

TURKEY'S FRONTLINE FOREIGN POLICY¹

Professor Shlomo Avineri

Director-General of Israel's Foreign Ministry in the first cabinet of Yitzhak Rabin, Professor of Political Science at Hebrew University

JERUSALEM – A few months before he became Turkey's foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's chief adviser, met with a group of Middle Eastern academics and policy experts, including Arabs and Israelis. With his academic background and immense erudition, he succeeded in painting, on a wide canvass, the new directions of Turkey's policies under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) leadership.

By then, it had become clear that Turkey's road to the European Union had been closed, somewhat rudely, owing mainly to combined German and French pressure. But those who expected Islamist fire and brimstone from Davutoglu were deeply disappointed.

What was articulated was a levelheaded and sophisticated exposé, seldom heard from policymakers: it was thoughtful, honest, and breath-taking. It was also a clear departure from the conventional foreign-policy straightjacket devised by Kemal Ataturk, which had for decades forced Turkish diplomacy into the Procrustean bed of 1920's-style integral nationalism.

Davutoglu began conventionally, declaring that Turkey's geopolitical situation would always dictate the country's foreign policy. Then came the bombshell: contrary to the conventional Kemalist view of the One and Indivisible Turkish Nation, Davutoglu referred to what everyone has known since modern Turkey was created: the country has more Azeris than Azerbaijan, more people of Albanian origin than live in Albania, more people of Bosniak origin than live in Bosnia, and more Kurds than in Iraqi Kurdistan.

This reality, Davutoglu maintained, means that violence and instability in Turkey's immediate neighborhood threatens to spill into Turkey itself, and regional external conflicts can easily become internally disruptive. Hence the credo of Turkish foreign policy should be "zero conflicts with our neighbors and in our neighborhood."

This, he explained, was the reason that Turkey was trying to find an accommodation with Armenia. It justified Turkey's policy vis-à-vis the Kurdish Regional Government in Northern Iraq, its involvement in Bosnia and in Kosovo, its rapprochement with Syria, and also its attempt to mediate between Syria and Israel.

Turkey, he argued, is neither pro-Israeli nor pro-Syrian: it seeks an Israeli-Syrian accommodation in order to add another building block to regional stability. All these steps are taken by the AKP government because it is in

¹ This article was first published in Project Syndicate on 05 July 2010.

Turkey's interest, given not only its geopolitical position, but also its unique multi-ethnic structure (he didn't use that terminology, though the implication was clear).

Since then (Davutoglu became Foreign Minister in May 2009), much of what Turkey has done can be explained as being in line with this "zero conflicts" theory, including a slightly more nuanced policy on the Cyprus issue. Yet recent developments suggest that, if this policy is pushed to its limits, it stumbles on its own premises.

One can well understand a Turkish policy of trying to defuse tensions with Iran over that country's nuclear program. But the joint Iranian-Brazilian-Turkish initiative goes beyond such a policy.

Brazil's President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva may have stepped on a hornets' nest, owing to his unfamiliarity with regional policies and his general anti-Yanqui sentiments. Erdogan must have known that, by trying in this way to shield Iran, he is opening a wider chasm with the EU – and obviously with the United States. Opposing new sanctions against Iran in the Security Council further alienated Turkey from both the EU and the US. This does not sit well with a "zero conflict" policy.

The same can be said about the shrill tone that Turkey, and Erdogan himself, has recently adopted vis-à-vis Israel. Walking off the stage at Davos during a round-table debate with Israel's President Shimon Peres might have gained Erdogan points in the Arab world, which has historically viewed Turkey with the suspicion owed to the old imperial ruler. But the vehemence with which he lashed out at Israel during the Gaza flotilla crisis obviously went far beyond (justified) support for beleaguered Palestinians and (equally justified) criticism of the messy way in which Israel dealt with an obviously difficult situation.

While gaining support on the so-called Arab street, and perhaps upstaging Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad in the role of a modern Commander-of-the-Faithful, Erdogan's policy and behavior have shocked not only Israelis, but also moderate Arab leaders in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and some of the Gulf states.

For many years, the AKP appeared to many in the region and elsewhere as a model for a democratic party with Islamic roots. But by supporting Hamas, Erdogan has allied Turkey with the most disruptive and extremist fundamentalist force in the Muslim Arab world – an organization that has its origins in the Muslim Brotherhood, the arch-enemy of all Arab regimes in the region (including, of course, Syria).

Since Erdogan is a critic of Israel, Arab rulers cannot say this openly. But Arab governments – and their security services – are beginning to ask themselves whether Turkey's policies will undermine whatever internal stability their states possess.

This is the exact opposite of a genuine “zero conflict” policy that aims to minimize tensions and enhance stability. Turkey now finds itself, through its alliance with Iran and support for Hamas, rushing headlong into a series of conflicts – with Europe, the US, Israel, and moderate Arab regimes that have survived Iranian Shia fundamentalism but may now feel threatened by a neo-Ottoman Sunni foreign policy.

Turkey is thus emerging not as a regional mediator, equidistant from contending local players, but as an assertive, if not aggressive, regional power aiming for hegemony. Far from avoiding conflicts and mediating existing tensions, Turkey under the AKP appears intent on stoking new conflicts and creating new frontlines.