

The New Davutoglu: The Next Prime Minister's Game Plan

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Articles & Testimony

Davutoglu's long track record of Ottoman revivalism has exposed Turkey to dangerous regional threats, and defusing them will likely preoccupy him in his new post.

Ahmet Davutoglu, Turkey's new prime minister, started his career as a professor of international relations in the 1990s. By 2003, he had worked his way into becoming an influential -- yet still relatively unknown -- advisor to Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul. When I met him in his small office in an old government building in downtown Ankara in 2005, he struck me as a scholar with deep knowledge of Ottoman history and a strong desire to transform Turkey into a regional powerhouse. If handed power, it seemed, Davutoglu would turn Turkey's traditional Western-oriented and inward-looking foreign policy upside down. Eventually, as advisor to Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the prime minister of Turkey at the time, and then as foreign minister, Davutoglu did exactly that. Now, as prime minister, he will need to figure out how to contain the damaging effects of his policies.

GO EAST

When we met in 2005, Davutoglu and I discussed a variety of foreign policy issues, including the role of Islam in Turkish politics and the legacy of Ottoman rule, including the responsibility it entailed regarding the people formally under its rule. I told him about my work in the 1990s, when I had organized international conferences in Ankara to publicize the suffering of the Bosnians. Davutoglu, for his part, emphasized the Middle East, suggesting that Turkey had a responsibility to actively cooperate with the Muslim states in the area. He added that only by reaching out to these Muslim nations and others in the Muslim world could Turkey become a great power. Davutoglu, it dawned on me, was an Ottoman revivalist, keen on eliminating the Kemalist legacy in Turkish foreign policy.

Turkey's first president, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, had a mantra: "Go West." He and his successors, the Kemalists, wanted to turn Turkey into a European country, thinking that doing so would make it a great nation. To accomplish this goal, they needed to redefine the whole of Turkish civilization -- to jettison the Ottoman legacy in the Middle East

and disavow the country's Muslim heritage. In its place, Turkey would embrace a new secular national identity and an inward-looking foreign policy rooted in "non-interference" -- that is, avoiding intimate ties with the region's states, especially Arab nations. They hoped that, one day, Europe would fully embrace their country.

Davutoglu is no Kemalist. He is a loyal member of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), the backbone of conservative and Islamist politics in Turkey, which has defined itself in opposition to Kemalism, the movement intent on modernizing Turkey from the top down. Often characterized as authoritarian in nature, Kemalism has in fact built Turkey's democratic institutions.

And it is this opposition to Kemalism that has made Turkey's Islamists different from other Islamists in the region. For one, Turkish Islamists dismiss violence because they have grown inside a democratic polity. In addition, other Islamist movements have to look deep into the annals of history for models of Islamic governments in their territories. As a result, they often pursue visions of austerity and obduracy. For instance, the region's Salafist movements harken back to the seventh century in their medieval values. In Turkey, however, Islamists need only look back to pre-Ataturk times, in other words, to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Ottoman Empire. At home, this means idealizing the late Ottoman Empire. Turkish Islamists envision the late Ottoman sultans as pious and conservative Muslims; in reality, these statesmen were bon vivants and modern. Abdulmecid Efendi, the last Ottoman caliph, was a master artist who painted nudes. Today, his paintings sell for roughly \$1 million at auctions. And abroad, this means idealization of Ottoman statecraft, re-engaging with the Middle East and rebuilding power -- the two tenets of Davutoglu's foreign policy.

PROBLEM PIVOT

In the early years of Davutoglu's tenure as foreign minister, Turkey did pivot toward the Middle East. He sought rapprochement with Turkey's Muslim neighbors, including Iran, Iraq, and Syria. He also reached out to the Gulf monarchies, and built good ties with countries as far away as Sudan. He believed that these policies, which he dubbed "Zero Problems with Neighbors," built Turkish influence in regional capitals and helped establish Turkey as a Middle Eastern power.

The Arab Spring, however, soon proved Davutoglu wrong. As protests began to heat up in Syria in 2011, Davutoglu flew to Damascus to advise President Bashar al-Assad to refrain from using violence against the crowds. Only hours after Davutoglu's departure, however, Assad sent tanks into Syrian cities for the first time, snubbing the Zero Problems policy and Davutoglu. Appalled by the slight and by Assad's treatment of civilians, the Turkish leader decided to back the uprising, and opened the country's borders to Syrian refugees and anti-regime rebels, including what would eventually become the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), which has declared a caliphate in parts of Iraq and Syria. This decision cost Turkey dearly, and its relations with Damascus and its regional patron, Iran, began to crumble. Things went poorly in Iraq, too, where Davutoglu supported the Kurds because he wanted to import their oil and because he saw them as a potential intermediary with Turkey's own Kurds and as proxy against the Shia-majority government in Baghdad. This rapprochement irritated the Iraqi government and Iran, also Iraq's patron.

The second tenet of Davutoglu's doctrine, power revival, draws even more directly from the late Ottoman Empire. Davutoglu's reference here is to the foreign policy pursued first by Sultan Abdulhamid II in the late nineteenth century and then by his successors, the Young Turks, until 1918, just before the dawn of Kemalism. Although Abdulhamid and the Young Turks opposed each other in power, their foreign policies revolved around a common goal: reviving Ottoman greatness. In other words, Davutoglu's revivalism is itself rooted in a period of revivalism.

