



STRATEGIC OUTLOOK

POLICY BRIEF

5/23/2016

May 2016, No.1

Turkey as A Country of Missed Opportunities: A Call For a Major Revision in Turkish Politics

Prof. Dr. Mustafa ACAR, N. Erbakan Univ. Dep. of Economics

Introduction



As Prime Minister Prof. Davutoğlu once said, Turkey is a country of opportunities. We keep missing economic, political and historical opportunities one after the other. Even worse, we keep blaming “others,” mostly western powers for all the bad things happen to us where in fact we ourselves are the ones who share the bigger part of the responsibility. We are the ones who could not change the Constitution for 14 years, we ourselves neglected EU “homeworks,” democratic-political reforms, we are the ones who started repeating the same old mistakes the ancient Kemalist regime had done for decades, we kept dragging in completing the reforms to permanently solve the Kurdish problem and related terror... But it is always the outsiders, some sort of “supra intellect,” the westerners, big powers and the imperialists are responsible; we are the good, they are the bad guys...

Prof. Dr. Mustafa ACAR



Analysis

Just look what happened in the last two weeks. Mr. Davutoğlu, the Prime Minister, who came to power just 6 months ago with an overwhelming election victory with a record high popular support of 49.5% was forced to step down. One wonders why? Is it because he has no popular support? No. He has record high popular support as we mentioned. Is he not successful? No. His government has fulfilled its election promises almost fully within a few months. Is he not hardworking? No. He is working almost non-stop 7/24, it is difficult to chase after him running from one activity to another, flying a few different provinces sometimes even within the same day. So, what is the reason? Is his name recalled with some sort of corruption? No. In fact he is one of the most righteous and clean

personalities in the Parliament with high moral standards. Besides, he is the most knowledgeable and wise profile in the Parliament with a broad political-intellectual vision and a deep historical-philosophical perspective. In other words, there is not a clear, understandable, convincing reason to force him to step down. Yet they forced him to leave the office with some unethical, unfriendly, even ugly means. It must have something to do with Erdogan's future plans and the abnormalities of Turkish politics regarding the Presidency, constitutional change and changing priorities in international relations. This is not a typical event one can observe in almost any democratic country in the world, maybe unique to Turkey.

Let's go back a little. Once upon a time, not long ago, Turkey was a rising star, both in the region and the world. Domestically we were making peace between people and the government, the country was reconciling with its neighbors in the foreign sphere; making new reforms one after another, launching negotiations with the EU for full membership, fighting against militarism and military guardianship regime. From East to West the world envied our success story; they were considering Turkey as a Muslim country harmonizing democracy and Islam. Everything looked so bright and fantastic...

Then something happened, something dark, something bad, something negative. The picture started to darken, losing its brightness. We lost our inspiring vision and started to spin on the same spot, or even go backward. Our famous "zero problems with neighbors" policy started to fall apart. First we fell out with Israel, then with the EU, then with the US, and then with Saudi Arabia, Iran and Russia, i.e. all the major regional as well as global players. In the end, almost no major player is left with which we don't have weak, negative, even hostile relations with. The most dramatic humanitarian disaster of the century has happened in Syria, our next door; the tragedy is still alive with all that heart-breaking consequences. We contributed to this tragedy with our stubborn, unilateral, unproductive foreign policy proclaiming that we are going to be the mastermind the change in the Middle East. Then, after so many drawbacks, negative consequences and heightened tensions, we went back to the beginning, trying to normalize the relations with Israel, EU, US, S. Arabia and Iran. One wonders once again: if this was going to happen, then why did we fell out with all of them in the first place? Why did we go through all these troubles? This brings to mind a joke, two guys returning to the beginning after forcing each other a series of tortures. What's the matter with us? What's the matter with our foreign policy? Where are we headed towards?

