

## ***Ahmet Davutoglu: A Thinker in the Halls of Power***

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Early this past January, Turkey's ambassadors from around the world gathered in Ankara for their annual meeting. The five-day gathering had the usual elements of gatherings from previous years: the seminars and debriefings, and the traditional group visit to the austere mausoleum of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, modern Turkey's secularizing founder. But there were also some significant differences this time around.

Turkey's foreign policy profile has increased dramatically in recent years, and the ambassadors' meeting coincided with visits to Ankara by the Japanese, Brazilian and German foreign ministers, all of whom addressed the Turkish envoys. Turkey's top diplomats were treated to a show headed by an all-star cast.

But the biggest -- and most surprising -- difference in this year's gathering came at the very end, when Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu decided to wrap it up not in Ankara, but rather in Mardin, a historic hilltop city not far from the Syrian border in Turkey's southeast region. Along with today's Kurdish and Arabic speakers, Mardin is also home to an ancient Christian community that has almost disappeared, most of its members having been forced to leave after getting caught up in the violence that gripped the region in the 1980s and '90s. Upon arriving in Mardin -- which, with its old stone houses, mosques and churches and winding, narrow streets, still retains a distinct sense of antiquity -- Davutoglu admonished his ambassadors (a notoriously stuffy, bureaucratic and Ankara-centric bunch, at least in the eyes of the Turkish public) to go out and mingle with the locals at the city's teahouses and bazaars.

But the trip to Mardin wasn't all about getting the ambassadors to loosen up and meet some "real people." Davutoglu, a former academic, drew on the historical setting to offer his staff a philosophical -- even slightly mystical -- look forward. "By 2023, when the country will commemorate the 100th anniversary of its founding, I envision a Turkey that is a full member of the EU after having completed all the necessary accession requirements, living in full peace with its neighbors, integrated with neighboring regions in economic terms and with a common security vision, an effective player in regions where our national interests lie, and active in all global affairs and among the top 10 economies in the world," the minister said in his speech.

But Turkey's rise, Davutoglu told his envoys, also depends on the country being part of an effort to help create a new, more just international system. "If we are to find a new philosophy [for that system] one day -- and that day is not far off -- those who will undertake this effort need to understand Mardin's soul," Davutoglu told his ambassadors. "Every mosque, every church, every temple in this city represents that beginning."

For bureaucrats used to the careful language of diplomacy and the hidebound traditions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this was certainly heady stuff. But Davutoglu is not only shaking things up in Ankara. For the last several years, first as a senior adviser to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and now as his foreign minister, Davutoglu has been methodically shaking up Turkey's traditional foreign policy: recalibrating the country's relations with its traditional allies, the United States and Israel, re-engaging with the Arab and Muslim countries of the Middle East that it had ignored for decades, and increasingly positioning Turkey as a global soft-power broker.

"He's different in many aspects," says Sami Kohen, a veteran Turkish journalist who has been covering foreign affairs for the daily Milliyet newspaper since 1954. "He's not a career diplomat. The fact that he is an academic, that he was the foreign policy adviser of Erdogan, is in itself a difference. He's a thinker. Now, of course, as foreign minister he's combining both thinking and practice, and he's practicing what he thinks."

Adds Kohen, "We are starting to witness some major changes in Turkish foreign policy because of him. During the Cold War, Turkey's foreign policy was indexed to the West, to Washington. Here we have a turning point, a change."

As for whether or not that turning point represents Turkey changing its axis, Kohen said that is not a useful question. "I believe the thinking now in government circles," he says, "is that Turkey itself can now be an axis."

The paper trail of most foreign ministers, if they have one, is made up of dry briefings, wonky policy papers and perhaps a few interviews and testimony to legislative bodies. Tracing Davutoglu's paper trail, on the other hand, requires wading through several academic books and articles with frequently impenetrable titles. A quick sampling includes, "Philosophical and Institutional Dimensions of Secularization: A Comparative Analysis," "Rewriting Contemporary Muslim Politics: A 20th-Century Periodization," and "Alternative Paradigms: The Impact of Islamic and Western Weltanschauungs on Political Theory."

