

FROM “HOCA” TO “PRIME MINISTER”: DAVUTOĞLU’S ASCENDANCE IN TURKISH POLITICS

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There are few critical turning points in Davutoğlu's life which guided his journey from a *hoca* (professor) to the only candidate for prime minister in Turkey. His appointment as chief advisor to the Prime Minister in 2002 was his first step into politics. He had an unusually high profile for guiding and shaping foreign policy in the early period of the Justice and Development Party (AK Party). His formulation of principles and mechanisms of foreign policy provided him with international recognition as a man of vision in international relations. The second important moment was his decision to stay at his post on the eve of the domestic crisis surrounding Presidential elections in 2007 and the AK Party's closure case in 2008. As his close friends know, he had planned to go back to academia but considered it wrong to leave the AK Party at such a critical period.

The third important moment was Prime Minister Erdoğan's appointment of Davutoğlu as Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2009. This new position not only allowed him to restructure foreign policy but also finalized his transition to a prominent figure in Turkish politics. He has converged his political career with Erdoğan since 2009. He quickly overcame the first taste of political anxiety at the top of a campaign bus in Konya during the 2011 parliamentary elections. He was second to Erdoğan in terms of dynamism and the popularity of his speeches to huge crowds in the subsequent elections. The last critical moment made this choice more visible. Davutoğlu stood by Erdoğan during the political warfare in Turkey that started in December 2013, during which the latter was targeted with a smear campaign of corruption among other allegations.

Davutoğlu is a trusted aide to Erdoğan and there is no reason to think this would change in the foreseeable future. He has also worked closely with Hakan Fidan, head of the National Intelligence Agency (MIT), before and during Fidan's current post. Fidan successfully transformed the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) into a complementary agency in foreign policy and facilitated a number of foreign policy initiatives in his previous duties as head of TIKA and deputy undersecretary in Prime Ministry. The structural change in both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and MIT has been significant and would not have been possible without coordination and cooperation between Davutoğlu and Fidan, and the strong support by Erdoğan as well.

Davutoğlu's Foreign Policy

Although the ideas in Davutoğlu's book *Strategic Depth* constitute the cornerstones of his perspective, it would be unfair to consider that as the only guiding principle of the new foreign policy. It is a product of formulation and practice of foreign policy in the AK Party era and is still a work in progress. His geopolitical thinking is dynamic, subject to revision and has been influenced by the various changes in regional contexts as well as other issues at stake.

Davutoğlu suggests a conceptualization of a central country to encompass the qualities of the new geopolitical thinking for Turkey. According to him, to qualify as a central country the state has to have undergone several historical transformations: been a cradle of grand political entities; be located at a cultural and economic intersection; and have influence in neighboring countries and regions. In these respects, Davutoğlu assumes that a powerful Turkish state is a pre-requisite to playing a central role in world politics.

In terms of foreign policy identity, Davutoğlu argues that Turkey has a well-established place in European history. Turkey's political, economic and social modernization has been guided by European-oriented ideas. He suggests a more dynamic and functional framework for relations with the European Union (EU), which will make Turkey a full member in due course and contribute to the EU's emergence as a global power. Turkey's inclusion in the EU will empower the latter to consolidate its multicultural characteristics and provide improved access to Asia. In this sense, the new geopolitics will emerge from a self-confident attitude, with Turkey considering itself historically and geographically European, while simultaneously having multiple regional identities. The neighboring geography is a constitutive base of an ever expanding geopolitical horizon but Davutoğlu's perspective does not limit itself to the geography of cultural and historical affinities.

Davutoğlu underlines this difference with a new conceptualization of Turkish diplomacy. In his words: "There is no constant line for diplomacy, but a platform of diplomacy. That platform is the whole world." The frontiers of geographic outreach are global. This new thinking accords Turkey a role and presence on the global stage. Trans-Atlantic ties are at the center of his foreign policy, while at the same time developing closer ties with neighboring regions and opening up to new relationships in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Relations with the U.S. are at the core of Davutoğlu's foreign policy perspective. He assumed that Obama's election would herald a golden era in Turkish-American relations. Despite occasional rhetorical differences, this assumption proved true in terms of similarities of foreign policy objectives, cooperation and coordination ranging from Iraq, Afghanistan, and energy security to fighting against terrorism and, more importantly, the convergence of future perspectives in almost all foreign policy priorities in both countries. Relations with Israel have some degree of influence in Turkish-American relations and constitute the core of some objections to Davutoğlu's policy. U.S.-Turkish-Israeli relations have followed a complex and cyclical pattern of ups and downs in recent history. The Mavi Marmara incident of 2010 has been an indelible factor in distancing Turkey from Israel, and this distance is reinforced by the continuous negative recurrence of the Palestinian question. Davutoğlu's critical attitude targets certain Israeli policies and does not aim at a total disruption of relations with Israel. For Turkey a return to normalcy both in Israeli-Palestinian relations, followed by a revitalization of political ties between Ankara and Tel Aviv would only be welcome news. The continuation of positive economic relations and human interaction are evidence of Turkey's projection of further engagement with Israel.

