

What Drives Turkish Foreign Policy?

by Svante E. Cornell

Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) was reelected to a third term in June 2011. This remarkable achievement was mainly the result of the opposition's weakness and the rapid economic growth that has made Turkey the world's sixteenth largest economy. But Ankara's growing international profile also played a role in the continued public support for the conservative, Islamist party. Indeed, in a highly unusual fashion, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan began his victory speech by saluting "friendly and brotherly nations from Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, Amman, Cairo, Sarajevo, Baku, and Nicosia."¹ "The Middle East, the Caucasus, and the Balkans have won as much as Turkey," he claimed, pledging to take on an even greater role in regional and international affairs. By 2023, the republic's centennial, the AKP has promised Turkey will be among the world's ten leading powers.

At the same time, Turkey's growing profile has been controversial. As Ankara developed increasingly warm ties with rogue states such as Iran, Syria, and Sudan while curtailing its once cordial relations with Israel and using stronger rhetoric against the United States and Europe, it generated often heated debates on whether it has distanced itself from the West. Turkey continues to function within the European security infrastructure although more uneasily than before, but has a rupture with the West already taken place, and if so, is it irreversible?

AKP CHANGES FOCUS FROM WEST TO EAST

The basic tenets that guided Turkey's foreign policy since the founding of the republic included caution and pragmatism—especially concerning the Middle East. An imperial hang-

Svante E. Cornell is research director of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, affiliated with Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies and the Stockholm-based Institute for Security and Development Policy.

¹ *Hürriyet* (Istanbul), June 13, 2011.

over from the Ottoman era drove home the lesson that Ankara had little to gain and much to lose from interjecting itself into the acrimonious politics of the region. Notwithstanding occasional differences with the Western powers, Ankara concentrated on playing a role within Europe.

The AKP appeared to maintain this course during its first term (2002-07) as seen in its focus on EU harmonization as a means to join the union. But in its second term (2007-11) it departed significantly from this approach. Guided by the concept of “strategic depth” elaborated by Erdoğan’s long-term advisor-turned-foreign-minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, Ankara increasingly focused on its neighborhood with the stated goal of becoming a dominant and stabilizing force, one that would function as an honest broker and project its economic clout throughout the region and beyond.²

The official slogan, which could be called the Davutoğlu doctrine, was “zero problems with neighbors.” Ankara rapidly developed relations with the Syrian government to the level of a strategic partnership; Turkish officials also began cultivating closer economic and political ties with the Iranian and Russian governments, both large energy providers to the growing Turkish economy. It also reached

Ankara became the chief castigator of Israel in international forums.

out to the Kurdish administration of northern Iraq, a previously unthinkable move. In another bold but ultimately failed move, the AKP leadership sought to mend fences with Armenia; its predecessors had never established diplomatic relations with Yerevan due to its occupation since the early 1990s of a sixth of Turkic Azerbaijan’s territory, including the disputed area of Nagorno-Karabakh.

These moves were generally welcomed in the West. Critics in Washington deplored Ankara’s overtures to Tehran and Damascus, but the in-

coming Obama administration went on to develop rather similar outreach policies of its own. The AKP argued that it could function as an interlocutor with these regimes on Turkey’s border with which Brussels and Washington had only limited ties and that a more active Turkey would also benefit the West. Ankara’s eagerness to mediate in regional conflicts also brought goodwill. The Turkish government offered its good offices in bridging differences between Syria and Israel, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and between the rival Palestinian factions of Fatah and Hamas. Western leaders generally gave the AKP the benefit of the doubt as it assured them that its outreach could help moderate rogues and bring them within the international system.

AN AXIS SHIFT

Yet Ankara’s actual course soon began to deviate substantially from its official narrative. Three issues in particular have generated concern about the AKP’s foreign policy intentions: Iran, Israel, and Sudan—and more recently, renewed belligerence on Cyprus.

Ankara’s policy of engagement with Tehran was welcomed as long as it was influencing the Iranians, rather than the other way around. But Erdoğan and his associates soon began to move away from the stated objective of acting as a mediator between Iran and the West, becoming increasingly outspoken defenders of Tehran’s nuclear program. In November 2008, Erdoğan urged nuclear weapons powers to abolish their own arsenals before meddling with Iran.³ Soon afterwards he termed Ahmadinejad a “friend”⁴ and was among the first to lend legitimacy to the Iranian president by congratulating him upon his fraudulent and bloodstained election in June 2009.⁵ Turkish leaders then began to publicly juxtapose the issue of Israel’s nuclear weapons with

2 See, for example, Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye’nin Uluslararası Konumu* (Istanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2001).

3 *Hürriyet*, Nov. 17, 2008; *The Economist* (London), Nov. 27, 2008.

4 *The Guardian* (London), Oct. 26, 2009; *Sofia* (Bulgaria) *Echo*, Oct. 26, 2009.

