Transformation of Turkey's Foreign Policy: Original Discourses or Religious Idealism?

Mustafa Ali Sezal
Yıldırım Beyazit University

Introduction

Turkey's foreign policy (generally referred as ‘Turkish Foreign Policy’) has been increasingly popular topic among the scholars particularly since the end of the Cold War. After 2002 elections, which brought the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to the government, interest towards Turkey’s foreign policy became even more visible. Turkey’s incumbent Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, who was the minister of foreign affairs in the 2009-2014 period and the chief advisor on foreign affairs to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the 2003-2009 period, has been praised for his ingenious approach to foreign policy. This approach was constituted of his own concepts such as the ‘zero-problems with neighbours policy’ and ‘strategic depth’, which was also the title of his magnum opus. He has been heralded as the pioneer of the ‘transformation’ of Turkey's foreign policy. Most accounts of Turkey’s foreign policy in the last decade naturally have focused on Erdoğan and Davutoğlu's tenure in the government. These, however, pose a serious problem; not only because the transformation of the foreign policy was initiated by İsmail Cem, who was the minister of foreign affairs between 1997 and 2002, but they also tend to ignore certain trends and conjunctural factors that had their roots in the pre-AKP era. This paper aims at overcoming ahistorical approaches to Turkey’s foreign policy and locating the original discourses that initiated and maintained the transformation of it. It will be argued that the recent developments in Turkey’s foreign policy indicate that while there was a significant transformation during İsmail Cem’s tenure, Davutoğlu era only maintained this for a short period, and then opted for a religion/sectarian-based idealism. For this, firstly Turkey's traditional foreign policy will be briefly summarized. Then the principles of İsmail Cem’s foreign
policy will be explained and Davutoğlu’s foreign policy vision will be reviewed. Finally, changes and continuities between these two eras will be exemplified through analysis of the transformation discourses in Turkey’s Syria policy as a short case study.

**Traditional Foreign Policy**

Turkey’s traditional foreign policy has been based on two main pillars namely, “maintaining the status-quo” and “westernism” (Oran 2003, 46-53). After the Lausanne Treaty and establishment of the republic in 1923, Turkey sought to maintain the status quo with its neighbours while opting for a relatively pro-western stance in its foreign policy in line with the domestic reforms. As the Cold War intensified Turkey grew closer to the West by joining the NATO and signing an association agreement with the EEC. Although relations with the West were damaged in some periods, particularly regarding the Cyprus crisis, the general trend continued. Relations with the Middle Eastern states, however, remained minimal maintaining the status quo. Following the emergence the armed rebellion of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in southeastern Anatolia, Turkey became more interested in its neighbours but this time solely based on “security” concerns and again trying to maintain the status quo, in this case against establishment of an independent or an autonomous Kurdistan. Totality of Turkey’s traditional foreign policy can be viewed as a security-oriented military-strategic approach where Turkey’s (numerically) large army was always on the forefront.

**Transformation**

Most of the scholarly articles refer to the second half of the Turgut Özal era (1988-1993) as a proactive period in Turkish foreign policy in which the traditional pillars were somewhat expanded (Öniş 2011; Taşpınar 2008; Hale 2013; Yeşilyurt and Akdevelioğlu 2009). This was a natural response to the end
of the Cold War. As the USSR dissolved there emerged newly independent gas-rich Turkic-speaking republics. However, sudden death of Özal in 1993 and increase in attacks by the PKK guerrillas constituted a pretext for returning to the traditional security-centric approach.

The next attempts were during Necmettin Erbakan’s short-lived tenure as Prime Minister from June 1996 till June 1997 when the Turkish Armed Forces forced him to step down. During this short period he sought closer relations with Islamist countries, but was not successful as the military dictated cooperation agreements with Israel that were detrimental for rapprochement attempts towards Islamic and Islamist countries. Even though the “Developing 8 (D8)” group that Erbakan pioneered still exist today, it cannot be considered as an active and effective institution.

