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COMMENT

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'New Turkey' has to face the regional realities > Turkey's Islamic identity has resulted in a bold foreign policy

The narrative of true Muslims re-conquering the Turkish state is a crucial component explaining the AKP's policies and its continuing success. However, the reality of the Middle East doesn't correspond to Turkey's vision of itself as a regional leader.

As a consequence of the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) 12-year rule, Turkey's domestic politics is heavily characterized today by all-encompassing 'New Turkey' discourse. But although everyone speaks about it, very few seem to have a clear idea of what it means.

However, there is no doubt that Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who became Turkey's first-ever popularly elected head of state on August 10, and his new prime minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, are speaking about 'New Turkey' in a confident manner, making it explicitly clear that in their vision Turkey is destined to become a leading country in the region. A powerful executive president is a central aspect of this vision, but legalizing the position requires a new Constitution, and that, on the other hand, can only be realized if the AKP manages to further increase its parliamentary seats in the general election next year.

The fact that Erdogan was able to hold sway over the presidential palace after enormous recent challenges – nationwide anti-government protests, major corruption allegations, an intra-constituency struggle with his former ally, Fethullah Gülen, and severe societal polarization – is an indication of two long-term trends in Turkey: an

economic boom and the successful building of an 'unbeatable bloc', a nationalist-conservative constituency that sees its own well-being and status as crucially linked to that of the party. In order to win a clear majority in the next election, the AKP must ensure that both the economy and the hegemonic ideology continue to prosper.

The same combination of material and ideational factors explains Ahmet Davutoglu's successful portfolio switch from foreign to prime minister. Whereas Erdogan is known among his supporters as *usta* (master), Davutoglu's honourable Turkish nickname is *hoca* (teacher); he had a long academic career before becoming a politician, and his writings concerning international relations and Turkey's new role in the post-Cold War world have defined the parameters of Turkish foreign policy ever since the AKP came to power in 2002.

Subsequently, after Davutoglu became foreign minister in 2009, the insistence on turning his theoretical formulations into reality by attempting to re-establish the pre-World War I Ottoman imperial system in the Middle East has caused Turkey much harm. The Arab Spring revolutions that brought the AKP's 'soulmates', the Muslim Brotherhood,

into power in Tunisia and Egypt, and, as it seemed at the time also in Syria, was perceived by Davutoglu as a golden opportunity to construct a Turkey-centred Middle East. But as it turned out, with the exception of Tunisia, the Muslim Brotherhood was unable to stay in power. In Syria, the Assad regime seems to be prevailing. In addition, Syria and Iraq have been turned into a jihadist state-in-the-making, a reality that should have made Turkey thoroughly re-evaluate its former policies of encouraging militant Sunni groups in Syria in particular.

Nevertheless, even though Davutoglu's ideological foreign policy is at least partly to blame for the success of the Islamic Caliphate jihadists, a movement that by now not only poses a severe external threat to Turkey but has also penetrated the country with its cell-type organization, Davutoglu has not been discredited in the eyes of the AKP cadres, but exalted to the premiership instead.

Currently, Erdogan and Davutoglu together reaffirm the narrative of a New Turkey, rising like a phoenix out of what they and their followers increasingly perceive as a historical mistake, namely the Republican Westernizing-secularizing project. During his

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presidential election campaign, Erdogan repeatedly declared that he is the representative of a ‘great cause’ (*dava*), a highly emotionally charged concept, implying that the devout Muslims, understood in this context as the ‘real nation’, have been repressed during the previous decades under the Westernizing elite.

One could argue that all this talk of defending the ‘Muslim cause’ against the elite is nothing but the stuff of domestic populist rhetoric, which needs to be kept distinct from the policies taken in reality. Thus, in this context, analysts tend to underscore economic development as the basis of the AKP’s success.

However, the ideological component – the narrative of the once-glorious Turkish Muslim nation now re-conquering the state – is just as crucial in keeping the AKP constituency together. This narrative is thoroughly internalized not only by the poor and uneducated, but also animates the worldview of the new intellectual class. One only needs to read through the columns of various AKP partisans in the pro-government media to understand how widely the idea of Turkey as a leading Islamic power is being disseminated within the country.

All this creates expectations that need to be addressed. In terms

of foreign policy, the domestic underscoring of Turkey’s Islamic identity has resulted in rather bold undertakings. Currently, there is an increasing discrepancy between the ‘great Turkey’ narrative and the reality Turkey is up against in the Middle East. Rather than becoming a hegemon, Turkey will sooner or later be forced to tackle the jihadist Caliphate with every means at its disposal. Turkey’s recent one-dimensional siding with Hamas and other Muslim Brotherhood splinter groups has been applauded by many ordinary Arabs, but decreased Turkey’s circle of friends among the region’s regimes.

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