5 Svante E. Cornell, “Iranian Crisis Catches the Turkish Government off Guard,” *Turkey Analyst*, June 19, 2009; *Hürriyet*, Feb. 2, 2010.

Iran's covert program,⁶ and in November 2009, abstained from a sanctions resolution at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) against Tehran that both Moscow and Beijing supported.⁷ In May 2010, in a display of defiance, Erdoğan and Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva made a well-publicized appearance in Tehran on the eve of a U.N. Security Council vote on a new round of sanctions on Iran, holding hands with Ahmadinejad and announcing their alternative diplomatic proposal to handle the Iranian nuclear

issue.⁸ In the scope of two years, Ankara had become Tehran's most valuable international supporter.

The breakdown of Turkey's alliance with Israel is another cause of concern. The AKP at first sought to mediate between Syria and Israel as well as between the two Palestinian factions, Fatah and the Islamist Hamas.⁹ Yet in 2007, following Hamas's violent takeover in the Gaza Strip, Ankara broke the Western boycott of the movement when it invited Hamas leader Khaled Mesh'al to Ankara.¹⁰ Following Israel's offensive against Hamas in December 2008-January 2009, Ankara became the chief castigator of Israel in international forums.¹¹ In January 2009, Erdoğan famously walked out of an event at the Davos World Economic Forum after starting a shouting match with Israeli president Shimon Peres; Tur-



In a scene that would have been unimaginable a decade ago, the head-scarved wife of newly reelected Turkish prime minister Erdoğan greets well-wishers with her husband. Turkey's founder Kemal Atatürk saw such public displays of religiosity as a hindrance to the creation of the new, secular Turkish Republic.

key subsequently disinvented Israel from planned joint military exercises under the NATO aegis.¹² By the spring of 2010, a nongovernmental organization closely connected to the AKP, the Humanitarian Relief Foundation, designed and implemented the notorious Gaza flotilla¹³ aimed at putting Israel in an untenable position regarding its blockade of the Hamas-controlled territory. When eight Turkish citizens were killed in fierce clashes with Israeli commandos boarding the ship, Davutoğlu called the event "Turkey's 9/11,"¹⁴ and a series of Turkish leaders threatened to cut off diplomatic relations with Israel while Erdoğan stated in no uncertain terms that he did not consider Hamas a terrorist organization.¹⁵ Ankara later downgraded diplomatic relations with Israel to the level of second secretary.

More worrisome is Erdoğan's military posturing, including threats of confrontation with Israel. In September 2011, he argued that Turkey would have been justified in going to war with

6 *Middle East Online* (London), Mar. 17, 2010; *The Wall Street Journal*, Apr. 8, 2010.

7 Reuters, Nov. 27, 2009.

8 *The Economist*, May 17, 2010.

9 *The New York Times*, May 21, 2008; *Ha'aretz* (Tel Aviv), June 30, 2009; Reuters, June 10, 2010.

10 *Khaleej Times* (Dubai), Feb. 19, 2006.

11 *Ha'aretz*, Jan. 13, 2009; *Eurasianet* (New York), Feb. 4, 2009; *The Jerusalem Post*, Jan. 13, 2009.

12 *Hürriyet*, Oct. 11, 2009.

13 *The Jerusalem Post*, June 24, 2011; Michael Weiss, "Ankara's Proxy," *Standpoint*, July/Aug. 2010.

14 *The Jerusalem Post*, Feb. 6, 2010.

15 *Radikal* (Istanbul), June 4, 2010; *The Jerusalem Post*, June 4, 2010.



Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (left) consults with long-term advisor-turned-foreign-minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. Davutoğlu has written extensively about the conflict between Islam and the West, encouraging the emergence of Islamic states.

Israel following the Gaza flotilla incident.¹⁶ In addition, the Turkish navy was ordered to “ensure freedom of navigation” in the eastern Mediterranean, including supporting the delivery of humanitarian aid to Gaza—raising the danger of a direct confrontation with the Israeli navy upholding the blockade on Gaza, which a U.N. inquiry commission has deemed to be legal.¹⁷ Moreover, the Turkish air force has begun installing a new identification friend or foe (IFF) system on its F-16s, replacing the built-in system that automatically designated Israeli jets or ships as friendly thereby preventing armed clashes between the Turkish and Israeli forces. The new system produced by the Turkish company Aselsan does not automatically designate Israeli ships or jets as friendly and will supposedly be deployed across the Turkish armed forces.¹⁸

Ankara has repeatedly referred to Sudan as

its main “partner in Africa” though it is far from being Turkey’s largest trade partner on the continent.¹⁹ Ignoring the growing international outrage over crimes against humanity committed by Khartoum-aligned militia groups in Darfur, Erdoğan voiced support for President Omar Bashir during a 2006 visit, stating he saw no signs of a genocide.²⁰ The Sudanese president was invited twice to Turkey in 2008, and by 2009, Erdoğan publicly argued that Israel’s actions in Gaza were worse than whatever had happened in Darfur²¹—a mind-boggling assertion given that the Gaza fighting claimed about 1,200 lives, an estimated 700 of whom were Hamas terrorists²² while in Darfur over 300,000 people have perished. The progression of Turkish policies in all three cases suggests a move from an honest broker and regional peacemaker toward siding with one of the parties involved—the Arabs in the Arab-Israeli conflict, Hamas in the Hamas-Fatah relationship, and Iran and Sudan in their confrontations with the West.

