

HAYK DARBINYAN*

TURKEY'S RETURN TO HARD POWER: CONCEPT OF THE "PRECIOUS LONELINESS"**

Abstract: *The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union led to significant changes in the international system, bringing about several new realities. Among these were the reshaping of the geopolitical landscape, shifts in military-political power, the need for fresh relations with Russia, and the formation of three new states in Turkey's immediate neighborhood—challenges that required a clear and thoughtful response from Turkey's foreign policy. When the Justice and Development Party assumed power in Turkey in 2002, public diplomacy and soft power became essential elements of Turkey's foreign policy. As a result of several geopolitical developments and changes in Turkey's immediate neighborhood and the Middle East, hard power has reemerged as a key element in Turkey's foreign policy since the 2010s.*

This article explores the reintegration of hard power into Turkey's foreign policy, focusing specifically on Ahmet Davutoğlu and İbrahim Kalın, along with their respective approaches of "Zero Problems with Neighbors" and "Precious Loneliness." It aims to highlight that Turkey's foreign policy is a multifaceted and complex process, where various governmental institutions contribute and compete to influence the formulation and execution of foreign policy. In addition to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, other entities, such as the Ministry of National Defense and the National Intelligence Organization, are playing increasingly important roles in shaping the country's foreign policy.

Keywords: *Turkey; Foreign Policy; Public Diplomacy; Soft Power; Ahmet Davutoğlu; İbrahim Kalın.*

Introduction

In the early years of the Justice and Development Party's government in Turkey, the foreign policy vision developed by Ahmet Davutoğlu, based on his book *Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position*, brought some successes by strengthening the country's reputation as a reliable partner, especially in the West. In addition to the new foreign policy, Turkey enhanced its reputation in the West due to the reforms introduced by the party (Patton, 2006) and the government's democratic approach to internal political developments in Turkey (Insel, 2003). The foreign policy of the Justice and Development Party, based on Davutoğlu's theory, has been regarded as a true combination of Eastern identity and Western values.

*Ph.D. candidate at the Faculty of Oriental Studies, Yerevan State University, email: haykdarbinyan93@gmail.com.

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In December 2010, a self-immolation during a demonstration in Tunisia is widely viewed as the event that sparked the Arab Spring. Among other factors, this event posed significant challenges for Turkish foreign policy. Interestingly, Turkey did not have a unified position on the consequences in the Middle East resulting from the Arab Spring. It is widely interpreted that, during the early stages of the Arab Spring, Turkey supported the revolutionary processes in Yemen and Egypt but took a more reserved stance on the antigovernment protests in Syria and Libya (Sumer, 2013). The key to the failure of Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East was the wrong strategy of Turkey's foreign policy towards the ongoing processes in Egypt. Turkey actively engaged in the political processes of Egypt starting in 2011, and many believed this was an attempt to interfere in the country's internal affairs (Khalifa 2017, 104).

The crises Turkey faced with key countries from various regions, coupled with tense relations with Middle Eastern nations, revealed the shortcomings of the foreign policy developed by Davutoğlu, where public diplomacy and soft power played a pivotal role.

From the outset of the Arab Spring, it became evident that Davutoğlu's policy of "zero problems with neighbors" led to more challenges instead of contributing to their resolution. As a result, Turkey was compelled to reshape its foreign policy toward the Middle East and find an alternative to the policy of "zero problems with neighbors." The push for an alternative foreign policy in the Middle East led to a broader shift, contributing to the transformation of Turkey's entire foreign policy, with its beginnings often marked in 2013.

New theoretical approach to Turkish foreign policy: "precious loneliness"

The transformation of Turkish foreign policy was directly influenced by the major shifts in the Middle East caused by the Arab Spring. Ibrahim Kalın, as the foreign policy advisor to the Turkish Prime Minister, played a crucial role in this transformation. It is worth noting that Davutoğlu's policy was underpinned by a thorough theoretical framework in his "Strategic Depth" (Davutoğlu, 2001), while the alternative to this policy emerged from a single note by Kalın on the "X" platform. Reflecting on the criticism of the Turkish foreign policy that Turkey has no partners and support in the international arena, especially in the Middle East, Kalın argued. "The claim of Turkey's loneliness in the Middle East was untrue, but if this was the claim, then I should say this is a 'precious' loneliness." (Kalın, 2013). The term "precious loneliness," coined by Kalın, quickly became a key expression for describing the emerging logic of Turkish foreign policy. Explaining the term that he used, Kalın noted, "At some point in history there comes a time where you stand by the truth all alone when the world keeps silent against coups and slaughters. You do not give up your principles and values because your allies and other countries do not stand by you. This is not being alone but presenting an honorable stance. I used

‘precious loneliness’ also as taking the risk of being alone for the sake of defending the values one deems right. Once you are left with such a choice, the right move is to stick to your principles, which are correct both for your national interests and the international policy. If this places you in a different position than the rest, this is a ‘value-centered loneliness,’ and this actually is a precious loneliness.” (Kalin, 2013).