Given some of the skeptical reactions to his foreign policy, discussions on the viability of Davutoğlu's vision center on four main points. The first is the stagnation in Turkey's relations with its neighbors over the course of the Arab Spring. The second is the lack of coherence and balance in Turkey's relations with other actors. The third common point is Turkey's overconfidence in acting autonomously in regional issues, without seeking international approval and support. The fourth theme is the negative impact of Turkey's alleged democratic deficiency at home on its foreign policy front.

Despite these criticisms, there is broad agreement that Davutoğlu did relatively well until the Arab Spring. During the initial phase of establishing the new foreign policy, particularly towards the Middle East, he had gathered critical assets that supported the redefinition of Turkish foreign policy. These assets were at the service of Turkey's foreign policy in the wake of the Arab Spring. The soft-power instruments that Turkey has relied upon in recent years will continue to be beneficial in sustaining its new role in the

region and beyond. Turkish foreign policy under Davutoğlu remains a viable project. Although uncertainties persist, a role for Turkey as an influential regional power is within reach.

What Kind of a Prime Minister?

Davutoğlu's style is to employ an intellectual approach and develop a strategic vision to deal with issues and problems. He is a talented and hard-working policymaker with a considerable degree of patience in building and consolidating principles and mechanisms. In addition, he is also capable of decision-making under stress and pressure, and his decisions during times of crisis demonstrate a balance of critical and value judgments. Despite his strong and principled position on the issues at stake, he remains receptive to alternative ideas, policy advice and makes adjustments as warranted.

Davutoğlu's long-term goal is to make Turkey a central player in world politics. The prerequisite for such a role is relevant development in the domestic sphere, a stable regional atmosphere and a pluralist international order. He is likely to focus on the instrumentalist nature of the state, which aims to serve the well-being of its citizens with the least possible ideological baggage. The state mechanisms should be designed to reflect strong capabilities and a compassionate treatment that together would provide maximum benefits to its citizens. His attempt to restructure foreign policy institutions and mechanisms would be extended to the state as a whole.

In domestic politics, Davutoğlu's long-held position has been to strengthen Turkish democracy, which he considers to be the major source of Turkey's soft power. The challenge here, however, is that Davutoğlu only has had a limited degree of influence in this process. Under his leadership, the government is expected to move to carry out reforms in the economic, political and identity spheres. From his perspective, a strong economy, freedom and liberties, rule of law, separation of powers, and inclusive citizenship are necessary elements of Turkey's restoration as a great power. Davutoğlu believes the current constitution falls short of the realities of Turkey and would work for a new constitution that facilitates stability and progress at home and the continual enhancement of Turkey's position in international politics. To him, there has been great progress toward these ends, but he considers that larger challenges remain to create the necessary instruments to assure steps are taken toward a more capable, prosperous, and democratic Turkey.

Davutoğlu's dynamism is not likely to end soon but he may have to leave some of his projects behind in the new post. There is certainly a need for a new team of his own to whom Davutoğlu would delegate duties and responsibilities for achieving these goals. He would also be required to designate new ministers, accommodate AK Party cadres and utilize state bureaucracy in his cabinet and administrative offices. His main aide, Ali Sarıkaya, who is already chief advisor at the prime ministry, is an important resource to ensure a smooth transition. Although Sarıkaya was at the prime ministry, he has accompanied Davutoğlu on missions and has been known as his advisor since 2002.

The new role sharing between the Prime Minister and the President would be one of task-sharing and joint handling of the issues to be resolved. President Erdoğan would provide enough space for Davutoğlu to act within the understanding and trust that has developed between them over the last twelve years. Davutoğlu has much support within the party, in particular from the youth. He has the conceptual and

political power to revitalize the stalled reform agenda and has cultivated a sense of confidence among his followers that “Turkey can make a difference both in Western and Eastern fora.”

Davutoglu’s political style is conciliatory but he does not hesitate to take the challenge, as has been illustrated in the recent course of events. He is generally consensual but does not shy away from expressing his own ideas in a persuasive manner. His dialogues are mostly professorial but at times contentious and seemingly overly drawn out. It is unlikely that he will discard his professor’s hat, yet he has also grown political instincts to help realize his vision for Turkey. No matter how volatile the regional and how fragile the international order, he would preserve Turkey’s dynamism and visibility by inaugurating new initiatives.

On 21 August, Prime Minister and President-elect Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced the decision of the executive board of the AK Party to nominate Davutoğlu to succeed him as the leader of the party. In a few days, we will see Davutoğlu chosen as the leader of AK Party and the Prime Minister, and it will be a matter of time before one can assess his performance at this post. One thing is beyond doubt: Ahmet Davutoglu is already an exceptional figure in Turkish politics, and will remain so as the next Prime Minister of Turkey.