Early in its tenure, the AKP proved willing to agree to far-reaching concessions on the Cyprus dispute—so much so that it provoked the ire of the Turkish general staff. But lately, Erdoğan has reacted harshly to the Cypriot government’s decision to develop natural gas fields in the eastern Mediterranean, threatening to send in the Turkish navy and air force to the area to “monitor developments.”²³ In so doing, Erdoğan seemed oblivious to the implications that a military dispute with an EU member would have on Turkey’s relations with Brussels.

The distancing from the West has led An-

16 *The Telegraph* (London), Sept. 13, 2011.

17 *The New York Times*, Sept. 1, 2011; *Today’s Zaman* (Istanbul), Sept. 12, 2011.

18 *Today’s Zaman*, Sept. 13, 2011.

19 *Eurasia Daily Monitor* (Jamestown Foundation, Washington, D.C.), Jan. 15, 2008.

20 *Milliyet* (Istanbul), Mar. 30, 2006.

21 *Today’s Zaman*, Nov. 9, 2009.

22 “The Intelligence and Terrorism Information Centre’s Response to the Goldstone Report,” Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Centre, Gelliot, Israel, Apr. 4, 2011.

23 *The New York Times*, Sept. 19, 2011.

kara closer to both Moscow and Beijing—culminating in Turkey’s joint military maneuvers with China in October 2010, the first such with any NATO country—in what has been described by AKP critics as an “axis shift.”

A CENTER OF WORLD POLITICS?

A number of factors have been cited to explain the shift in Turkish foreign policy. While Ankara has undergone tremendous domestic change in the past decade, an arguably more significant shift is Turkey’s emergence as an economic power. Since 1990, Turkey’s gross domestic product has quadrupled, exports have grown by a factor of five, foreign direct investment by a factor of 25, and the value of traded stocks by a factor of 40. While economists have increasingly begun to issue warning flags regarding Turkey’s current accounts deficit and risks of overheating, such concerns have yet to translate into the political field. It is only natural that Turkey’s newly found economic clout would translate into more self-confidence on the international scene. Ankara’s “rediscovery” of the Middle East is part and parcel of this: Turkish exports are looking for new markets, and hordes of businessmen regularly accompany Turkish leaders on their numerous visits to Middle Eastern states. Given the close ties between politics and business in the region, closer political ties provide Turkish businessmen with preferential treatment. In Kurdish-dominated northern Iraq, the dynamic is inverted: The growing presence of Turkish businesses there after 2003 helped open the way for a political rapprochement with the Kurdish Regional Government in Erbil.

Secondly, alleged Western mistakes are often viewed as an important factor in this transformation—including the view of former U.S. secretary of defense Robert Gates who blamed the EU’s cold shouldering of Turkey for the country’s “drift.”²⁴ While Ankara sided with

Western states in major foreign policy issues in the past, this relationship was based on perceived reciprocity. However, since Turkey began negotiating for EU accession in 2005, opposition to Turkish membership not only grew in Europe but became ever more clearly articulated in terms of Ankara’s cultural identity: Was Turkey in fact European at all? Overt calls by French and German politicians against Turkish accession had a profound impact in Ankara where politicians of all stripes denounced this stance. Most Turks now believe that Ankara will never join the EU, and internal support for membership has dwindled. Europe’s alienation from Turkey has clearly had foreign policy implications.

Meanwhile, ties with Washington suffered primarily as a result of differences over Iraq. Turkey’s involvement was crucial to the 1991 Kuwait war, but Ankara was left dissatisfied by the war’s outcome—chiefly due to the significant damage to Turkey’s economy that Washington did little to soften, and the emergence of a de facto independent Kurdish entity in northern Iraq. The events since 2003 saw a rapid deterioration of relations as the war in Iraq indirectly led to the resurgence of Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan (Kurdistan Workers’ Party, PKK) terrorism in Turkey. Until 2007, the U.S. administration failed either to exercise sufficient influence on its Kurdish allies in northern Iraq to rein in the PKK or to allow Turkey to raid PKK bases inside Iraq.²⁵ This generated substantial resentment across Turkey’s political spectrum.

To be sure, some of the differences that have arisen with the West may well be attributed to Ankara’s resurgent self-confidence, or what one observer termed “Turkish Gaullism”—a Turkey that is “more nationalist, self-confident and defi-

There is a growing tendency in Turkey’s policies to side with Islamist causes.

24 *BBC News Europe*, June 9, 2010.