Finally, after İsmail Cem became the minister of foreign affairs during Mesut Yilmaz’s premiership one can pinpoint a continuous transformation in the conduct of foreign policy. As a thinker İsmail Cem had already claimed in 1970 that “with its culture, history, state tradition, strategic significance, folkloric diversity, potential for regional leadership” Turkey had all sources of development, however, these were not used by the ineffective dominant classes who could not turn these into dynamics for development (Cem 2012, 445). Cem’s understanding of foreign policy was an extension of these ideas. He believed that “a country which [was] unable to evaluate its capabilities and deficiencies, alienated towards its history [could not] become a serious actor in international politics” (Cem 2009, 13). He claimed that one of the gravest mistakes of the traditional Turkish foreign policy was distancing itself from the nations that it has shared a history, the Balkans, Northern Africa and the Middle East with the hope that this distancing would make Turkey more acceptable to the Western Europe (Cem 2009, 15). In this respect Cem identified five main assets of the foreign policy of the new Turkish government at the 1997 UN General Assembly as the following:
“1. *Historical asset* and its revaluation; the modern crossroads of the East and the East.

2. *Cultural identity*, the privilege of being a European nation, as well as an Asian nation.

3. *A thriving economy*; great potentials of industry, trade and tourism.

4. Proven *parameters of stability and peace* in a huge and most disturbed geographic region, which holds the major energy resources of the world, as well as economic prospects.

5. “*The Turkish Model*”, the main, if not the only experience in the world of a country with Islamic traditions, which has adopted pluralist, democratic institutions, human rights, secular laws, gender equality.” (Cem 2001, 57)

Furthermore, he labels improving relations with neighbours as a foreign policy priority where Turkey would responds with two steps if one positive step came from any party (Cem 2001, 58). In the end what İsmail Cem sought to achieve was making Turkey an “integral part of the European integration process” and “to transform Turkey into a pivotal and prosperous country at the center of [...] Eurasia” (Cem 2002, 4).

Cem understood that economics replaced military might in the 2000s and therefore Turkey needed emphasis on economic relations as well as its historical, cultural, and political assets (Cem 2002, 1). For this reason, structure of the ministry of foreign affairs was reorganized in order to reflect this emphasis during his tenure (Kirişçi 2009, 45-46).

Foreign policy rhetoric is significant as it helps shaping the perceptions, however, one also needs to examine the conduct of foreign policy in order to locate discrepancies and paradoxes. It would be just to say that İsmail Cem’s vision that has been summarised above only became perceivable in foreign policy starting with 1999. This was due to several domestic political factors. First was PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan’s capture early that year and the second was the election victory of Democratic Left Party (DSP) which made the party leading partner of the coalition government.
Cem was able to reflect his foreign policy visions into actual foreign policy-making as exemplified by Turkey's growing economic, social, and diplomatic relations with its neighbours as well as securing Turkey’s EU candidacy at the 1999 Helsinki Summit (Ormeci 2011, 241). Cem’s Syria policy will be elaborated in the last section of the paper where it will be compared and contrasted with Davutoğlu’s policies.

Rise of AKP and Foreign Policy

In November 2002 AKP came to power with a landslide victory in the general elections. Shortly after the elections, high-ranking AKP officials declared that the party was committed to EU membership prospects and increasing regional cooperation while maintaining the non-partisan nature of foreign policy without any ideological or religious concerns (Cagaptay 2002, 46). Accordingly no immediate change in foreign policy can be seen after the elections. In March 2003, the parliament voted against a resolution that would allow the passage of the US troops for Iraq War. This caused significant problems with the US as the government was confident that the resolution would pass. Professor Ahmet Davutoğlu was appointed as the chief advisor for foreign affairs to the Prime Minister shortly after the elections, however, until 2004 he has not been visible. Since 2004 he has started to be seen in the media with his foreign policy analyses and visions. He argued that Turkey needed to be a “centre” country and for this there were five main principles: 1. Freedom and security equilibrium allowing Turkey to be a model country; 2. Zero-problems-with-neighbours; 3. Multi-dimensional foreign policy; 4. Identifying Turkey as a central country; 5. Dynamic/rhythmic diplomacy (Davutoğlu 2004). Despite the initial statements after the election, as time passed Davutoğlu and other high-ranking officials in AKP claimed that the 2002 elections were a breaking point in Turkish history and foreign policy (Yeşilyurt and Akdevilioğlu 2009, 41). The principles Davutoğlu put forward, however, closely echo, if not paraphrase, İsmail Cem’s
foreign policy vision. Actually, they even lack the economic aspect that Cem emphasised as early as 1997.