Let's make our final argument clear in advance: Turkey has missed a historical golden opportunity, or even a series of opportunities that knock the door maybe once in a lifetime mainly because of the the mistakes it did one after another. To get a similar opportunity may take decades. In a period when the Soviet Union dissolved, the US is not as strong as it used to be, the EU troubling itself with its internal issues, Iran was isolated almost entirely from the whole world, the Arab world gazing over Turkey and the West hopeful of Turkey as "the country which harmonized democracy and Islam," if Turkey was more constructive, smarter, developed a discourse compatible with its hard and soft power, maintained more friendly relations with foreign countries and masterfully managed the crisis in the Middle East, it could have become the axis state of the region and become a role model and hope for the Middle East without straining relations with the West and the East.... Unfortunately it didn't go this way, hence we missed this great opportunity. Especially the inappropriate policies towards the Syrian crisis forced Turkey into giving up almost every principle we previously adopted as the basis of our foreign policies. Now we start over; we sit down at the table again with countries that we needlessly tensed our relations with, burned bridges and neglected our obligations toward, hence we're back to the beginning. For all that, after

countless lives perished, after all the destruction and massacres, revision comes too little too late... It is time now to sit down and calmly evaluate everything from head to toe, a time to drastically overhaul this foreign policy and mend stricken relations.

Let's make another point clear: The author of these lines is neither a perpetual "Erdoğan's enemy," nor a "Justice and Development Party opponent," nor even a dispirited and angry "concerned modern" who lost his privileges with the regression of Kemalist regime and military guardianship. Once upon a time, during its reformist, pro-change, pro-freedom era I myself passionately defended both Erdoğan and the JDP governments. But he did not hesitate to criticize their inappropriate and ineffective policies as deem fit. This author has not ingratiated himself with anyone, nor did he appeal at gaining the hatred of others, either. He is just an ordinary citizen concerned with the future of our country as well as the Muslim world, whose "heart is tongue-tied, wherefore he's fed up with," in the words of the late Poet Mehmet Akif. He does not have an agenda nor in search of a social footing, grateful to no one but Allah. Who talks blunt and shoots straight; regards highly of the truth, does not abstain from criticizing the wrong...

The borders are changing in our region, the history being re-written. Everything is rapidly changing. We are weaving, doing much but not moving forward. Our reputation both in the Arab and the Western world is heavily wounded. We lost the speed in going towards the top, the speed we gained in the first decade of 2000s. Mistakes in our foreign policy have an important role in this outlook. We have to revisit our position thoroughly. Keep saying "we are right but everyone else is wrong, long live our precious solitude" is no way to go. In this context, the mistakes and accomplishments of Turkey in its foreign policy requires a calm, sound and restrained critical evaluation; for as we benefit from the accomplishments, the mistakes also affect the entire nation and even the Muslim Ummah, not just the ones who made those mistakes.

Old-timers say "the ignorant speak of personalities, the in-between of events, and the wise of ideas." We should keep this advice in mind. We do not have any personal beef with anyone else, so let's speak of ideas and events and not of personalities as much as possible. Let's speak what we have to say, those who want to take it personal may do so if they please...

The accomplishments, right policies

- The "zero problems with neighbors" policy, drafted by Prime Minister Davutoğlu first as a key advisor to Erdoğan in foreign affairs, and then later as the Foreign Minister. It was an accomplishment, a revolutionary change in traditional Kemalist foreign policy.
- The idea to solve all the problems with our neighbors by speaking, negotiating and through diplomacy was extremely fitting.
- It was extremely appropriate for Davutoğlu and Erdoğan to collaborate with their teammates in pursuing a vital expansion for our foreign policy, leaving behind the Western-oriented traditional policies of the Republican era and adopting a proactive, multi-faceted one.
- In this regard, putting aside the traditional Kemalist foreign policy which turned its back on the Muslim world, especially to the Arab world and the Middle-East, and adopting a new one aiming to mend our relationships and make peace with both worlds was admirable.
- To accept the existing regimes and power balances as given and being ready to speak and work with anyone was quite appropriate.

- Taking the EU membership process and its homework seriously, carrying the reforms required by the adaptation process into effect quickly, getting negotiation dates and solemnly doing what is needed to kick-start the negotiation process was vitally important.
- When the Arab Spring erupted, it was an accomplishment to call Arab leaders into paying attention to the demands of their people. Also it was appropriate to support change, democracy and freedoms when such calls failed.
- It was an accomplishment to advocate foreign powers to abstain from interfering with the tensions in the Middle East, especially the resistance to a Western armed intervention.
- At the beginning of the Syrian crisis, the policy to push Assad into making reforms and overcoming the crisis through reforms, and the shuttle diplomacy on this regard, was right.
- Turning towards not only to West but to East, observing the whole world within our sphere of interest, expanding into the Asian, African and the Middle Eastern markets and making new partners in foreign trade, diversifying the market and the general policies of

overseas expansion was quite all right. However, but, nevertheless...

