

Principles of Turkish Foreign Policy and Regional Political Structuring

by *Ahmet Davutoğlu*

This policy brief elaborates the principles of Turkey's foreign policy as the country responds to the regional political transformation. The brief argues that Turkey sees the regional transformation as a natural process and works to devise suitable policies to cope with the challenges. In this endeavor, the brief further argues, Turkish foreign policy draws on several strengths: holistic understanding of historical trends and a sense of active agency, its progress in establishing a stable and peaceful domestic order, and its reintegration with neighbors. The brief also identifies several principles of Turkish foreign policy that are applicable in the current political juncture: pursuit of a value-based foreign policy, self-confident action, devising policies autonomously, and having a vision-oriented approach to crisis management. Finally, the brief outlines the contours of Turkey's policy towards the popular uprisings in the Middle East, explaining how it was formulated with careful consideration of democratic demands in the region.

About the author:

Ahmet Davutoğlu was born in Taşkent/Konya in 1959. After receiving his Ph.D. in Political Science and International Relations at Boğaziçi University, he taught political science at numerous prestigious institutions. He served as Chief Advisor to the Prime Minister and Ambassador at large during the 58th, 59th and 60th Governments, before being appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs of the 60th Government of the Republic of Turkey in 2009. He was elected as an MP from the AK Party from Konya province to the Turkish Grand National Assembly in 2011 and was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs of the 61st Government. He is the author of many publications on foreign policy and international relations in Turkish and English, including *Küresel Bunalım* [Global Crisis] (Küre Yayınları, 2002).

The world is undergoing tumultuous changes, presenting challenges to countries such as Turkey that are affected by this tectonic transformation. While there is a serious economic crisis currently affecting the international community at large, the regions surrounding Turkey are undergoing the equally significant process of political transition. Though challenging, we believe that these transformations are natural and inevitable processes. As it is unwise to confront these processes, the best course of action is to develop a sound understanding of the causes of this transformation and develop suitable strategies to cope with the change. As it conducts foreign policy in such turbulent regional and international environments, Turkey possesses several advantages, which make it uniquely positioned to respond to the myriad of challenges related to political transition.

Strengths of Turkish foreign policy

First, Turkish foreign policy is formulated with reference to a holistic understanding of historical trends and a sense of active agency. Rejecting a reactionary foreign policy approach, Turkey develops its positions on regional and international issues with careful consideration of its own conditions. More than anything else, Turkey's stance reflects its historical depth, geographical positioning and rich legacy in international affairs. We believe that those who fail to understand the flow of history and do not position themselves in the world accordingly will be overtaken by the rapid pace of events and will

end up paying a heavy price for it. Therefore, we formulate our policies through a solid and rational judgment of the long-term historical trends and an understanding of where we are situated in the greater trajectory of world history. More importantly, we constantly question and self-reflect on our position and make revisions where necessary. By adopting such a deep-rooted stance on current affairs, we manage to tackle the challenges of the drastic transformations taking place in the global system.

Second, Turkey achieved progress in establishing a stable and peaceful domestic order on which it can build a proactive foreign policy. In recent years, Turkey has struck a healthy balance between freedoms and security at home. When we embarked on this transformation process, we were motivated by the belief that stability cannot be built on the basis of force alone. Only those governments that enjoy political legitimacy and respect freedoms can achieve peace and stability. While Turkish governments in the 1990s lagged behind the wave of democratization and failed to embrace universal human rights, in the last decade Turkey has undergone a major domestic restructuring process, fixing many of its shortcomings in terms of its human rights record. This fundamental transformation was made possible by the various democratization reforms implemented in a determined manner by strong political authority with a visionary leadership. Today, Turkey has consolidated its economy and liberalized its political system. In particular, Turkey has abandoned its erroneous habits of the past, when viewing society as a potential enemy sucked its energy in vicious internal discussions. No longer driven by fear of internal problems thanks to the expanded scope of basic freedoms, Turkey now is more self-confident about its international position, and is trusted by its neighbors and the international community. If Turkey had failed to establish the security-freedom balance, today it would be facing enormous difficulties in withstanding the pro-democratic transformative wave in the region, compromising its security.

Third, Turkey's reintegration with its neighbors will be yet another asset for its foreign policy in this turbulent era. While it goes through a domestic transformation and reform processes, Turkey also has embarked on the parallel undertaking of moving to consolidate ties to its region. One strength of our foreign policy, thus, is the ongoing process of reconnecting with the people in our region with whom we shared a common history and are poised to have a common destiny. This objective will continue to shape our foreign policy priorities, and we will not take steps that will alienate us from the hearts and minds of our region's people for short-term political calculations. This objective also means that we will seek to reconcile our differences with neighboring countries by engaging in a soul-searching effort and moving beyond the disputes that have divided us. Through increasing ties with neighbors, Turkey will be better positioned to play its role as a responsible country at the global level.