25 Gareth Jenkins, *Turkey and Northern Iraq: An Overview* (Washington: Jamestown Foundation, 2008), pp. 15-20.

ant.”²⁶ The new self-confidence is explicit: Foreign Minister Davutoğlu often laments the trepidation and lack of self-confidence of previous governments, implying that a Turkey at ease with its identity and history can play a great role in the region and beyond—one that is not locked into the one-dimensional focus on Western alliances but rather appreciates the “strategic depth” that Turkey had in the former Ottoman lands. In a 2009 speech in Sarajevo, Davutoğlu laid out Ankara’s ambition: “We will reintegrate the Balkan region, Middle East and Caucasus . . . together with Turkey as the center of world politics in the future.”²⁷

THE ROLE OF IDEOLOGY

Much as the AKP rejects any definition of itself as “Islamist” because it rejects the term as such,²⁸ it equally opposes the idea that its foreign policy is ideologically grounded, or that it is distancing itself from the West at all. In a 2010

The AKP’s consolidation of power has been followed by a growth of authoritarian tendencies and a distancing from the West.

interview, for example, President Abdullah Gül rejected any notion that Ankara had turned its back on the West. Turkey “was now a big economic power that had embraced democracy, human rights, and the free market.” It had become a “source of inspiration” in the region, he said. “The U.S. and Europe should welcome its growing engagement in the Middle East be-

cause it [is] promoting Western values in a region largely governed by authoritarian regimes.”²⁹

26 Ömer Taspınar, “The Rise of Turkish Gaullism: Getting Turkish-American Relations Right,” *Insight Turkey*, Jan.-Mar. 2011.

27 Gökhan Saz, “The Political Implications of the European Integration of Turkey: Political Scenarios and Major Stumbling Blocks,” *European Journal of Social Sciences*, no. 1, 2011.

28 Daniel Pipes, “Erdoğan: Turkey Is Not a Country Where Moderate Islam Prevails,” DanielPipes.org, updated Apr. 12, 2009.

29 *The Times* (London), July 3, 2010.

Such assertions notwithstanding, the growing tendency of Turkey’s policies to go from mediating to taking sides—and to consistently side with Islamist causes—underscores the question of whether ideological factors are indeed at play.

The question is particularly relevant given the AKP’s roots in a strongly ideological milieu: the Turkish Islamism of the Milli Görüş school, dominated by the orthodox Naqshbandiya order.³⁰ The Naqshbandiya has been the hotbed of Islamist reaction to westernizing reforms since the mid-nineteenth century, thus predating the creation of the republic. The Milli Görüş movement was its political vehicle, which mushroomed at first in Germany among expatriate Turks before becoming a force in Turkish politics in the late 1960s. During a brief stint in power from 1996-97, leading figures in the Turkish Islamist movement had called for the introduction of Shari’a and pursued a foreign policy that sought to distance Turkey from the “imperialist” West.³¹ The founders of the AKP publicly broke with that movement in 2001 in the aftermath of the military’s shutting down the main Islamist Fazilet party. The “young reformers” led by Gül and Erdoğan openly repudiated Islamism, emphasized their commitment to democracy, cultivated an alliance with the Turkish liberal elite, and sought to have the new party accepted as a mainstream conservative force by performing an 180-degree turn in embracing both the market economy and Turkey’s EU membership aspirations.³²

This ideological transformation was quite

30 See, for example, Birol Yesilada, “The Refah Party Phenomenon in Turkey,” in Birol Yesilada, ed., *Comparative Political Parties and Party Elites* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), pp. 123-50; Itzhak Weissmann, *The Naqshbandiyya: Orthodoxy and Activism in a Worldwide Sufi Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 152-6; Svante E. Cornell and Ingvar Svanberg, “Turkey,” in Dawid Westerlund and Ingvar Svanberg, eds., *Islam outside the Arab World* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), pp. 125-48.

31 Banu Eligür, *The Mobilization of Political Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), chap. 3; Birol Yesilada, “The Virtue Party,” in Barry M. Rubin and Metin Heper, eds., *Political Parties in Turkey* (London: Frank Cass, 2002); Gareth H. Jenkins, “Muslim Democrats in Turkey,” *Survival*, Spring 2003, pp. 45-66.

32 William Hale, “Christian Democracy and the AKP: Parallels and Contrasts,” *Turkish Studies*, June 2006, pp. 293-310; Sultan Tepe, “Turkey’s AKP: A Model ‘Muslim-Democratic’ Party?” *Journal of Democracy*, July 2005, pp. 69-82.

abrupt and top-down but while the AKP largely stayed true to such democratic rhetoric during its first term in office, it is striking to what extent its consolidation of power since 2007 has been followed by a growth of authoritarian tendencies at home and a distancing from the West in foreign policy.