By the late nineteenth century, when Abdulhamid came to the throne, the Ottoman Empire was weak. In an attempt to restore its past eminence, Abdulhamid, the opera-watching and rum-drinking caliph, pragmatically employed Islam. He sent emissaries throughout Central Asia and the Indian sub-continent, hoping to inspire their local Muslim

populations to rebel against Russian and British rule. His ultimate goal was to build up proxies overseas. This strategy worked up to a point: At the end of World War I, when British forces occupied Istanbul, sub-continental Muslims organized a massive fundraising campaign to support the faltering Ottoman Empire and help the caliph. Ironically, the funds ended up in Atatürk's hands. He used them to buy Soviet weapons to defeat the Allies and abolish the caliphate.

Likewise, Davutoglu envisions running a country that is powerful not just in the Middle East, but also throughout the Muslim world. Early on as foreign minister, he tried to assume the mantle of the protector of Muslims, from the Philippines and Somalia to Myanmar and Bosnia. Over the past decade, Turkey has emerged as a staunch supporter of aid programs for Muslims everywhere, establishing organizations such as the Turkey International Aid Agency (TIKA), the Turkish version of USAID. This agency, a small outfit that had only 12 offices overseas before the AKP came to power, ballooned under Davutoglu. Today it has 33, at least 22 of which are in Muslim-majority countries, including the Palestinian Authority, Pakistan, and Somalia. Davutoglu cares deeply for Muslims around the world and sees Turkey as their advocate. Turkey also took over the presidency of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in 2004 for a ten-year period. This was an unusual step for a country with a secular constitution, but it fit well into Davutoglu's vision of building influence among Muslims in order to revive Turkey's status as a great power.

For better or worse, Davutoglu has also borrowed a page from the Young Turks' book. This group was composed of idealist Ottoman soldiers and bureaucrats who in 1908 overthrew Abdulhamid and declared the Empire a constitutional monarchy. The Young Turks were far more impetuous in their pursuit of Ottoman greatness than their predecessor. Thanks to his cunning, Abdulhamid had avoided drawing Turkey into a war for three decades. But the Young Turks first debilitated their empire in the Balkan Wars in 1912–13, in which the Ottomans suffered an embarrassing defeat at the hands of their former subjects, including in Montenegro and Serbia. And then, in 1914, when Germany offered the Young Turks vast territories in the Russian Empire in return for allying with the Central Powers, the Young Turks eagerly accepted, thus dragging the Empire into battle once again, and on multiple fronts. As a result, the Ottoman Empire collapsed like a house of cards. At one point, the sophomoric Young Turk pashas even deployed ill-equipped Arab recruits, many of whom had never seen snow before, to battle against the Russians on the snow-laden Caucasus plateau: tens of thousands of Syrian troops died from the cold before the Russians could get to them.

Davutoglu's policy in Syria bears an eerie resemblance to that of the Young Turks. Turkey was gracious to open its border to Syrian refugees. To date, the country provides shelter to nearly 1.5 million Syrians, with little international assistance. Yet Davutoglu's policy in Syria proved feckless. The Turkish leader called for Assad's ouster before securing military backing from NATO or Arab allies. Apparently, he hoped that providing assistance to the rebels would be enough to trigger Assad's downfall. It wasn't, of course. And so as the war dragged on, Turkey started allowing foreign fighters to cross into Syria in the hope that they may be able to do the job. These better-funded and better-armed radicals soon became a dominant faction in the country.

Davutoglu never intended to assist the radicals. The Turkish leader believed that allowing foreign fighters to cross into Syria was a price worth paying for Assad's fall. And even if a few bad guys got into Syria, he thought, the good guys would clean them up. But three years later, Assad has not fallen, the good guys are not taking over, and bad guys are building a Taliban-style state that stretches across Turkey's 800-mile border with Syria and Iraq. They have already targeted Turkey; on June 10, after capturing Mosul, the militant group attacked the Turkish diplomatic mission in the Iraqi city, taking 49 Turkish citizens, including children, hostage. From day one, Turkey has lacked the hard power to back its Syria policy. Just as the Young Turks could not fight on multiple fronts, modern Turkey could not oust Assad, nor can it contain the ISIS terrorists spilling out of the fray.

FOREVER FOREIGN POLICY

Davutoglu's Ottoman revivalism has dangerously exposed Turkey to regional threats, which will probably preoccupy him as he takes over the prime ministership. Indeed, it is likely that because Erdogan knew foreign policy -- specifically managing the Syria crisis -- would figure heavily in his legacy, he picked Davutoglu as his successor as prime minister. Erdogan and his AKP have won seven elections since 2002 primarily because they have delivered phenomenal economic growth in Turkey. Erdogan has more than doubled average Turkish incomes in a decade. And this economic success has been fuelled by record amounts of international investment -- nearly \$50 billion annually. Investors prefer Turkey to its neighbors because it is more stable. But the spillover from the Syrian war -- sectarian conflict and ISIS -- could take all that away. The new Turkish president hopes that his prime minister, who catapulted Turkey into the Middle East to begin with, can now find ways to keep it safe.

At this point, it is nearly impossible for Turkey to seal its borders or abandon the Middle East. And it is too late for Ankara to turn back inward in its foreign policy. That leaves Davutoglu with one choice. Turkey is now a part of the Middle East reality and all its turmoil. The only way out of it would be to re-embrace the "Go West" mantra of Ataturk and the Kemalists. Ankara can then work with its real allies, such as Europe, NATO, and the United States, to contain the regional threats and thrive together.

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute, and author of [The Rise of Turkey: The Twenty-First Century's First Muslim Power](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-centurys-first-muslim-power) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-centurys-first-muslim-power>), published by Potomac Books. This article originally appeared on the [Foreign Affairs website](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141947/soner-cagaptay/the-new-davutoglu) (<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141947/soner-cagaptay/the-new-davutoglu>). ❖

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