But Davutoglu's most significant work is one that has yet to be translated into English, "Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu," or, "Strategic Depth: Turkey's Place in the World." In it, Davutoglu maintains that modern Turkey has failed to take full advantage of its geographic location and its historical ties in the area surrounding it -- not just the Middle East, but also Central Asia, the Balkans and the Caucasus -- and argues for deeper engagement and a more activist foreign policy.

Analyst Graham Fuller has described the book's prescription for Ankara's way forward in the world as "perhaps the most systematic, substantial and comprehensive vision of Turkey's strategic position yet written. . . . Davutoglu's vision is at once independent, nationalistic, Islamic, pan-Turkist, global and Western."

When "Strategic Depth" was published in 2001, Davutoglu was still firmly ensconced in the world of academia, serving as the chair of the International Relations department at Istanbul's Beykent University and also teaching at the city's Marmara University. When the liberal Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power at the end of 2002, Davutoglu -- who had close connections to many of the party's top leaders -- became Erdogan's senior foreign policy adviser, while still keeping one foot in the classroom.

Davutoglu's government work soon eclipsed his academic activity, though, as he took on an increasingly important role in shaping Turkey's rapidly evolving foreign policy. In many ways, Davutoglu -- the son of a tradesman from the conservative city of Konya, in central Anatolia, who had little previous connection to Turkish politics -- became a shadow foreign minister, setting policy from outside the bureaucracy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. When he was officially appointed to the position of foreign minister in May of last year, replacing Ali Babacan, an American-educated financial expert who failed to leave a

strong mark in the position, there was a sense in Turkey (and among Turkey watchers in other countries) that the curtain had been lifted on the wizard who had until then been working behind the scenes.

In Davutoglu, Turkey now has a foreign minister who presents a very interesting, if not unprecedented, mix: someone equally at home in the Ivory Tower and in the halls of power, whose foreign policy thinking is equal parts Machiavelli and Rumi and whose foreign policy implementation frequently blurs the line between idealism and realism.

"I think there should be a proper combination of realism and idealism in foreign policy," Davutoglu says, during an interview on board a Turkish Airlines charter taking him to the recent London conference on Afghanistan. "A purely idealist approach that ignores the realist school of international relations may not achieve the goals that were set out in the beginning. A realist approach that ignores idealist perspectives or values or visions may produce just reactive, responsive policies, rather than vision-oriented policies. What should be done? There should be a vision in the mind of policymakers, of public-opinion makers. But in the practice, the same person should be realistic in order to achieve this."

"I remember in 2003," he continued, "the first time when I declared a 'zero problems' policy with our neighbors, many people saw it at that time -- since I didn't have any practice yet, I was only an academician and a chief foreign policy adviser -- as an idealist formula, even a utopian one. But what did we do? We not only declared this policy, but we worked on this policy step-by-step, stage-by-stage, with patience."

As an example, Davutoglu cited Turkey's relations with Syria, which he characterized as a relationship of "at least mutual mistrust" when the AKP government was established in 2002. But between 2003 and 2009, a period during which he visited Syria 39 times, the two countries signed 51 agreements and lifted all visa requirements.

"Many people look at our Middle East policy, but look at Balkan politics," Davutoglu adds. "In the 1990s, we had problems with Serbia because of Bosnia-Herzegovina, but now we have excellent relations with Serbia. Our president has gone there, I have gone twice. In the last four months, we have organized four trilateral summits between Turkey, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia. There, we also have the same approach."