Statements suggestive of reassertion of Islamist ideology are plentiful. Addressing a crowd of 16,000 Turks in the German city of Cologne in 2008, Erdoğan equated the assimilation of Turks, urged by German politicians, to “a crime against humanity.”³³ In reference to Sudanese leader Bashir, he stated in 2009 that “a Muslim cannot commit genocide.”³⁴ At the same time, the prime minister’s statements on Israel show not only a growing antipathy toward the Jewish state but are strikingly evocative of the anti-

Semitic tendencies pervading Islamist movements across the world. Thus, in 2009 he blamed “Jewish-backed media” for allegedly spreading lies about the Gaza war. Similarly, when the *Economist* endorsed the Turkish opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP) in the June 2011 elections, Erdoğan accused it of working on behalf of Israeli interests, castigated the CHP’s leader for being an Israeli tool, and expressed regret over the fact that the CHP, under Turkey’s second president İsmet İnönü, had recognized the State of Israel,³⁵ alluding also to a growing perception “equating the star of Zion with the swastika.”³⁶

Many of Erdoğan’s most combative statements have occurred during electoral campaigns and could be interpreted as electoral populism. Nevertheless, given his dominance of the Turk-

33 *Der Spiegel* (Hamburg), Feb. 11, 2008.

34 *Hürriyet*, Nov. 9, 2009.

35 *Ha’aretz*, Jan. 13, 2009; Reuters, June 6, 2011; *Bugün* (Istanbul), June 4, 2011.

36 Sedat Ergin, “Can the Symbols of Nazism and Judaism Be Considered Equal?” *Hürriyet*, June 22, 2010.

Photo will not display.

Turkish protesters burn an Israeli flag. Erdoğan’s antipathy toward the Jewish state is strongly evocative of the anti-Semitic tendencies pervading Islamist movements across the world. In the June 2011 elections, he accused his chief opponent of being an Israeli tool and denounced Turkey’s recognition of the State of Israel, speaking of a growing perception “equating the star of Zion with the swastika.”

ish political scene, these stated views should not be dismissed out of hand. Indeed, the formulation and conduct of Turkish foreign policy has in the past several years been dominated by Erdoğan and Davutoğlu, who is widely considered the architect of the AKP’s foreign policy and a major influence on Erdoğan’s views. With a long academic career preceding his ascent to political fame, Davutoğlu has left a substantial trail of published work that provides ample insights into his worldview.

AKP’S ALTERNATIVE WORLDVIEW

While Davutoğlu’s best-known work is his 2000 book *Stratejik Derinlik*³⁷ (Strategic Depth), of equal interest are his earlier works: a doctoral dissertation published in 1993 as *Alternative Paradigms: The Impact of Islamic and Western*

37 Istanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2001.

Ankara's growing criticism of Assad led to a deterioration in Turkish-Iranian ties.

Weltanschauungs on Political Theory,³⁸ and his 1994 volume *Civilizational Transformation and the Muslim World*.³⁹ These works are dense, theoretical treatises, as are several lengthy articles published in the Turkish journal *Divan* in the late

1990s. While heavy going, the main thrust of Davutoğlu's work could not be clearer: It is dominated by a deep conviction in the incompatibility of the West and the Islamic world, and by resentment of the West for its attempt to impose its values and political sys-

tem on the rest of the world.

Davutoğlu argues that the "conflicts and contrasts between Western and Islamic political thought originate mainly from their philosophical, methodological, and theoretical backgrounds rather than from mere institutional and historical differences."⁴⁰ He focuses on the ontological difference between Islam and all other civilizations—particularly the West. While most of this work is almost two decades old, Davutoğlu has continued to reiterate the same views, showing their continued relevance to his thinking. In a 2010 interview, for example, he stressed:

All religions and civilizations before Islamic civilization had established a demigod category between god and man. In fact, civilizations except the Islamic civilization always regarded god, man, and nature on the same ontological level. I named this "ontological proximity." ... Islam, on the other hand, rejects ontological proximity between god, nature and man and establishes an ontological hierarchy of Allah, man, and nature.⁴¹

Davutoğlu's problem with the Western "mod-

ernist paradigm" lies in its "peripherality of revelation," that is, the distinction drawn between reason and experience, on the one hand, and revelation on the other, resulting in an "acute crisis of Western civilization."⁴² By contrast, Davutoğlu underscores the Islamic concept of *Tawhid*, "the unity of truth and the unity of life which provides a strong internal consistency" by rejecting the misconceived secular division of matters belonging to church and state.⁴³ Such a view is neither merely theological nor theoretical, and its main implication is that the Western and Islamic worlds are essentially different and that Turkey's long-standing effort to become part of the West is both impossible and undesirable. It is impossible because it goes against the country's intrinsic nature: the "failure of the Westernization-oriented intelligentsia in the Muslim countries ... demonstrates the extensive characteristic of this civilizational confrontation."⁴⁴

As far as Turkey is concerned, Davutoğlu concludes that Atatürk's republican endeavor was "an ambitious and utopian project to achieve a total civilizational change which ignored the real cultural, historical, social, and political forces in the society." Thus, "the Turkish experience in this century proved that an imposed civilizational refusal, adaptation, and change ... cannot be successful."⁴⁵ Moreover, it is undesirable, because the West is in a state of crisis. As early as 1994, he argued that capitalism and socialism were "different forms of the same philosophical background" and that "the collapse of socialism is an indication for a comprehensive civilizational crisis and transformation rather than an ultimate victory of Western capitalism."⁴⁶ Thus, the downfall of communism was not a victory of the West but the first step to the end of European domination of the world to be followed by the collapse of Western capitalism.⁴⁷

38 Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1993.