The mistakes, wrongs, ineffective policies

- Neglecting EU reforms in the third, so-called "mastership period," suspending the economic-political-legal reforms, leaving them aside was a gross mistake. Putting the blame on the EU by saying "they are not sincere" when we also neglected our own promises, -e.g. not extending the borders of the Customs Union to include all EU members in particular, was wrong.
- It was wrong to forget that the period when our macro-economic indicators was rapidly rising was a period of good relations with the EU, a period when we took our homework seriously.
- Threatening attitudes to the point of confronting EU, USA, UN and Russia all at the same time, bullying and the "antagonizing politics" was wrong. What we needed was soft power politics and diplomacy.
- It was wrong to remember that we are a NATO member only after the plane downing crisis and being threatened by Russia in the aftermath of the event.
- It was wrong to remember that we are a country that aims for full membership with the EU only after Syria and the

subsequent refugee crisis. When it is considered that our full membership negotiations started at the same time with Croatia, it was not masterful statesmanship to be able to open only half of the 35 chapters in 11 years since 2005. Let's not forget that most of the chapters that were suspended or failed to be open were only regarding the extension of the Customs Union (letting Southern Cypriot ships come in our ports). It is naïve to think that Southern Cypriot goods cannot come into Turkey through Salonica. Let's remember that free trade and economic linkages is the magical key to alleviate animosities between nations.

- It was wrong to embrace only or mostly the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria -for a long time- instead of embracing all opponent groups. In fact all of them needed to be equally embraced right from the beginning.
- It was a mistake to wait until as late as October 2013 to add ISIS in the terrorist organizations list. Instead of wasting time on conspiracy theories of who created the ISIS, we should have remembered that militants of this organization were Muslims, their commanders were Muslims, that ever since the Khawarij of the early Muslim

Era there have always been a tendency in the Muslim world to declare anyone who are different as *kafir* (unbeliever); we should have criticized such Takfirian-bloodthirsty-radical-Salafi mentalities more clearly with no if, no but, no on the other hand...

- When resistance against Morsi started in Egypt, instead of calling him to include the political opposition into governance and not to overstate his power, closing our eyes to him swimming against the current until it was too late was a gross mistake. In a situation where the Egyptian army dominated half the Egyptian economy, combined with the fact that the EU, US, Israel and Saudi Arabia did not trust the Muslim Brotherhood, when we had many domestic and foreign enemies, we needed to be strictly sensitive in the policies we followed, pay regards to balances and focus with all of our power for a soft transitional period. Morsi thought the 52% support he received when he was elected as President gave him all kinds of authority, his inexperience brought ineptitude, "our folks" did not adequately guide him; a coup followed blatantly...
- Estimates and discourses on how to "manage the change in the Middle East"

by creating "brother regimes" in the Egypt-Syria-Turkey triangle (Muslim Brotherhood and JDP) was highly ominous and very startling for the West, this mistake shook confidence to Turkey and caused recalculation of all plans with regard to Turkey and Turkish policies. The discourse "we will manage the change in the Middle East, and we will perform morning prayers in the Umayyad Mosque" was entirely wrong.

- Upon realizing that Assad was not willing to do reforms Turkey initiated the following discourse: "Assad must go, he has only two months anyway." This discourse was wrong, hot-tempered and made rather hastily. How badly they miscalculated the possible duration of Assad in power became clear later on: He is still in power after five long years. Turkish leaders were not able to see that Syrian opponents were not organized, they had grave splits among themselves in terms of ideology and future plans, their weaponry was too weak to overthrow Assad.
- It was of vital importance to discuss and negotiate on who is going to replace Assad with the major regional and global players and cooperate with them to develop a feasible solution with regard to the future of Syria. Instead of

seeking a common solution our folks attempted to develop their own solution and go their own way, neglecting the conflicting demands and the complexity of the situation. And it was "the last straw" for the big players to leave Turkey alone and counter attack against Turkey's ambitions. Originally, the US had many reasons to overthrow Assad and dissolve the Syrian regime: Syria was a long-established ally of Russia, had negative relations with Israel, and it was a transit route for Iran's help and access to Hezbollah. These were convincing reasons to overthrow Assad for the US.

