

The Future of Turkey's Foreign Policy

Written by Suha Bolukbasi

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SUHA BOLUKBASI, MAY 28 2016

The title of this short article implies that a change is expected after Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu resigned his post recently. Not exactly. Given the fact that Davutoğlu largely complied with Erdoğan's guidelines, if not whims, style but not direction might change after his departure. While he was Prime Minister many characterized government policies as authoritarian, but not as authoritarian as President Erdoğan — or *Reis* (chief) — as his associates refer to him — wished. As to the European reaction, one should not expect a backlash. Whoever stops illegal crossings to Europe will be the interlocutor of European leaders.

Davutoğlu's public perception was that he was almost a robot who dutifully implemented Erdoğan's decisions. On foreign policy, the two saw eye to eye, while on domestic politics the two made contradictory statements. Davutoğlu had stated that if the pro-Kurdish HDP (Peoples' Democracy Party, considered close to the separatist PKK) came back to the negotiating table, he would do so as well. Erdoğan rejected out of hand any talks with the HDP. After his resignation — which Erdoğan demanded — many speculate that in Davutoğlu's absence authoritarianism could reach higher proportions.

On May 22, Binali Yıldırım, the long-time Minister of Transportation, Maritime and Communications was elected chairman of the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP). The change of horse came after Erdoğan decided to pick a new PM more loyal to him. Davutoğlu had time and again demonstrated loyalty to Reis, while at the same time trying to create elbow room for himself. Conventional wisdom is that Erdoğan is surrounding himself with hard core loyalists. The man he fired was a loyalist himself, but apparently not sufficiently so.

Davutoğlu had stated that he would revise the so-called "Schengen visa agreement", allowing Turks to travel to Schengen area states without visas. The original agreement with the EU was negotiated when Erdoğan was Prime Minister, and the feisty President felt offended by Davutoğlu's attempt to steal the limelight. Since Davutoğlu's appointment in August 2014, Erdoğan loyalists increasingly insinuated that Davutoğlu's loyalty to Reis had always been dubious, rather than steadfast, and that he was soft vis-a-vis an imagined monstrous West.

His successor turned out to be Binali Yıldırım, elected to the post by the extraordinary congress of the JDP on May 22. Yıldırım has a reputation of being the architect of Turkey's major transportation projects and a close confidant of the president. Given the fact that he has been an associate of Erdoğan since the latter's time as mayor of Istanbul, the two will probably cooperate more easily.

Erdoğan and Davutoğlu differed somewhat on the domestic Kurdish issue. A major indication of this was the Dolmabahçe meeting between the HDP leadership and Davutoğlu and associates in 2013. Erdoğan denounced the agreement reached there as unacceptable.

Despite his best efforts, Davutoğlu was not able to implement any foreign policy decision without Erdoğan's approval. Davutoğlu's desire to meet U.S. President Barack Obama only shortly after the U.S. leader's meeting with Erdoğan might also have infuriated the Turkish president. But as Gardner suggests, "the man he ... defenestrated is a loyalist. He joins a long list of those jettisoned from the president's inner circle over the past two years, in a processional purge that is starting to look like a standard political procedure."

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The talk of the town is Erdoğan aspired to untrammelled one-man rule ever since he moved from premiership to presidency 18 months ago. Earlier, in 2002, before the JDP came to power for the first time, the JDP rhetoric was mostly based on widening liberties. "By 2013, it became clear that the feedback loop of this well-oiled political machine had been short-circuited by sycophants." Over time, JDP heavyweights, including former President Abdullah Gül, Bulent Arinc, co-founder of the JDP, Huseyin Celik, and the economy czar Ali Babacan were liquidated from leadership positions of the party.

Davutoğlu and Erdoğan also differed over the pre-trial imprisonment of academics and journalists, which Davutoğlu opposed. Davutoğlu had championed a deal with the EU to stem the flow of refugees across the Aegean Sea – an issue in which the president has shown little interest.

One major conflict emerged when Davutoğlu proposed and publicly backed legislation aimed at tackling corruption, known as the "transparency package". Erdoğan, who as prime minister had been embroiled in a serious corruption scandal that involved several government officials and his immediate family, made sure the bill was withdrawn.