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Principles of Turkish foreign policy

Turkish foreign policy in recent years has been conducted in consideration of several underlying principles. I have elaborated on them in some length previously, such as rhythmic diplomacy, multi-dimensional foreign policy, zero problems with neighbors, order instituting actor, international cooperation, or proactive foreign policy.¹ As we conduct our foreign policy in this new era, several of those principles stand out and will continue to guide us along with others. They deserve closer scrutiny here.

First, while paying utmost attention to defend our national interests, we will also pursue a value-based foreign policy. We have already expressed our readiness to assume the responsibilities of a global actor, and set ourselves the objective to be reckoned as a wise country in the international community. Especially in times of crises, such as the economic crisis the world is going through or the political transformation in our region, the need for wise countries to deliver such essential functions as conflict prevention, mediation, conflict resolution or development assistance becomes particularly evident. As a wise country, i.e. a responsible member of the international community, we aspire to enhance our capability to shape the course of developments around us and make a valuable contribution to the resolution of regional and international issues.

In pursuit of our global objectives, we will endeavor to listen to the consciousness and common sense of humanity, and become a firm defender of universal values. While embracing these universal principles, we will enmesh them with local values; and advocate, in particular, human rights and such norms as democracy, good governance, transparency and rule of law. We will extend our assistance to the people who rise up to demand such values because given our belief in the principles of justice and equality, we are convinced that they also deserve to have the same rights and privileges enjoyed by our own people. As its region experiences democratization, Turkey will continue its quest to maintain a balance between promoting democratic values and defending national interests.

Our emphasis on fundamental freedoms and democratic rights will not be confined to our region. We will also work to advocate the rights of Turks abroad. Especially, we are concerned about the rising xenophobic views in some Western countries. We will continue to raise awareness about the long-term threats posed by such trends to the democratic and pluralist values in Europe, as well as its immediate effect on people who have migrated to that continent from Turkey, especially considering that xenophobic attacks in some cases cost lives. We believe that we have a stake in the question “Where is Europe heading?” in terms of its core values and will keep a keen eye on the future of democracy in Europe.

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Second, as we position ourselves in this great historic transformation process, we will act with self-confidence in our ability to meet the aforementioned challenges. When we set ourselves the objective to become a wise country, we realize it comes with many expectations and require new instruments which might be missing in Turkey's traditional foreign policy toolkit. We will rely on our ability as individuals, as a nation and a state to garner the resources necessary to achieve our foreign policy objectives. In areas where we lack specific instruments needed to fulfill the new demands of our objective of a wise country, we will work to develop these instruments with self-confidence.

We have already initiated a major restructuring of the Foreign Ministry's organizational structure as well as improvements in the quality of its personnel through new educational programs. At the same time, we have expanded our diplomatic representations abroad. In the last two years, we opened 30 new embassies in different parts of the world including twenty-two in Africa, five in Latin America, and three in East Asia. We also have become actively involved in new areas such as international development assistance, peace-making and mediation. In this context, we have assumed responsibilities in several regional and international organizations and hosted events such as an international conference on Africa, UN Summit on Least Developed Countries and a UN Conference on mediation besides others. As we continue to prepare ourselves for this challenging global role, we will benefit greatly from the rich history, experience and resources of our nation which is the basis of our foreign policy.

Third, our foreign policy will be conducted autonomously. We suffer from a perception that other powers design regional politics and we only perform the roles assigned to us. We need to do away with this psychological sense of inferiority which has permeated in many segments of our society and amongst political elites. Today, we determine our vision, set our objectives, and execute our foreign policy in line with our national priorities. We might succeed or fail in our initiatives, but the crucial point is that we implement our own policies. We do not receive instructions from any other powers, nor are we part of others' grand schemes. In particular, our policies towards neighbors are devised with careful consideration of our own evaluation of the situation. As has been the case so far, we will continue to coordinate our policies with those of our Western partners as we see fit, but will never let such partnership negatively affect our relations with neighbors.

Fourth, we will pursue a vision-oriented foreign policy. The wise country role requires us to establish a healthy balance between crisis management and vision management. Today, the world is going through a major global economic crisis while our region is experiencing a troublesome political transformation. We have stepped in to play an active role

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in these transformation processes, putting at work our crisis management services and our multi-dimensional diplomacy. As we struggle to handle the conjectural challenges in the Middle East, Balkans, Caucasus and Europe however, we will never lose sight of the broader trends keeping in mind our holistic approach.