- However, gradual dominance of ISIS and other jihadist movements in the field became a serious source of worry for the western powers. Another issue of concern was who would replace Assad. Apart from all these, Turkey's self-ordained, over-confident and partly-menacing discourse changed US' calculations. The US gave up its policy to "overthrow Assad," left Turkey alone on the matter and even greenlighted Russia in entering Syria.
- The result was a fiasco for the foreign policy goals of Turkey: We could not convince Assad to reconcile with the opponents, he was not persuaded to

initiate reforms, assistance for the opponents was not enough, so Assad could not be overthrown. Contrary to previously declared principles Turkey had to call for a Western intervention, not only political but also an armed intervention. We could not prevent Russia from entering Syria, we could not protect the Turkmens living in our door step, we could not prevent PKK-linked Kurdish forces (PYD) from establishing a canton in northern Syria, we could not prevent the merger of the cantons dominated by the Kurds, and we could not prevent the US' support of PYD. A complete fiasco.

- At the beginning, however, the Syrian opposition took to the streets taking inspiration from Turkey. Turkey should have determined more accurately their capabilities, power and to what extent they were organized. The best solution Turkey should have opted for was to prevent the street demonstrations turning into an armed conflict and a civil war at all costs. In case it did not work, we should have sought for a common, agreed upon solution with the West. A calamity which displaced six million people from their homeland, 500 thousand people slaughtered by the tyrannical Assad regime or lost their

lives in the civil war, thousands of them died in the Aegean and Mediterranean trying to take refuge in Europe. After all these, I think we should seriously ask the question: "Do not we have any responsibility in this calamity?" I think we have. So, a serious self-criticism is necessary.

- Meanwhile, let's not forget that to a large extent it is directly or indirectly related with the Syrian crisis and Turkey's Syrian policy that we had to go back to where we started with regard to the peaceful solution to the Kurdish problem and terror. After we have invested so much in the peace process, recently we lost almost all our accomplishments in the face of rising terror once again, the trenches and "saved neighborhoods" in Diyarbakır, Şırnak, Nusaybin and elsewhere. There is no doubt that our tense or strained relations with the world both with the East and the West have a lot to do with this unfortunate disaster. Weaving after Habur, taking backward steps, not addressing the Uludere disaster enough, adopting a menacingly nationalist discourse from time to time and finally perpetually delaying the constitutional and juridical reforms as part of the Peace Process are of course also among

the unforgiveable mistakes. Leaving behind the "zero problems with neighbors" policy and entering a process of "problems with everyone" with the Syrian crisis by facing off with every possible player, and PYD securing a canton in Syria, the Kurdish political movement in Turkey -both armed and civil- changed its future plans. They probably thought that "a little from Syria, a little from Turkey, maybe a Kurdish state can emerge." This is likely to be a major reason behind re-emergence of the PKK terror in Turkey.

- You might ask, "Are we the only one at fault here? Isn't the West and the Kurds, the PKK who appeal to violence responsible?" Of course, they are responsible as well. The West who did not recognize the coup in Egypt as a coup, who overlooked the cruelties of Assad, and the PKK who abused the tolerant setting of the peace process by building-up weapons and taking up arms are just as responsible, no doubt there. However we cannot pull off or clear our name by offloading the blame, we also have to face our mistakes and neglects...

What to do now?

- None of us would have wanted all of this to happen, but sadly, here we are due to mistakes caused by us as well as other actors including external forces. However, we can no longer lose time by lamenting. As the old saying goes, "a fault confessed is half redressed." We have to make a serious self-criticism at once and move towards a more sound and constructive direction.
- The first thing to do is to leave behind the "antagonizing politics." We should know that without any nuclear weapons, without saving the defense industry from its foreign-dependency, without producing our own critical technologies, without having a competitive and innovative economy that can support a deterrent military power, without persuading our brain power that we have lost to Europe and United States into returning back to our country, without leaping forward in patents and scientific research and publications, every threat we will make against the world will return back to us as counter-threats, terror-promotion, and possibly as attempts at generating domestic turbulence and destabilization attempts.
- Our forefathers have said, "Without appropriate method, accession is impossible". We cannot reach our goals

if our methods, manners and style are not fit for it, we cannot reach our aim. Our goals may be accurate, righteous, but the method is just as important; in place of threats we must consult to kind words; in place of brute force, intelligence and brain power should be employed. In this regard, I want to evoke a very concise hadith that I have heard from the dearworth legal expert, the "walking library," venerable Prof. Ahmet Bilgin during a talk I had with him on what's going on in the region: "The wise human being is the one who knows the limits of its strength." It's a shame that we have failed in estimating the limits of our power...