Notably, Kalın is a figure whose name is directly associated with Davutoğlu and his foreign policy approach, and he also played a key role in advocating for the use of soft power and public diplomacy in Turkish foreign policy. Kalın presented his ideas on Turkish public diplomacy and soft power in the article "Soft Power and Public Diplomacy in Turkey" (Kalin, 2011), which was published when he was the head of the Public Diplomacy Coordination Board under the Prime Ministry. Furthermore, in 2011, Kalın recognized Turkey as a significant soft power, emphasizing that the key sources of Turkey's soft power include its young population, long historical connections, rich cultural ties, and a flourishing economy (Kalin 2011, 19). Nonetheless, the subsequent events made it evident that Kalın’s strategy in Turkish foreign policy contributed more to the reemergence of hard power than to strengthening the role of soft power and public diplomacy.

Comparing the foreign policy visions of Ahmet Davutoğlu and İbrahim Kalın

It should be emphasized that Kalın’s views on the potential of Turkish public diplomacy and soft power differed significantly from Davutoğlu’s vision. According to Ahmet Davutoğlu, the coexistence of diverse peoples with differing value systems, cultures, and religions in the Ottoman Empire allowed Turkey to serve as a bridge for these peoples and, to a certain degree, to play the role of a pioneer advocating for their interests abroad, while Kalın holds a different view: “Turkey has acquired a negative image due to past mistakes and was prevented from conducting effective public diplomacy... Turkey’s new narrative is more than creating a new image. Rather, it reflects the new identity which the country wants to embrace to overcome its past mistakes and chart a new course for its social and political future” (Kalin 2011, 12). Additionally, he contends that changing the negative image of Turkey is not something that can happen overnight: “For instance, reshaping the Turkish-Ottoman image, or updating it in accordance with today’s realities is a difficult task. Despite the many efforts of the two-century-long experience of modernization, the new communication tools that globalization provides, the presence of almost five million Turks living in Europe, and all the efforts Turkey has made to join the EU, the images of the Turk, Ottoman, Muslim, and Middle Easterners in many European countries are still shaped by perceptions inherited from the Middle Ages” (Kalin 2011, 17). Here is another interesting example of how Kalın describes the negative image of Turks: “In some circles abroad, Turkey is

presented as a country invading Cyprus, murdering Armenians, and executing military operations in neighboring territories in the name of fighting against the PKK” (Kalin 2011, 16).

For the reasons mentioned above, which Kalin discusses in his article, he proposes putting more effort into creating a new identity for Turkey, rather than focusing on its image. The main takeaway from his arguments is that instead of confronting the factors that shaped Turkey’s negative image internationally, Kalin recommends reframing them from an alternative perspective and playing a role in altering global perceptions of Turkey.

Interestingly, at the time Ibrahim Kalin wrote his article, Ahmet Davutoğlu was the Foreign Minister of Turkey, and his theory still dominated Turkish foreign policy. While Kalin and Davutoğlu shared many common views on Turkish public diplomacy and soft power, notable differences also began to surface. The 2013 note on the "X" platform, rather than the article discussed above, was the crucial element that altered the direction of Turkish foreign policy.

Reflections on "precious loneliness": diverging views of criticism and endorsement

The term "precious loneliness," coined by Kalin, has gained significant attention in the Turkish press. Only three weeks after that note, a columnist linked to the Turkish Republican People's Party, the main opposition party in Turkish politics, criticized the foreign policy of Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party, noting that Turkey, which once played a pivotal role in Syria, no longer had an ambassador in Damascus. Highlighting that Turkey is no longer seen as a country with a decisive role in the region, even by its neighbors, he argued that Turkey had abandoned its traditional "peace at home, peace in the world" policy, eroded its soft power, and diminished the strengths of its foreign policy (Kara, 2013).

However, the concept of "precious loneliness" was also met with severe criticism from the main opposition party. One of the prominent figures shaping the foreign policy of the Turkish Republican People's Party, Osman Korutürk—who had previously served as Turkey's ambassador to Tehran, Oslo, Berlin, and Paris and later entered Parliament from Istanbul in 2011 after leaving the foreign service—described Kalin’s policy as nonsense (Konuralp, 2013). While it faced criticism, it also garnered some support. In particular, another columnist published an article in the Turkish media analyzing the Turkish government's stance on Syria, Egypt, and Iran, and voiced complete solidarity with Kalin’s vision for the new Turkish foreign policy (Acet, 2013).