Our long-term vision will inspire our crisis management efforts and help shape the course of developments in our regional and global neighborhoods. At the regional level, our vision is a regional order that is built on representative political systems reflecting the legitimate demands of the people where regional states are fully integrated to each other around the core values of democracy and true economic interdependence.² At the global level, we will aspire to build in a participatory manner a new international order that is inclusive of the international community at large. This global order will have three dimensions: a political order based on dialogue and multilateralism, an economic order based on justice and equality, and a cultural order based on inclusiveness and accommodation.³

Turkey's policy toward the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa

Turkey's value-based approach and emphasis on democracy and popular legitimacy have underpinned its policy toward the uprisings in the Middle East. Since the revolution in Tunisia, we have pursued a dynamic foreign policy reflecting our basic principles. First we decided to support the people who rise to demand such basic rights as freedom of expression and other political freedoms. Our chief concern was to sustain the deep and dear friendship we established with the people and to not trade these ties for temporary balance of power calculations. Second, we emphasized that the transition towards stable and legitimate democratic political structures can only be achieved via a balance between security and freedom. Third, we believed that there is no contradiction between our emphasis on democratic demands, which in some cases required us to confront repressive regimes, and our foreign policy principle of zero problems with neighbors. Fourth, we expressed our opposition to foreign intervention because this region's future has to be decided by its people. Fifth, we considered all people of the region as our eternal brothers irrespective of their background and saw it our duty to dampen sectarian tensions.

With these principles in mind, we believed that the youth demonstrating in the streets represented the future of the region and their aspirations needed to be taken into account. The values demanded by the young Arab generation is the same as what our people enjoy and we believed that they had a right to claim them: free and fair elections, rule of law, transparency and accountability. In fact, this was a delayed transfor-

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mation and was long overdue. All these transitions to democracy should have been achieved in the Middle East in the 1990s as the Cold War’s downfall was instigating an international wave of democratization. But, unfortunately at the time, the preference of major powers was more for stability than democracy in this region, and the archaic regimes continued existence with their backing.

As the region was undergoing such a political earthquake, we aspired to position ourselves on the right side of the history and decided to make our humble contribution to this epic democratic struggle. When the Turkish government debated what our foreign policy should be, we concluded that we should unconditionally support the demands of the Arab people wherever they are, and whatever the content of their demands are, because it was their right to demand the best for themselves.

By positioning itself on the side of the people demonstrating in the streets, Turkish foreign policy took a courageous but risky decision last year. We thought it was a prudent and just action as it was in line with our vision for the region discussed earlier. That vision in fact had shaped our policy in the region even before the Arab Spring when we established good neighborly relations with the incumbent regimes. We developed ties with these regimes because at the time they were not at war with their own people. But when they preferred to suppress the demands of their citizens, we sided with the people and still remain committed to the same democratic vision for our region. Consistently, we stated that we will stand against any oppression in our region, irrespective of the identity of the oppressors, and will not tolerate regimes that see the country as their personal property and want to treat their people in complete disregard of universal values and fundamental human rights, most notably the right to life.

We advised the leaders only one thing, to listen to the voice of their people and do only what they wanted. We advised the regimes to no longer ignore their people’s quest for democracy and asked them to establish the balance between freedom and security. Because we had faith in the power of democracy and argued that a government unable to communicate with its own people will not survive. If security is sacrificed for freedom, it will lead to chaos, while if freedom is sacrificed for security, it will result in dictatorial regimes. Our policy was simply to urge the leaders to provide maximum freedom without risking security and maximum security without limiting freedoms.

The instruments we used to conduct our foreign policy in this process reflected our new principles. As our government contemplated how we could assist the Arab people’s quest for democracy, we firmly agreed that we will pursue an Ankara-based policy and act in line with our value-based evaluation of the developments. We decided to exhaust all means of diplomacy in order to mediate between the regimes and the people.

When the regimes chose to use brute force against their citizens, we still endeavored to find diplomatic solutions to end bloodshed and massacres because we wanted to avoid foreign military intervention in our region in consideration of its devastating effects. While standing against intervention as a matter of principle, we also expressed that we will not keep silent on oppression by autocratic leaders and will act in tandem with the international community to end it. Since we aspired to achieve limitless cooperation and economic integration in our region, we also were careful to ensure that this transition process will not draw new lines of division. I stated on many occasions that we do not want to see Cold Warlike structures emerging in the region, especially in the sense of new tensions and polarizations erecting walls of separation among the people. In particular, it was incumbent upon us to work towards preventing divisions across sectarian lines, i.e. Shiite versus Sunni or political regimes, i.e. defenders of the old regimes, versus new democratic regimes.