39 Kuala Lumpur: Mahir Publications, 1994.

40 Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Alternative Paradigms: the Impact of Islamic and Western Weltanschauungs on Political Theory* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1993), p. 2.

41 Kerim Balci, "Philosophical Depth: A Scholarly Talk with the Turkish Foreign Minister," *Turkish Review*, Nov. 1, 2010.

42 Davutoğlu, *Alternative Paradigms*, p. 195; idem, *Civilizational Transformation* (Kuala Lumpur: Mahir Publications, 1994), pp. 13-4.

43 Davutoğlu, *Alternative Paradigms*, p. 196; Michael Koplow, "Hiding in Plain Sight," *Foreign Policy*, Dec. 2, 2010.

44 Davutoğlu, *Civilizational Transformation*, p. 64.

45 Ibid., pp. 107-8.

46 Ibid., p. 64.

Davutoğlu approvingly characterizes the emergence of the Islamic state as a response to the imposition of Western nation-states on the world but takes the argument one step further: Viewing globalization as a challenge to the nation-state system, he suggests that “the core issue for Islamic polity seems to be to reinterpret its political tradition and theory as an alternative world-system rather than merely as a program for the Islamization of nation-states.”⁴⁸

Indeed, Davutoğlu’s worldview has important consequences for how recent, key world events are interpreted in Ankara. For example, since the 2008 financial crisis has affected the West much more severely than emerging economies, it could easily be taken as evidence of the supposed “acute crisis of the West” that Davutoğlu wrote about twenty years ago, vindicating his view of Western civilization in decline.

Not only do Davutoğlu’s writings and Erdoğan’s statements dovetail, they also demonstrate the power of ideology that lies behind some of Turkey’s most controversial foreign policy stances. Indeed, the tendency of the AKP government to side increasingly with Islamist causes, its growing attention to non-Western powers combined with its increasing criticism of the West, can be fully understood only if the ideological background of Turkey’s top decision-makers is taken into account. This is not to say that the other factors previously cited are not useful in grasping changes in Turkish foreign policy. But it suggests that they are insufficient and that the ideological component must be factored in for a full understanding of Ankara’s evolving policies.

THE CHALLENGE OF THE ARAB UPHEAVALS

The Arab uprisings of 2011 have been challenging for Turkey, which has seemed to struggle with formulating its stance in the face of unfolding events.

47 Ibid., p. iii.

48 Davutoğlu, *Alternative Paradigms*, p. 202.

Ankara was an early cheerleader for the Egyptian revolution: Erdoğan called on Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak to resign on February 2, 2011,⁴⁹ making him the first world leader to do so. This behavior was markedly different from Turkey’s reaction to the 2009 events in Iran, which otherwise bore great similarity to the Egyptian protests. In the Iranian case, far from urging Ahmadinejad to step down, Erdoğan was among the first to congratulate him on his fraudulent reelection.⁵⁰ Likewise, Davutoğlu repeatedly refused to discuss the validity of the Iranian presidential elections, promising “to respect the outcome of Iran’s political process”—in marked contrast to the decision to take sides in Egypt’s internal struggle.⁵¹ This ostensible inconsistency lay to a considerable extent in the ideological affinity of Turkish Islamism with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (and for that matter—with the Shiite Islamist regime in Tehran) and the pervasive hatred generated by the Mubarak regime within the global Islamist movement as a result of its repression of the Brotherhood and other Islamist groups.

If Ankara was unequivocal on Egypt, Libya proved more complicated. When violence in Libya escalated, the Turkish leadership refrained from taking a clear stance. In fact, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu initially opposed U.N. sanctions on the Qaddafi regime and rejected calls for a NATO operation in the developing civil war. Erdoğan, Gül, and Davutoğlu cast doubt on Western motives, referring to “hidden agendas” and the West’s thirst for oil resources.⁵² Ankara eventually relented when some of its reservations were

The AKP government may have grossly overestimated its influence in the Middle East.

49 Press TV (Tehran), Feb. 2, 2011.

50 Halil M. Karaveli and Svante E. Cornell, “Turkey and the Middle Eastern Revolts: Democracy or Islamism?” *Turkey Analyst*, Feb. 7, 2011.

51 Cornell, “Iranian Crisis Catches the Turkish Government off Guard.”

52 *World Bulletin* (Istanbul), Mar. 24, 2011.

