead for Turkey. The restoration concept has four basic dimensions. First, there is domestic political restoration, a process that entails a series of important advances in domestic reform. Domestic restoration is framed around democratic deepening, and consolidation through institutionalization. Second is identity restoration, which entails taking steps to resolve identity-based problems, especially the Kurdish issue. Drafting a new consti-

tution will tie together the processes of domestic and identity restoration. Third is economic restoration. This effort will focus on preserving the structural conditions for sustained growth and expanding into more dynamic regions. Finally, sustaining the dynamism of Turkey's foreign policy represents the fourth dimension of restoration, which will require using various ad hoc alignments to resolve regional crises. Reviewing critiques related to foreign policy capacity is among the topics Davutoğlu will evaluate most in the during his premiership.

Additionally, the issues at the top of Turkey's upcoming foreign policy agenda will turn on how to relate the security and political crisis in the Middle East to the AK Party's domestic reformist understanding, and how to transcend current constraints in order to construct a sustainable regional order. The second important topic will be how to construct a model of foreign policy implementation. It stands to reason that the coming period will witness a kind of "presidential foreign policy" in style and structure, though instituting this model in the short term may be difficult. Nevertheless, instituting this model will be simplified by the fact that Erdoğan and Davutoğlu have been working together in this area for over twelve years. ■

Endnote

1. Şaban Kardaş, "Reelpolitikten Moral Politığe Türkiye'nin Dış Politikası ve Filistin," *Star Açık Görüş*, July 26, 2014.