Interestingly enough very few scholars and commentators acknowledged the fact that the AKP era foreign policy was actually a continuation of İsmail Cem era’s bold transformation. While certain scholars refer to the Cem era as the root of the AKP activism, they do not elaborate on these and they continue their analyses as if in November 2002 Turkey woke up from almost a century old sleep (Taşpınar 2008; Öniş and Yılmaz 2009; Altunışık and Tür 2005; Altunışık 2009; Altunışık and Martin 2011; Aras ve Karakaya Polat 2008). Even the 3 volume Turkish Foreign Policy textbook that was edited by Professor Baskın Oran and covering from 1919 to 2012 refers to İsmail Cem era very superficially and only in detail in reference to relations with Greece.

Soli Özel and Serhat Güvenç (2012) and Ozan Örmeci (2011a; 2011b) may be among the very few Turkish scholars who purport that the most of the foreign policy elements of AKP were put in place by İsmail Cem. Separately, in the latest edition of his authoritative book on Turkish foreign policy William Hale (2013) asks whether the activism in the foreign policy, particularly towards Middle East, was new. He answers by claiming that the IMF’s financial programme which was adopted following the 2001 economic crisis enabled Turkey to have a stable economy to pursue foreign policy goals, therefore “the AKP administration successfully exploited pre-existing opportunities, rather than creating new ones” (Hale 2013, 254). This is especially important when the Syrian crisis of 2011 considered as it can be argued that Turkey created a perpetual risk by its far-fetched policy choices.

**A Short Case Study: Syria Policy**

Turkey and Syria relations have not been peaceful due to several reasons: namely the Hatay issue and water issue. Hatay is a province located in southern Turkey on the Mediterranean coast bordering Syria. After the dissolution of the
Ottoman Empire it was attached to Syria, which was under French mandate. Hatay province became an independent state since 1938 under French supervision and following a referendum its parliament decided to join Turkey as a province in 1939. When Syria gained its independence from France in 1946, it did not recognise this annexation claiming that the agreement was made between France and Turkey not Syria and Turkey. Water issue was about the use of River Euphrates’ waters, as within the framework of South-eastern Anatolia Project (GAP) Turkey built several dams on the course of the river and Syria demanded more water to be released. Hafez al-Assad administration harboured PKK and particularly PKK’s leader Abdullah Ocalan as a political response to these aforementioned issues (Kirişçi 1997; Sayari 1997, Martin 2000). In 1998, Turkish military massed on the Syrian border and threatened the Assad regime with a military attack if it did not expel PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, and with Egypt’s mediation and signing of the Adana Protocol, Ocalan was expelled which led to his apprehension in early 1999. After the 1999 elections, and following the earthquake Turkey’s foreign policy in these issue were led by its aspiration to become a full EU member.