"This is the vision," he emphasized. "But how did we achieve this vision? Through realistic policy." For decades, Turkish foreign policy -- marked by the diplomatic and military misadventures that led to the breakup of the Ottoman Empire -- had been characterized by a deep sense of caution. It was reactive rather than proactive, and rarely took diplomatic initiatives. But now, in many ways thanks to Davutoglu's "zero problems with neighbors" policy, it's hard to find a place in Turkey's wider surrounding region where the country isn't active.

In the past few years, Turkey's relations with Syria and Iran have improved dramatically, with political and economic relations with both countries at all-time highs. From being on the verge of war a decade ago, Ankara and Damascus are now on the road to becoming close allies. In October, meanwhile, Turkey and Armenia signed a historic set of protocols that lays the groundwork for the two countries to restore their relations and examine their difficult past. Although now apparently stalled, the reconciliation process with Yerevan still represented a major breakthrough for Turkish foreign policy.

Meanwhile, at one time or another over the last few years (and with varying degrees of success), Turkey has been involved in mediation efforts between Israel and Syria, between Fatah and Hamas, between rival groups in Lebanon, and between Afghanistan and Pakistan -- most recently holding a summit in Istanbul between the Turkish, Afghan and Pakistani presidents as a run-up to the larger Afghanistan conference in London.

"It's the first time Turkey has had a foreign minister that foreign ambassadors enjoy meeting, who has the prime minister's ear. These are very important things," says Hugh Pope, Turkey analyst for the International Crisis Group, a policy and advocacy organization based in Brussels. "He's managed to put a name to Turkish foreign policy in a way that [Ataturk's famous dictum] 'Peace at Home, Peace Abroad' never did. He's managed to make a brand out of Turkish foreign policy."

To a certain extent, Davutoglu's success has been one of putting a catchy name on an already existing set of policies. As some Turkish analysts like to point out, the groundwork for "zero problems with neighbors" was actually already being laid down during the late-1990s by the late Ismail Cem, who served as foreign minister between 1997 and 2002. During Cem's tenure, for example, the highly successful normalization of Turkey's problematic relations with Greece took off. Even the improvement of relations with Syria and Iran trace their roots to this period. The first major breakthrough in Turkish-Syrian relations in recent years actually happened not under the AKP's watch, but in 2000, when arch-secularist President Ahmet Necdet Sezer went to Damascus for the funeral of longtime Syrian leader Hafez Al-Assad.

In his writings, meanwhile, Cem laid out a formula for a "realist" Turkish foreign policy, one that sees the country as a meeting point between East and West, occupying the unique position of being both Asian and European, able to combine Islamic traditions with democracy. It's a formula that sounds very similar what the AKP and Davutoglu have put forward.

#### *Turkey's policymakers build on an old foundation*

"For a variety of reasons, I think he comes across as a very successful foreign minister, but I think the revolution in Turkish foreign policy has a lot more continuity than change," says Soli Ozel, a political analyst and foreign editor of the Haber Turk newspaper. "Nothing that these guys have done, with the exception of the Armenian opening, was from scratch. They built on the ground that was there, and they have done that passionately."

Says Volker Perthes, director of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs in Berlin, "Davutoglu calls it 'zero problem with neighbors.' I think it is a reinterpretation of Ataturk's motto of 'Peace at home, Peace Abroad.' Given Turkey's location, with so many problematic neighbors, it makes sense for Turkey to reach out to its neighbors."

"What's new here," Perthes adds, "is the semi-ideological, emotional content that we have here, particularly Erdogan filling [the policy] with 'Muslim brotherhood' kind of language, 'that we can mediate in the region because we are Muslims.' This is a new part, but the geostrategic part is not. It's rather Ataturk in an AKP coat."

Still, the AKP coat is certainly a successful one. Since being formed in 2001 by members of the reformist wing of one of Turkey's veteran Islamist parties, the party has gone on to become one of the most

significant forces in Turkish political history, winning two national elections decisively and becoming the first single-party government to rule the country in over a decade.