Islamist movements across the Middle East have emulated the AKP's approach to gaining power through democratic means.

taken into account and later approved the NATO operation, calling for Qaddafi's resignation in April,⁵³ formally withdrawing its ambassador from Tripoli and recognizing the Transitional Council in early July.⁵⁴ Following the collapse of Qaddafi's regime, Turkey tried to maximize its influence in the country, and Erdoğan was received more warmly during his visit⁵⁵ than either French presi-

dent Nicolas Sarkozy or British prime minister David Cameron.⁵⁶

However, the deteriorating situation in Syria proved the most difficult for Ankara to handle. From a country with which Turkey almost went to war in 1998, Syria had become what one expert called "the model success story for [Turkey's] improved foreign policy."⁵⁷ A seemingly solid rapproche-

ment developed between the two countries, involving the lifting of visa regimes, economic integration, and deepened strategic relations. In particular, Erdoğan developed a close personal relationship with Bashar Assad. When Assad's violence against civilian protesters escalated over the spring and summer of 2011, Ankara took upon itself to caution the Syrian regime to exercise restraint. Despite repeated trips by Davutoğlu to Damascus, Turkish efforts appeared to yield no result. By June, Erdoğan was declaring that "we can't support Syria amidst all this,"⁵⁸ and in early August, Turkish leaders spoke of being unable to "remain indifferent to the violence" and demanded reform in Syria.⁵⁹ Later that month, Presi-

dent Gül stated that Turkey had lost confidence in Assad⁶⁰ but did not call for his resignation though it seemed only a matter of time before Ankara would be forced to take that step.

Ankara's response to the turmoil in the Middle East, thus, lends itself to several conclusions. First, it shook the policy of "zero problems with neighbors" to its core. The refugees pouring across the Turkish border, fleeing Assad's crackdown, triggered an inevitable test of the Davutoğlu doctrine. Ankara proved unable to use its clout with the Assad regime to affect any significant change. Moreover, its growing criticism of Assad led to a deterioration in Turkish-Iranian ties: Official Iranian media outlets have openly criticized Ankara's stance on Syria since June 2011, hinting that it was doing the West's bidding in the region.⁶¹ The Turkish government's decision in the fall of 2011 to accept the stationing of U.S. missile defense systems was very much linked to these new tensions with Tehran while also in all likelihood an attempt to ingratiate itself with Washington and reduce the impact of its increasingly harsh anti-Israeli policies.

Davutoğlu's "zero problem with neighbors" policy was always predicated on the unrealistic assumption that none of Turkey's neighbors had any interests or intentions that ran counter to those of Ankara while neglecting the difference between the regimes and peoples of Turkey's neighbors. Likewise, the alienation of Israel was based on the equally unrealistic assumption that Turkey would never need the friendship of either Israel or its allies in Washington. But mostly, perhaps, these policies have been based on the notion that the United States and the West need Turkey more than Turkey needs the West. This might make sense if Ankara is growing economically while the West is in the throes of crisis, but it might well prove a dangerous assumption given the risk that Turkey's economy could enter a crisis of its own in the not too distant future.

A second conclusion is that the AKP government had grossly overestimated its influence

53 Al-Arabiya (Dubai), May 3, 2011.

54 Al-Jazeera TV (Doha), July 3, 2011.

55 Bahrain News Agency, Sept. 14, 2011.

56 *The Guardian*, Sept. 15, 2011.

57 Henri J. Barkey, "Assad Stands Alone," *The National Interest*, June 14, 2011.

58 *Today's Zaman*, June 10, 2011.

59 *The Turkish Daily News* (Ankara), Aug. 1, 2011.

60 *The New York Times*, Aug. 28, 2011.

61 Sobh'eh Sadeh, quoted in Burak Bekdil, "Zero Problems, a Hundred Troubles," *Hürriyet*, Aug. 9, 2011.

in the Middle East. Erdoğan's hard line on Israel has indeed made him a darling of the Arab street, and the AKP government spent significant efforts building trade relations across the region. While Ankara peddled its clout in the Middle East as a key reason for the West to be supportive of its decisions, the events of 2011 suggest that at least for now its rhetoric has not been matched by actual influence. Erdoğan's visit to Egypt in September 2011, when the Muslim Brotherhood appeared unwilling to adopt his suggestion that they emulate Turkey's political system, is a case in point.⁶² This is not to say that Turkey is not a rising power, rather that the country's leadership has been unable to realistically gauge its true level of influence. Indeed, building regional influence of the type to which Turkey aspires is a process that takes place gradually and incrementally over decades and not as an immediate result of the hyperactivity of Davutoğlu's diplomacy.

Finally, Ankara's policies never squared the circle of the AKP's rhetorical embrace of democracy and human rights, on the one hand, and its focus on developing ties with the authoritarian regimes of the region on the other.⁶³ Indeed, a policy of "zero problems" essentially suggests the absence of principles or, for that matter, concrete and well-defined national interests. While some of the missteps in regard to Libya and Syria can be understood against the backdrop of Turkish overconfidence, the dramatic divergence in Ankara's attitude to the various countries in the region cannot be so easily explained. Indeed, the slack that Turkey's leadership was willing to cut Iran's Ahmadinejad or Syria's Assad, or even Libya's Qaddafi, stood in marked contrast to the vehemence with which it denounced Egypt's Mubarak.