From the outset, the term "precious loneliness" was used in Turkish media to characterize Turkey's foreign policy, especially in the Middle East. However, this perspective shifted significantly due to a major internal event in modern Turkey. The protests at Istanbul’s Gezi Park and the government's violent crackdown on these protests in 2013 sparked strong criticism of the Turkish government,

particularly from the West. As a result of this criticism, some parts of the Turkish public felt aggrieved, and the "precious loneliness" policy emerged as the most effective response to it (Gürcanlı, 2013).

As discussions around the term grew within the public, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), though not officially, responded to Kalın's vision. In particular, a leak in the Turkish media revealed the MFA's stance on the matter. It was claimed that the MFA remained committed to Davutoğlu's "zero problems with neighbors" policy and that Kalın's "precious loneliness" was merely a reflection of his personal views (Ergan, 2013). From our perspective, even if unofficially, the term had already become a key principle guiding the shift in Turkish foreign policy at that point. These discussions, coupled with the effort to find the most suitable formulation of Turkish foreign policy that would encompass all the internal and external developments of the time, ran parallel to the increasing criticism of Prime Minister Davutoğlu and his foreign policy stance. In October 2014, Tarhan Erdem, who had previously served as Minister of Industry and Technology in Bülent Ecevit's government, published an article (Erdem, 2014) that rocked the Turkish media, criticizing Prime Minister Davutoğlu's rhetoric in internal political discussions. The criticism was further extended by Baskın Oran, a prominent scholar and politician, with a focus on Davutoğlu's foreign policy. Oran summed up Davutoğlu's role in one phrase, claiming that while he was once the best, he is now worse than ever. Oran stated that, aside from Bulgaria and Georgia, Turkey has issues with every neighbor, specifically pointing to Turkey-Armenia relations and claiming that Turkey had discarded the normalization protocols signed with Armenia (Oran, 2014). Oran's article seemed to signal the end of the wave of criticism directed at Turkey's "zero problems with neighbors" policy and Davutoğlu's approach to foreign policy.

Reintegration of hard power into Turkey's foreign policy

The incident on November 24, 2015, when Turkey shot down a Russian Su-24 aircraft near the Turkish-Syrian border, can be seen as a turning point, overshadowing Turkey's public diplomacy and soft power in favor of a move toward hard power. From this point on, the reintegration of Turkey's hard power in its foreign policy became evident through several actions, particularly in Syria. In pursuit of its stated goals in Syria, Turkey carried out and implemented various military operations, such as Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch. Moreover, a report by the Foundation for Political, Economic, and Social Research (SETA), a non-profit institute, noted the clear absence of Turkish public diplomacy during Operation Euphrates Shield, which should have been employed to counter various groups spreading anti-Turkish propaganda (Yeşiltaş, Seren & Özçelik 2017, 43).

Thus, Turkey's foreign policy, initially based on soft power and public diplomacy under the AKP government and influenced by Davutoğlu's policy, shifted toward the concept of "precious loneliness" as formulated by Kalın, where hard power became more central.

Moreover, the reintegration of hard power into Turkish foreign policy resulted in several tangible consequences on the ground. The involvement of the Turkish army and military structures in the country's internal political processes has been evident since the 1960 military coup, with the failed coup attempt of 2016 being the most recent illustration. At different points in the history of the republic, the Turkish army's involvement in political processes has been shaped by conflicts with civilian authorities, with these contradictions often erupting in violence. After the 2016 failed coup attempt, the Turkish military was gradually brought fully under the control of the president and civilian leadership. Alongside this process, Turkey's approach to international relations became more rigid, with a renewed emphasis on hard power in foreign policy. Consequently, the Turkish military and intelligence became engaged in foreign policy processes, but under the complete supervision and guidance of the Turkish government. Notably, Turkey boosted its military presence overseas by setting up operations in multiple countries. It became increasingly common for the Turkish military to be directly or indirectly involved in military operations abroad. Particularly significant to the militarization of Turkish foreign policy are the military operations carried out by the Turkish Armed Forces in the Middle East and its role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Mehmetcik & Çelik, 26).