"Erdoğan does not want anyone in the party who does not fully agree with him, or anyone who would have their own opinion on any topic," Levent Gültekin, a writer and columnist, explained. "Davutoğlu was one of the last JDP party politicians who would make suggestions of change to Erdoğan's policies."

Rumours about a growing rift between the two boiled over recently, when the JDP's executive board stripped Davutoğlu of his authority to appoint provincial party leaders while he was on a government visit to Qatar. "The decision to take away my authority to appoint party leaders is something I would not have expected from fellow party members," Davutoğlu said in a rare sign of defiance.

Recently veteran journalist Ertugrul Özkök wrote a column criticizing Davutoğlu Middle East policy. He wrote:

Exactly two-and-a-half years ago, I wrote, "Your Syrian policy is wrong. As a result of this, our border region will turn into Peshawar." Unfortunately, what I said came true. That place became such a center of atrocity that it makes al-Qaeda jealous. Exactly one year ago, I wrote, "Do not waste time trying to train certain moderate people in Syria. They have no chance of success. Their weapons will go to [the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant] ISIL or al-Nusra." Unfortunately, it came true. The first "train and equip" squad was ambushed, captured, some of them killed in Syria. The 30th division was not able to fire one shot at ISIL. Exactly one-and-a-half years ago, I wrote, "Your Egypt policy is wrong; you will be left completely alone." Unfortunately, this came true also.... This is not Turkey's policy, but it is the disaster created by an ambition who assumed himself powerful to do everything. Well, what will happen if this "historic delusion," this disastrous policy does not change?

As Özkök suggested, Turkey welcomed the ousting of the Egyptian president Mubarak by the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan). The verdict was that moderate Islamists were on the rise and the JDP was acquiring allies in the region. Perhaps the next to fall could be President Assad of Syria.

Although Erdoğan had established rapport with Assad, and they had even spent a holiday in the Aegean together, accompanied by their wives, he decided to support his ousting from power. His expectation was that Assad was the next domino to fall. Davutoğlu strongly shared his view. Events proved otherwise. Assad remained in power, and Muhammad Mursi was overthrown in a military coup commanded by General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. This was yet another blow to the JDP's grand design. Another misfortune for Erdoğan and Davutoğlu was Israel's growing relationship with the Greek Cypriot administration and Greece. The final setback came when Iranians elected moderate Hassan Rouhani as president. Rouhani has since improved relations with the West after revising Iran's nuclear program. Iran no longer needed Turkey's good offices to redeem itself.

Although Davutoğlu designed Turkey's Syrian policy jointly with Erdoğan, the Syrian debacle eroded most of his credibility. He ended up becoming the scape goat for Turkey's isolation in the Middle East. This is all the more interesting given the fact that his "strategic depth" doctrine foresaw Turkey abandoning its traditional "NATO's outpost" role, and become a geopolitical player with an ambitious policy. "Turkey's Kissinger", as some referred to

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him, argued that Turkey possessed “strategic depth,” which would enable it to play a major role in its near abroad. Instead of simply implementing policies designed by NATO, the EU, or the US, Turkey was to impose its strategic blueprint on the region. He – and by extension Tayyip Erdoğan – failed miserably. The country ended up antagonizing Arabs as well as Israelis. Intent on overthrowing Assad, Turkey became a frontline state to the conflict raging between ISIS and the Syria-Russia alliance.

All of a sudden, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu had remained all alone in Turkey’s near abroad. Fancy slogans, ambitious goals, and exaggerated means had come to naught. The much lauded slogan “zero problems with neighbors” failed to become reality. Instead, Turkey has problems with almost all the neighbors, , excluding the Kurdistan Regional Government. There are tensions with Russia, the United States, and the European Union. In 2010, Obama had declared Turkey to be a “great Muslim democracy” and “a critically important model for other Muslim countries in the region.” In April 2016 he stated “I think the approach they have been taking towards the press is one that could lead Turkey down a path that would be very troubling.” The hand-picked Yildirim is expected to be a low-profile executive of Erdoğan’s directives.

About the author:

Suha Bolukbasi is Professor of International Relations at the Middle East Technical University, Ankara. He completed his MA and PhD in the Department of Government and Foreign Affairs, University of Virginia. He was Visiting Professor at the Department of Central Eurasian Studies, Indiana University (1994-96), Residential Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (2000-2001), and Visiting Professor in the Department of Politics, Oberlin College (2005-2006).