In the fall of 2010, the author asked a former AKP minister and deputy chairman why Turkey was so much more assertive on the Gaza issue than the Arab countries. The answer was straightforward: One should not misconstrue the

Arab regimes with the Arab countries. These, he argued, are all monarchies that are doomed to collapse. When that happens, democratic forces sharing the AKP's views on these issues would seize power.⁶⁴ While the response was indeed prescient given the events that would follow, it betrayed a deep disdain for the pro-Western regimes of the Arab world as well as an expectation that Islamic movements would replace them and see Turkey as a leader or model.

Indeed, this senior official's perspective echoes Davutoğlu's worldview. It indicates an expectation of a fundamental remake of the Middle East with the demise of the pro-Western regimes. Thus far, the vision might not differ much from that of Western supporters of the wave of popular protests sweeping the Arab world. The question, of course, is what would succeed the regimes that had hitherto been safely ensconced in power for decades.

While in the early 1990s, Turkey was touted for its secularism and democracy as a model for the newly independent Muslim-majority states of the former Soviet Union, in the wake of the Egyptian revolution, Ankara was looked to as a model for a different reason: In the words of *The New York Times*, it was perceived as "a template that effectively integrates Islam, democracy, and vibrant economics."⁶⁵

Indeed, Islamist movements across the Middle East—primarily in North Africa—have emulated the AKP's approach to gaining power through democratic means. The question, however, is: Do these movements see a party that truly democratized its ideology and accepted underlying liberal democratic principles, or a party that successfully used the democratic system in

Turkey and the West will cooperate when their interests align rather than as a result of shared values.

62 *The Huffington Post*, Sept. 13, 2011.

63 M. K. Kaya and Halil M. Karaveli, "Vision or Illusion? Ahmet Davutoglu's State of Harmony in Regional Relations," *Turkey Analyst*, June 5, 2009.

64 Author interview with an AKP deputy chairman who requested anonymity, Ankara, Aug. 2010.

65 Landon Thomas, Jr., "In Turkey's Example, Some See Map for Egypt," *The New York Times*, Feb. 5, 2011.

order to achieve power without being committed to democratic values and ideals? The jury is still out on this question, but the developments in Egypt are indeed cause for concern given the Muslim Brotherhood's growing dominance over the country's political scene.

As the AKP's recent authoritarian tendencies have become increasingly acknowledged, its credibility as a force of true democratization in the Middle East has suffered concomitantly. More and more it appears that the AKP—and Turkey—has adopted a rather simplistic understanding of democracy as majority rule: In societies where the overwhelming majority are conservative Muslims, democracy will ensure that the political forces representing these conservative Muslims will be ushered into power.

CONCLUSIONS

While there is much to suggest that Turkey's role in the world is likely to grow, confidence appears to have turned into hubris. At the bureaucratic level, Turkey's state apparatus—especially the Foreign Ministry—is hardly equipped to handle the load of initiatives coming from Davutoğlu's office, and expanding the foreign policy machine can only happen gradually. Thus, many Turkish initiatives have been less than well prepared, suggesting a top-heavy approach rather than balanced and serious planning. This was true of the opening with Armenia, and similarly, Turkish leaders appeared truly surprised when the Turkish-Brazilian deal on Iran failed to prevent new sanctions against Tehran at the U.N. Security Council.

Nonetheless, Turkey is now an active and independent player in regional affairs whose clout is likely to continue to grow in coming

years. It is also a less predictable force than it used to be and one whose policies will occasionally clash with those of the West. This is, in part, a result of Turkey's economic growth, of the mistakes made by the West in alienating Ankara, and of Turkish overextension, which is in turn related to an inflated view of its newly found role in the world. But the role of ideological reflexes and grand ambitions, in particular those of Turkey's two foremost decision-makers, Prime Minister Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu, must not be underestimated. These impulses are likely to continue to have policy consequences as Turkish leaders will interpret events from a distinctively different—and Islamically-tinged—viewpoint than their Western counterparts.

While a cause for concern, Ankara's changing foreign policy is not necessarily a cause for alarm. On many issues, Turkey is a power with which the West can work: As the Libyan operation showed, suspicions of Western motives notwithstanding, Ankara came around to join the undertaking. The reaction to the Syrian crisis and Turkish cooperation on missile defense are further examples of this possibility.

But significantly, whenever Turkey and the West will cooperate, it will be because their interests happen to align rather than as a result of shared values. Where the values of the Turkish leadership do not align with those of the West, most prominently concerning Cyprus and Israel, Turkish behavior will continue to diverge from the Ankara the West used to know. It is increasingly clear that the Turkish leadership does not consider itself Western, a worldview that will inevitably have far reaching implications for Turkey's role in the Euro-Atlantic community.