The years preceding the AKP's first election, in 2002, were particularly difficult ones for Turkey, marked by a severe economic crisis, political and economic mismanagement, and the aftereffects of the country's 1980 military coup. The AKP's success in righting the country, both economically and politically, appears to have provided the government with opportunities not only in the domestic sphere, but also in the foreign policy arena.

"[The troubles in the period before the AKP came to power] created a major political vacuum in Turkey. Those were really horrible years and Turkey lost big time," says Ibrahim Kalin, a senior foreign policy adviser to Erdogan, during an interview in Ankara. "The AKP came to power and proved to the world that it could run this country much better than all the other governments before. The more successful AKP became, in terms of running the government and electoral satisfaction, it opened up new venues, new possibilities [in terms of foreign policy]."

According to Kalin, "It's no longer a narrow nation-state agenda. It's a regional agenda. It's a global agenda."

But the AKP's increased ability to maneuver abroad is not only due to its success at home. The party's rise to power has coincided with the aftermath of the Iraq war and the resulting significant decrease in American influence in Turkey's immediate neighborhood. That has further enabled Ankara to think big in terms of its foreign policy.

"Turkey has more room to flex its muscles," says the ICG's Pope. "The United States just doesn't have the levers it used to have on Turkey." Adds Pope, who recently returned from an academic residency in Washington, "A lot of the angst I felt about Turkey [in Washington] is a general angst about an American loss of influence in the world and how that's being filled by intermediate powers."

Turkey's newfound diplomatic activism, much of it inspired by Davutoglu, has certainly left many of Turkey's traditional allies somewhat off balance. In Washington, Ankara's increasingly strained ties with Israel -- until a few years ago a significant strategic partner -- as well as its rapidly warming relations with Iran have raised numerous question marks about Turkey's future orientation.

"Davutoglu has opened a whole new and wider agenda and list of questions for the American-Turkish relationship," says Ian Lesser, senior transatlantic fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States in Washington. "There's no doubt that the activism and the potential for Turkey to play a role on a long list of issues is much greater, and for the most part that's being viewed positively in Washington."

Lesser maintains that the official view of Davutoglu includes reservations, "since there is always a discussion of where Turkey is going." But, he argued, it is largely positive because Davutoglu "is pursuing policies that could give a lot more potential to the relationship and he has a much more engaging style. He is articulate. He can speak to different audiences. Style counts in foreign policy, as we know, and he does have a positive style in dealing with American counterparts."

In the Middle East, meanwhile, Turkey's assertive reappearance in the region after decades of keeping its Arab and Muslim neighbors at arm's length has created something of a stir. In an October column in

Al Hayat, Paul Salem, director of the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, made the case for this being "Turkey's century" in the Middle East.

"Indeed, Turkey is well-placed to make a bid for a pre-eminent leadership role within the Muslim and Arab world. Egypt under Nasser set the standard. Since then, Egypt has faded. Iran has made headway, but it has been limited by its Shiite identity in a mainly Sunni world and by an increasingly dysfunctional and unattractive model of clerical rule," Salem wrote. "Turkey is the only country in the entire Middle East that has integrated with modernity. It has a functional and democratic political system, a productive economy, and has found workable balances between religion and secularism, faith and science, individual and collective identity, nationalism and rule of law, etc. No other country in the region, from Morocco through to Pakistan, has succeeded in this way."

"Iran, Egypt and other Arab countries are not the future," Salem concluded. "Turkey might well be. As a large Sunni country with deep historical roots in the region, this could be the beginning of Turkey's century in the Middle East."

Mustafa Alani, director of the Department of Security and Defense Studies at the Gulf Research Center in the United Arab Emirates, describes Ankara's outreach to the Middle East, so far, as a major success story. "We look at Turkey now as a counterbalance to Iran, to Iranian influence in the region. Iran's influence is through intimidation, through interference. Turkey's way is completely different," he says. Still, Alani adds, some question marks remain. "It's a policy of the party, not of the state, right now. So the question is how long that can be sustained. We are wondering if we are seeing a major policy shift, or a product of the party and leadership in charge? This still needs more time."

