

Katerina Dalacoura

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Report

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FUTURE NOTES

A NEW PHASE IN TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY: EXPEDIENCY AND AKP SURVIVAL

Katerina Dalacoura



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A NEW PHASE IN TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY: EXPEDIENCY AND AKP SURVIVAL

Katerina Dalacoura¹

The forced departure of Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu in May 2016 and the attempted *coup d'état* of July 2016 against the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government in Turkey were both turning points and catalysts for a new phase in the country's foreign policy. The emphasis on the "civilizational" aspects of Turkey's role in foreign affairs is diminishing and there is a concomitant move away from the ambitious promotion of Turkey as a "great power". In its place, we can observe a more "transactional", unplanned, ad hoc type of foreign policy, based on expediency. The ideological preferences of the AKP government are still significant but, as Turkey descends into internal crisis, and the Syrian war continues to take its toll, the interests and survival of the ruling party are increasingly paramount. This will have important and possibly harmful implications for the manner in which Turkey's national interests are conceptualized and pursued abroad, and will shape Turkey's role in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

THE TURNING POINT OF DAVUTOĞLU'S RESIGNATION

Ahmet Davutoğlu was forced to resign from the position of prime minister in May 2016. He had been the guru of the AKP's foreign policy during his tenure as chief foreign policy adviser to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (2003-09) and then foreign minister (2009-14). An academic-cum-politician, Davutoğlu's writings became the foundation for a reorientation in Turkey's foreign policy. His fundamental thesis was that, were Turkey truer to its "civilizational self" (which in his mind entailed being more open to its Islamic and Ottoman past), it would be a stronger country overall and more powerful in the international arena. Davutoğlu argued against the idea of a "clash of civilizations" – his view was that Turkey could have good relations with both the East and the West – but he believed, nevertheless, that civilizations had an "essence" and an important role to play in world politics.

The AKP, in power since 2002, has not altered the fundamentals of Turkey's foreign policy: Turkey's membership of NATO remains its central pillar, and its commitment to gaining EU membership still stands. An understanding of Turkish nationalism as homogeneous and monolithic continues to inform, if not completely dominate, the government's approach to the Kurdish issue internally and externally (more of which below). The AKP has tried to redefine the Turkish national interest and Turkish nationalism but, in some ways, it has not eclipsed Kemalism in Turkish foreign policy as much as added a new layer to it. This is because foreign policy-making is a complicated business which can never be totally dominated by one man, be it Davutoğlu or even his more powerful boss, Erdoğan. One could even see Davutoğlu's "neo-Ottomanism", as it has been described, as another

¹ Katerina Dalacoura is Associate Professor in the Department of International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), London.

instrument in Turkey's power projection. It is not the place here to resolve the perennial dilemmas between ideational and material interests in the formation of foreign policy. Suffice it to say that ideology was a significant aspect of AKP foreign policy but did not – and could not – constitute its entirety.

Be that as it may, with Davutoğlu gone the civilizational discourse in AKP foreign policy has been fizzling out. Although this discourse did not necessarily constitute the core of Turkey's foreign policy orientation, its gradual disappearance is emblematic of a new phase. Turkey's relations with Israel and Russia were normalized within two months of Davutoğlu's resignation. The diplomatic repair had already been on the cards, but his departure provided the opportunity for accelerated change.

THE IMPACT OF THE ATTEMPTED *COUP D'ÉTAT*

The domestic implications of the attempted coup against the AKP government in July 2016 are profound and ongoing. The coup lacked popularity but the ruling party, and President Erdoğan, have used it as an opportunity to further increase their grip on power. The weakening of democratic institutions, already evident, has quickened as a result. The coup attempt prompted the initiation of purges against its alleged perpetrators, the Gülenist movement, and many other opponents of the government. There is currently a push to change the constitution and move from a parliamentarian to a presidential system, with a referendum to decide the matter planned to take place on 16 April 2017. Polarization in the country is deepening.

The conflict with the Gülenist movement, which erupted in 2013, is only one of three in which Erdoğan and the AKP are engaged at the time of writing (February 2017), the other two being with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and with Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The peace process, such as it was, with the country's Kurdish minority broke down in the summer of 2015 and violence has erupted repeatedly since then, with the government taking repressive and destructive action in the south-east and the PKK perpetrating terrorist attacks throughout the country. Turkey has also been the target of terrorist attacks by ISIS, which has an axe to grind because of Ankara's Syria policy, particularly since the Turkish armed forces began intervening more directly in Syria from late August 2016, including targeting ISIS. This three-way struggle has shaped Turkey's domestic politics, but it is now also informing foreign policy, which is entering a new phase.

A SHIFT TO EXPEDIENCY IN FOREIGN POLICY

The AKP government is increasingly under siege, and this has led it to seek support abroad whenever and from whomever it can find it. Its rapprochement with Russia indicates that it is ready to put principles aside, most probably recognizing that the goal of removing Assad has failed and that its support of the Syrian opposition has not worked. The rapprochement with Israel does not necessarily, of course, indicate an abandonment of the Palestinian cause, but it demonstrates the need to mend fences with this important power in the region, with which Turkey, moreover, has close economic ties. The AKP will continue, with Qatar, to support Muslim Brotherhood movements in the Middle East, but it will work towards restoring relations with the Egyptian government of Abdel Fatah al Sisi, who removed the Brotherhood from power in 2013. Relations with Saudi Arabia,



with whom Ankara has been locked in ideological confrontation (over Brotherhood ideology, which Riyadh abhors), have already improved and will continue to do so. Relations with Iran, with whom Turkey has traditionally had an effective working relationship despite geopolitical rivalries, will carry on as such and this will be an asset both in Syria and in Iraq, where the two countries confront aspects of the Kurdish problem. Finally, Turkey may be party to a resolution of the Cyprus conflict in the negotiations of 2017.