- We must remember that we are a NATO member, not only when we are being threatened by a foreign power, but at all times.
- We must not forget that EU membership goal –regardless of whether it leads to full membership or not- is a strategic goal of vital importance for Turkey. Let's not wait for stranding crises to open new chapters and conduct reforms. We must not forget that economic and judicial reforms in the way to the EU harmonization are important for our

own people and a must to permanently end military guardianship regime.

- Once upon a time, power elite of the Kemalist regime in Turkey underestimated Iraqi Kurdish leaders Barzani and Talabani as "bandits and terrorists," not respecting in esteem and making up conspiracy theories about them. But now times have changed, irony of fate is that Kurdistan Regional Government headed by Barzani is our most sincere friend in the region. It is entirely possible for a day to come when the same thing can happen with PYD leader Salih Müslim and the movement he represents. We are the only ones to see PYD as a terrorist organization, but we could not convince anyone else. Then it might be beneficial to change our perspective. In the long run the most rational and permanent solution for Turkey is to become integrated with Kurdish and Turkmen areas in northern Syria and northern Iraq. If our relations with PYD start to normalize, this may be a key to end the conflict with PKK as well.
- In no place in the world terror is resolved with weapons, ultimately it is resolved on a negotiation table. Keeping this on mind, on the one hand we must save neighborhoods and districts

trenched and occupied by PKK; but at the same time we must also make the constitutional and legal reforms that will eradicate the grounds and alimentary sources of terror.

Let's make Turkey a fully democratic country based on the rule of law where law is not instrumentalized, where no arbitrary treatment is permitted, where the state is transparent and accountable, where institutional reforms to end the military guardianship regime permanently have been completed, where internal peace and stability are maintained, a country at peace with itself and with the world. The way to this is not "blood for blood, tooth for tooth," intimidating policies based on brute force, but a peaceful

discourse, pro-free trade and market oriented economic policies and establishing a liberal, pluralist democracy based on the rule of law. Eventually we have to return to these principles, let's not lose time and waste our valuable scarce resources...

The views expressed in this policy brief are solely those of the author in his/her private capacity and do not in any way represent the views of the institution.

Strategic Outlook is a leading research organization and think-tank in Turkey, which publishes exclusively in English. Our staff and contributors provide innovative news and analysis on the latest on global and regional issues. SO's authors and researchers come from a variety of countries in Middle East, the Caucasus, Russia, Middle Asia, Europe, Africa and East Asia giving our institution a truly global perspective.

SO welcomes submission of analytical and scientific **Policy Briefs** from researchers and practitioners on international and regional security, energy security, environmental problems, conflicts, terrorism, international/regional economic issues, domestic policy, ethnic and social problems, etc.

-
- Language of Policy Brief is "English" only;
 - Policy Brief is supposed to be short analytical papers with between 1500-1700 words, Times New Roman, 12 pt, 1.5 space and include followings: Background (200 words max.), Analysis (1200 words max.) and Conclusion (300 words max.); While referring please use the [hyperlink](#) citation, but not footnote/endnote;
 - Policy Brief should address clear research question; be well-explained, as it will consume our time while editing; focus on exact problem without going out of the topic; avoid jargons and unethical expressions. While using terms in a language other than English (ex. French, Russian, Latin) within text, please use *Italic* style; acronyms should be clarified in advance;
 - Policy Brief is supposed to be original work, fact-based, but not repetitive, objective; not descriptive, but analytical;
 - In the conclusion author should offer relevant recommendations on how to solve or address the problem, as it will contribute to better understanding of readers and subject-interested experts;
 - Policy Brief, after passing academic & plagiarism supervision, proofreading, will be published in between 7-10 days in a pdf format with [special edition](#) [!].
 - Policy Brief should be documented in a "Word" file titled as "Policy Brief_Name_SURNAME" and submitted by e-mail to info@strategicoutlook.org with "Policy Brief_SURNAME/Name" in the subject line;
 - While sending your submission by e-mail, please also attach your very short biography (with regular e-mail) and recent photo;
 - Please kindly note that, Strategic Outlook does not undertake remuneration for submission, as it is purely contributive and aimed at voluntarily addressing the international and regional problems from academic perspective;
-