While the transition in Tunisia and Egypt was less problematic, in Syria and Libya, Bashar Al-Assad and Moammar Gaddafi failed to heed their people's calls for political reforms. Turkey expended its utmost effort to maintain communication with all sides in these countries, hoping to prevent their descent into a vicious cycle of violence. We made several efforts to reach out to Assad and Gaddafi and proposed a peaceful transition period early on. In Libya, unfortunately, the country had to suffer a destructive conflict and the transition could be accomplished only through an international intervention. Just as we ceaselessly tried to find a diplomatic solution until the very last moment, we will continue to support the Libyan people as they work to heal the wounds of this conflict and reconcile in a democratic structure.

In Syria, President Bashar al-Assad promised to deliver reforms, but instead of implementing them he continued to use indiscriminate force against civilian protestors. He failed to follow the roadmap we agreed upon and unfortunately the people of the country today are experiencing a humanitarian tragedy. We pursued three-stage diplomacy to prevent that outcome. First, we initiated bilateral engagement with the regime and worked hard – around eight months until September 2011 – to convince it to introduce reforms. But unfortunately we were not able to convince the administration to stop the violence and to implement reforms. Thus we severed our ties with the Baath regime. After September, however, we launched a regional initiative in concert with the Arab League, and supported all of its plans, including the observer mission. When the Arab League came to a point that this initiative also failed to solve the problem, we moved to the international stage. Along with the Arab League, we supported the resolution presented to the U.N. Security Council which unfortunately was vetoed. We will continue to strongly support the Syrian

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people's democratic struggle in various regional and international platforms, including the "Friends of Syria" which brings together the like-minded states from within and outside the region.

The way forward for Turkish foreign policy

Turkey today faces a challenging international environment and accompanying foreign policy issues as it endeavors to consolidate its democratic experience at home. There is little doubt that the regional political transformation and global economic restructuring, with all the risks they entail, will continue to occupy Turkey's foreign policy agenda in the years to come. We, however, believe that several factors will aid us in coping with these challenges: our holistic approach to historical trends and sense of active agency, our stable and peaceful domestic order established around the balance between freedoms and security, and the process of reintegration with our neighbors. While we will continue to defend our foreign policy principles enmeshing the local and universal values, we will also pursue a proactive foreign policy approach by building on those strengths.

With our rational and active diplomacy, we will aspire to realize our values and make a contribution to the resolution of the regional and global problems as a responsible member of the international community. In this endeavor, our foreign policy will be based, among other things, on such principles as value-based approach to international problems, self-confidence in assuming our global responsibilities, acting autonomously in devising our priorities, and adopting a vision-oriented approach to crisis management. Backed by these solid principles, we will act in tandem with our regional and global partners to materialize our objective of becoming a wise country to which others look for aspiration.

We will work towards the establishment of a more peaceful and prosperous regional order and support people's quest for basic human rights and democracy. We will stand against those regimes that seek to deny and suppress such legitimate demands through coercion. We will use all avenues of diplomacy to address such emergencies so that a just solution short of a destructive military intervention can be brought to bear on. Unfortunately in Syria, we are confronted with such a contingency. Our efforts to find a diplomatic solution, carried out in coordination with the regional actors and the international community, have fallen on deaf ears in Damascus. The regime's indiscriminate killings have reached such massive proportions that they constitute crimes against humanity. The international community has to pursue a more resolute course of action to stop the bloodshed and bring those responsible before justice, as we tirelessly continue to make our contribution to those efforts. ♦

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1. For an extended discussion, see Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision," *Insight Turkey*, vol. 10, no. 1 (winter 2008), pp. 77-96.

2. I have elaborated these themes in: Ahmet Davutoğlu, "A Forward Looking Vision for the Balkans," *SAM Vision Paper*, no. 1 (October 2011).

3. On these principles, see Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Global Governance," *SAM Vision Paper*, no. 2 (March 2012).

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Recommended Reading

Bülent Aras, "Davutoğlu Era in Turkish Foreign Policy," *SETA Policy Brief*, no. 32 (May 2009).

Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik*, İstanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2002.

Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007," *Insight Turkey*, vol. 10, no. 1 (winter 2008), pp. 77-98.

Tarık Oğuzlu, "The 'Arab Spring' and the Rise of the 2.0 Version of Turkey's 'zero problems with neighbors' Policy," *SAM Paper*, no. 1 (February 2012).

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