One could argue that all of the above are positive developments, in that they indicate a shift towards a pragmatism which favours Turkey's national interests and constitute a much needed correction to previous AKP foreign policy mistakes, above all the rigid insistence on the removal of Assad. They are also part and parcel of a move away from an "emotive" foreign policy, symbolized by the breakdown of relations with Assad, Benjamin Netanyahu and Vladimir Putin (over the shooting down of a Russian military aeroplane in November 2015). Furthermore, these developments do not indicate in themselves a dramatic shift in AKP foreign policy. As I argued above, Turkish nationalism and the national interest, as shaped by Kemalist ideology, have not been eclipsed by the AKP but have been reconceptualized to a degree by it. This can be seen in the fixation of the AKP government on the Kurdish issue as the primary "national" problem of Turkey and the AKP's pursuit of the PKK and its sister organization, the People's Protection Units (YPG), in Syria.

The Kurdish issue constitutes the main dividing line at present between Turkey and the United States, and the West in general. All the parties share a common enemy in ISIS. The problem is that, for Turkey, the YPG in Syria is an equally if not more important enemy. US forces have sided with and supported the YPG against ISIS, which has created a split between Washington and Ankara, though this may be changing now that ISIS is attacking Turkey more venomously, as seen in the Reina assault in Istanbul on the first day of 2017.

Therein lies the problem. The conflict with the United States over Syria and the Kurds fits in well with the AKP and Erdoğan's domestic agenda. The July 2016 coup has been blamed, absurdly, by Turkish commentators on the United States and the West. The Turkish government has done nothing to correct the view of (at some point up to) 70 percent of Turkey's population that the United States was behind the coup. The return to conspiratorial hysteria is an easy option for the ruling party in its search for domestic enemies. It is also having a direct effect on relations with the United States, even though, for all its toying with Russia, Turkey will not abandon NATO, nor will it abandon the formal pursuit of EU membership. But the anti-Western, anti-American rhetoric of its government and particularly its president – albeit no longer based on the diminished "civilizational" discourse – is in the service of the AKP, not the nation, and illustrates a readiness to use foreign policy for narrow political self-interest.

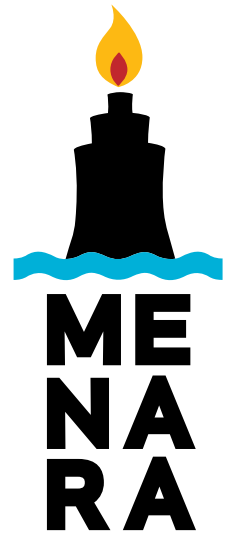
CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MENA REGION AND FOR TURKEY-EU RELATIONS

The gradual side-lining of civilizational ideology and discourse, never more than one aspect of Turkish foreign policy, is a positive development. It went with the departure of its major architect, Ahmet Davutoğlu, and as a result of the Syrian quagmire in which Turkey is caught up. However, although the new direction in Turkish foreign policy coincides (for now) with the pragmatic assessment of national interests, it is not driven by them; rather, AKP interests are paramount.

As Turkey descends into political, institutional and – as of January 2017, with the slide of the Turkish lira – economic difficulties and even possibly crises, and the ruling party and its leaders increasingly perceive themselves as being under siege and seek to conjure up foreign conspiracies against them, they will be ready to act on these perceptions, possibly to the detriment of the country. All leaders see their own and their country's interests as being intertwined to a degree; but it is a perilous moment in a country's history when its leadership comes to believe that they are inseparable. Therein lies an important danger for Turkey's future foreign relations and prospects in the international arena.

The implications of this analysis for Turkey's relations with the EU are multifaceted. If it is, indeed, the case that the AKP and President Erdoğan will be immediately concerned with their narrow interests as a result of internal pressures and the very precarious regional situation, then relations with the EU will be much more transactional. This could lead to greater cooperation in the four areas of concern in Turkey-EU relations (accession negotiations, the issue of refugees, Cyprus and security cooperation). However, European leaders should also be prepared for decisions by the Turkish government that may be detrimental to the long-term interest of the country if short-term political advantage is to be gained – the possibility of Turkey obstructing a Cyprus deal being the most obvious case in point.

With regard to Turkey's role in the MENA region, the conclusion from the above analysis is that Turkey will be a less involved, less interventionist power than in the immediate post-2011 period. It will pursue its immediate interests in Syria and Iraq more purposefully, as it has done over the past few months, because this tallies with AKP objectives. However, when it comes to Turkey's role further afield in the MENA, there will be a dissipation of efforts to present the country as a regional leader or a model. Support for Muslim Brotherhood groups will continue but in a more low-key fashion; growing Turkish cooperation with Saudi Arabia, and the improvement of relations with Israel and possibly with Egypt, discussed above, are indications of this shift, which signals a less ideological foreign policy. Turkey will continue to pursue its own interests in the MENA region, cooperating with the West and the EU at times, and will remain an important regional power, but the focus of its government on pressing internal concerns will mean that it will not necessarily play an active role in resolving regional issues, or that it will do so only when short-term political advantage demands it.



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MENARA maps the driving variables and forces behind these dynamics and poses a single all-encompassing research question: Will the geopolitical future of the region be marked by either centrifugal or centripetal dynamics or a combination of both? In answering this question, the project is articulated around three levels of analysis (domestic, regional and global) and outlines future scenarios for 2025 and 2050. Its final objective is to provide EU Member States policy makers with valuable insights.

MENARA is carried out by a consortium of leading research institutions in the field of international relations, identity and religion politics, history, political sociology, demography, energy, economy, military and environmental studies.



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