In 2000, we have witnessed the practice of desecuritisation on behalf of the Turkish state. President Ahmet Necdet Sezer attended Hafez al-Assad’s funeral, which marked an attempt at normalising the relations. It was significant in the sense that less than two years before two countries were on the brink of war. Political rapprochement naturally had a spill over effect towards economics and annual trade volume between two countries started to increase (Larrabee and Lesser 2003, 146; Tür, 592). When AKP came to power, relations with Syria were rapidly developing. In such a conjuncture and continuity the two countries grew closer. In January 2004 when Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad visited Turkey, he said they ‘have together shifted from an atmosphere of distrust to trust’. In 2005, Turkey’s President Ahmet Necdet Sezer visited Syria again and afterwards high level visits including the prime minister and ministers became more and more frequently. Assad even said that the Turkey and Syria’s perspectives on the region were very similar. Following this desecuritisation process both in actions and speeches, Turkish government became more active in the regional affairs
and started mediating between Israel and Syria between 2007 and 2008. In 2009 High Level of Strategic Cooperation Council was established and within the framework of this council, Turkish and Syrian cabinets had joint sessions. Also visa requirements for the citizens of the respective countries were abolished making it very easy to travel and taxes for TIRs were abolished as well. Nevertheless, when the opportunity surfaced in 2011 following the Arab Spring, Davutoğlu met with the leaders of the Syrian opposition who started an armed resistance against the Assad regime.

Throughout the crisis in Syria, Davutoğlu has expressed Turkey’s commitment to promotion of democracy, human rights, freedom, and equality. Turkey position towards Syria, according to Davutoğlu, shifted due to Assad’s disrespect for the rights of the Syrian people and his disregard of the friendly warnings and advices of Turkey. Although these idealistic elements were present in Cem’s visions, Davutoğlu’s explicit reference to these values produced a value-based or in other words idealistic foreign policy. Idealism implies a revisionism in the Turkish case which is also exemplified by statements by Davutoğlu that criticize the pre-AKP foreign policies as policies that only tried to maintain the status-quo. The then Prime Minister Erdoğan’s emotional promises that “in a few months we will be at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus for our Friday prayer” even hints at a hidden irredentism (Hürriyet 2012). Another significant point here is that while Turkey has been championing these democratic values Turkey ignored some states’ shortcomings in human rights issues such as Iran and Sudan (Hale 2013, 256). Also domestic crises including killing of 34 civilian Kurds in 2011 by an airstrike and the police brutality against mass demonstration at Gezi Park in 2013 show that Turkey has not yet internalized the values it supposedly promotes.

It has been depicted that the AKP government’s foreign policy did not have original discourses as the policies it adopted, albeit dubbed differently, were incepted during İsmail Cem’s tenure as the minister for foreign affairs. That being said, it needs to be acknowledged that the idealistic overtones have come forward after Davutoğlu became minister in 2009 and especially following the Arab Spring. Nevertheless, it needs to be reiterated that Davutoğlu or Erdoğan
never spoke of these idealistic values regarding Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Qatar or United Arab Emirates. Turkey’s championship for democracy and human rights seem to be considering only Syria and post-Muslim Brotherhood Egypt. Furthermore, an increasing religious tone can be located in the discourses of Turkish officials both in domestic and foreign policy. Erdogan’s desire to pray in the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, his statements emphasizing the sect (Sunni) of the victims of a mortar strike in a border city in Turkey, a covert support for the Islamic State manifested by easy transits of would-be-jihadists to Syria can be counted among recent significant examples. Both Davutoğlu and Erdoğan use a “civilization” rhetoric that seems to be conciliatory but in essence fed by the “clash” implication.

Conclusion

There is a consensus that Turkey’s foreign policy has become more proactive after 2002 general election when AKP came to power. These analyses pinpointing the transformation of foreign policy suffer from an ahistorical approach, which ignores the pre-AKP developments. It has been argued that the transformation of Turkey’s foreign policy started during İsmail Cem’s tenure as the minister for foreign affairs between 1997 and 2002. AKP governments maintained the activism initiated by Cem, however, following the Arab Spring opted for a religion-based idealism with aspirations for dominating the region. Turkey’s divergence from the Cem era activism towards an aspiration involving a great capabilities-expectation gap caused the impasse Turkey is in regarding the crisis in Syrian and the risks emanating from the existence of the Islamic State next to its border.
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