Meanwhile, observers inside Turkey wonder whether Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs can maintain the ambitious pace demanded by Davutoglu's foreign policy. With just more than 1,000 staff right now (by comparison, France and the United Kingdom both have more than 5,000 working in their diplomatic corps), the ministry's capacities have been stretched to the limit by Davutoglu's flurries of diplomatic activity -- much of it in places where Turkey has, at least since Ottoman times, little previous experience working.

"There are too many balls being thrown in the air and there's nobody to catch them all," says Cengiz Aktar, director of the European Studies department at Istanbul's Bahcesehir University and a former United Nations official. "Turkey's foreign service and academia don't have the institutional capacity and memory for all of this. Of course, you should start somewhere, but you should be humble. These guys are not humble enough."

Yet another domestic challenge faces Davutoglu and the AKP's foreign policy goals: Many of them are tied up in resolving historic and, until recently, taboo issues -- particularly the Armenian, Kurdish and Cyprus problems -- that have cast a heavy shadow over Turkish politics for the last few decades. Davutoglu has been smart enough to see this, which helps explain Ankara's softened approach to the Cyprus issue, as well as its desire to move ahead with its rapprochement with Armenia and to introduce a reform package aimed at giving the Kurds increased political and cultural rights.

"What they are looking for is a kind of Pax Turkica. They have the hard power, but what they are trying to do now is build up their soft power," says Henri Barkey, an expert on Turkey at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington. "But to do that they have to deal with the Armenians, with the Kurds and with Cyprus. How can you talk about 'zero problems' with neighbors

when you don't have relations with Armenians or when you are occupying northern Cyprus or when you're denying Kurdish rights?"

Considering how deeply these issues cut into the Turkish sense of self-identity, it's not surprising that these are the three areas where Davutoglu's "zero problems" policy is faltering. Negotiations between the Turkish and Greek Cypriot presidents continue, but there is still little indication of a breakthrough there and the issue remains one that could possibly derail Turkey's EU membership bid.

The accords signed between Ankara and Yerevan in October and which have yet to be ratified by either government are now in serious trouble, with both sides accusing each other of adding preconditions that were not agreed upon ahead of time. A breakdown in that process would mean that Ankara would again have to devote significant diplomatic resources to fighting Armenian genocide resolutions, particularly in Washington.

Meanwhile, the "Kurdish Initiative" that the AKP government announced several months ago is still in the works, but faces increasing domestic opposition that could wind up making it too politically costly for the AKP government.

Ultimately, it appears that Turkey's ability to project its power and influence abroad may be limited by its own domestic concerns and squabbles.

"The only obstacle to the country's foreign policy ambitions is Turkey itself and nothing else," says Semih Idiz, an Ankara-based columnist for Milliyet who covers foreign affairs. "We have a lot of unsettled accounts domestically. We have a lot of fault lines. A lot of things have been whitewashed over the years and now everything has come home to roost in a big way. Foreign policy is now a function of the domestic domain in the sense that it can be manipulated for domestic purposes. Before, it was the domain of the high priests of the diplomatic bureaucracy, who knew best. What they said went."

"All this talk of where Turkey is going is meaningless," Idiz warned, "until Turkey itself figures out what its own identity is."

In that sense, Davutoglu's taking his ambassadors to Mardin -- an ancient city whose more recent history tells of the bloody fight between Turks and Kurds, the slow disappearance of Turkey's ancient Christian community, and the impact of the modern Turkish state's heavy-handed attempt to create a uniform national identity -- was more than appropriate.

Davutoglu may have meant to teach them a lesson about the need to draw on Turkey's historic depth in order to fulfill its ambitious new foreign policy agenda. But there was another, perhaps unintentional message that the Mardin trip delivered: If Turkey really wants its new foreign policy vision to succeed, it first needs to better get to know itself.

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