New foreign policy actors driving Turkey's hard power

Developing and executing foreign policy in Turkey has always been a complex, multi-layered process, shaped by numerous actors. At the same time, Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has maintained undisputed authority over foreign policy, a legacy that traces back to the Ottoman Empire. Despite the Ottoman Empire's reservations about establishing diplomatic relations with other states and using diplomacy as a tool, particularly from its formative years through its 16th-century peak, it is clear that the Empire left a notable legacy in diplomacy and engagement with the outside world. Beginning in the second part of the 19th century, the Hariciye Nezâreti, or Ministry of Foreign Affairs, emerged as one of the most powerful organs of the Empire. While different leaders of the Turkish Republic have held varying views and approaches toward the MFA and its elite, the Ministry, rooted in Ottoman traditions, has consistently been regarded as the most respected bureaucratic institution in Turkey. The MFA was the primary institution responsible for shaping and executing the country's foreign policy. However, this trend changed dramatically at the beginning of the 2010s.

Starting in the second half of the 2010s, when hard power gained greater significance in Turkey's foreign policy, the responsibility for decision-making and implementing foreign policy transitioned from

the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the country's defense and security institutions. As part of this shift, the Turkish Ministry of National Defense (Milli Savunma Bakanlığı, MSB) and the National Intelligence Organization (Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı, MİT) assumed a notably active role. Turkey's advancement in defense capabilities and notable progress in the military industry have allowed the country to adopt a more ambitious foreign policy. In addition, it was clear that the development of the defense industry and the calculated use of military force aim to secure Turkey's standing in an evolving regional landscape, where soft power by itself is no longer enough (Karşıyaka & Karşıyaka 2017, 153-155). Sinem Adar claims. "Since 2016, Turkish foreign policy has markedly shifted from soft power policies of the early 2010s towards a hard power approach manifesting at numerous fronts. These include unilateral military incursions into Northern Syria in 2016, 2018, and 2019. ... Türkiye's new military bases in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), including in Qatar, underline this hard power shift" (Adar 2020, 10).

Turkey's evolving foreign policy went hand in hand with the growing influence of the MIT, which progressively became integral to both the development and execution of foreign policy. As a consequence of these developments, Hakan Fidan, who has led the organization since 2013 and is considered one of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's closest confidants, was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2023. In line with this, by the decree of the President of Turkey, Ibrahim Kalın took charge of MIT. While discussing this appointment, John Hatzadony and Spyridon Plakoudas argued, "The appointment of Ibrahim Kalın as the new head of Turkey's National Intelligence Organization marks another significant transition in the landscape of Turkish intelligence and foreign policy since 2010. ... Kalın's deep involvement in diplomatic and advisory roles suggests a possible emphasis on integrating intelligence findings more directly into foreign policy decision-making. This could result in a more proactive and strategic use of intelligence in shaping Turkey's international relations, especially in its dealings with neighboring regions and global powers" (Hatzadony & Plakoudas 2024, 13).

The current policy of the Republic of Turkey, shaped by these processes, can be regarded as a collective product of various governmental structures, where the MIT, the MSB, and the MFA occupy crucial and decisive positions.

Conclusion

After the formation of the modern Turkish Republic in 1923, its foreign policy was deeply shaped by the Ottoman Empire's legacy in international relations and its perception of how to engage with the external world. This understanding was centered around what we now recognize as hard power. After the end of the Second World War, for those guiding Turkey's foreign policy, the country's integration into the Western world order and the international systems it established became a top priority. Following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of Turkey's neighbor and Great Power, the USSR,

changes occurred not only in the international system but also within Turkey's foreign policy, creating both challenges and opportunities. In the post-Cold War era, the terms "soft power" and "public diplomacy" gained significant traction in the discourse of international relations. Over time, these concepts started to influence Turkey's foreign policy, which had once been regarded as one of the strongest examples of hard power. Following the rise of the Justice and Development Party to power in Turkey in 2002, the foreign policy landscape became more favorable for the implementation of public diplomacy and soft power. The ideological framework for Turkey's public diplomacy and soft power under the AKP government was rooted in the ideas and theories of Ahmet Davutođlu, with his policy serving as a key influence.

Turkey's foreign policy, focused on public diplomacy and soft power, did not fulfill the objectives the country had pursued in the Middle East and other regions since 2010, thus necessitating the creation of an alternative strategy to Davutođlu's vision. This alternative policy, known as precious loneliness, signified not only a shift back to hard power in Turkey's foreign policy but also a re-emphasis on the foreign policy principles and ideas inherited from the Ottoman Empire.

It should be noted that the transition in Turkey's foreign policy from soft power and public diplomacy to hard power does not signify the complete loss of soft power or its potential benefits. As Turkey expands its ambitions in international relations and across different regions, it is diversifying its foreign policy approach, leveraging not only public diplomacy and soft power but also being willing to employ hard power when needed, thus manifesting a power that is commonly referred to as smart power.

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