The Brookings Institution and SETA hosted a day-long conference on Turkey’s domestic, regional, and international challenges, and the future of US-Turkish relations. The conference featured a keynote address by Ahmet Davutoğlu, chief foreign policy advisor to Prime Minister Erdogan.

Keynote address: “Turkey’s Foreign Policy Outlook: an Assessment of the Present and a Look into the Future”

Ahmet Davutoğlu, Chief Foreign Policy Advisor to Prime Minister Erdogan

Ambassador Davutoğlu began by noting Turkey’s recent admission into the UN Security Council. He said Turkey’s high vote count is evidence of the success of Turkey’s new multidimensional approach to foreign policy, and shows broad support from all world regions. He said the international community has full confidence that Turkey can play a key and constructive role in regional and global affairs.

Amb. Davutoğlu said that after the Cold War, there was no global peace or grand congress as in previous conflicts. As a result, from 1989 to 2001, many crises were frozen in prolonged ceasefires. He said the lesson of that time is how quickly frozen sub-regional conflicts can escalate into global tensions. He said we must lay the groundwork for a new global order now that resolves or contains these frozen conflicts. Turkey’s central geography at the nexus of various civilizations, and its own multi-ethnic composition, allow it to take on a unique role in shaping the new emerging global order.

He then discussed five principles of Turkey’s new foreign policy. First, Turkey will seek a balance between security and freedom both domestically and regionally, as it forms the basis of political legitimacy. Internationally, Turkey seeks security within its NATO alliance, and freedom through democratization defined by the EU. Second, Turkey seeks no problems with any of its neighbors. He noted that Cyprus and Armenia remain an issue, and Turkey is ready to resolve all conflicts if there are first positive responses from Greek Cypriots and Armenians. Third, Turkey has engaged in proactive peace diplomacy in its surrounding areas, including the Balkans and the Middle East. It has mediated peace talks in Iraq, as well as on the Arab-Israeli conflict. It also has strategic agreements with the GCC and the Arab league. Fourth, he stressed the compatibility of all Turkey’s policies with its relations with the US and EU. He said other regional engagements do not threaten Turkey’s transatlantic orientation, but complement and strengthen it. Last, he noted Turkey’s new image in international affairs
and organizations. **He said Turkey’s new soft power orientation is an asset for both turkey and the global order.**

Asked about the Kurdish issue within Turkey, Amb. Davutoglu said there is no evidence of dispute or fighting in Kurdish population centers in Istanbul or Diyarbakir. **He said that Turkish identity is not based on ethnicity, but a historical formation including many peoples.** On Armenia, he said that President Gul’s recent visit to Armenia was a friendly initiative and he hopes and expects the trend to continue. He said we cannot be bound by history and must build for the future. He said that following the AKP closure case, Turkey did not turn inward as many expected. Advancing Turkey’s international vision was more important.

**Panel 1: “US-Turkish Relations: What will the New President Bring to the Table?”**

*Moderated by Mark Parris, Visiting Fellow in Foreign Policy at Brookings*

*Suat Kiniklioglu, AKP Member of Parliament*

*Ian Lesser, Senior Transatlantic Fellow at the German Marshall Fund*

*Cengiz Candar, Turkish author and journalist*

**Ian Lesser** said the US-Turkish has experienced stresses since 2003, there have been improvement in the last year. **He said Turkey’s new diversified and ambitious foreign policy role will be durable and beneficial, and the U.S. must accept and embrace it.** Lesser noted that Turkish public opinion will be receptive to a new U.S. administration, and an Obama victory will remove the problem of style that has plagued the relationship. He said that Obama’s foreign policy advisors know Turkey well, and view it through a modern lens rather than a traditional Cold War lens. **He said the issue will be getting the U.S. president to pay attention to Turkey in the face of myriad other foreign policy challenges.** Lesser said the basic strategic environment of the relationship will not change. The U.S. will still derive its Turkey policy from a calculation of its interests in Iran, Iraq, and Russia.

**Cengiz Candar** said that Afghanistan will be a point of divergence between the U.S. and Turkey in the new administration. Turkey believes we need to create institutions upon which a viable nation state can be built, while the U.S. will increasingly define its mission as combating terrorism. He also said that Turkey differentiates between the Taliban and al-Qaeda in a way the U.S. does not. **Candar echoed other speakers in noting Turkey’s structural transformation from a military-first orientation to the expansion of its soft power influence in the region and globally.** He said that Turks want a relationship with the U.S. commensurate with its newly gained self-confidence and self-assertion. He said John McCain is preferred in Turkey because he projects a strong pro-Turkish position. But structurally McCain’s belligerence is not aligned with Turkey’s new soft power reorientation. Barack Obama is seen as weaker on policy, but structurally his discourse is very compatible with Turkey’s new outlook.

**Suat Kiniklioglu** said that the AKP believes Turkish foreign policy is based on the pillars of its NATO alliance and eventual full EU membership. He said Turkey’s foreign policy outlook is multipolar both by choice and by necessity, and the new U.S. administration will realize that Turkey is not the same old satellite Cold War power. He urged the new president to engage
Turkey and come to Ankara early on, as he will have a great opportunity to mend and strengthen relations.

The panelists discussed the issue of the U.S. Congress acknowledging the Armenian genocide. Kiniklioglu said to “forget partnership” if Congress passes a genocide resolution. Candar said a Congressional resolution is not likely to happen. If it did, it would disturb relations, but we would find a way to mend them. **He said we can de-dramatize the genocide issue as long as rapprochement with Armenia continues.** Suat agreed, and said there is a rigorous debate within Turkey on the genocide issue. **Congress intervening in the debate would be extremely destructive.** Candar agreed, and said that Turkey should acknowledge its history, while both diasporas should support the ongoing reconciliation process between Turkey and Armenia. He noted that Congress can torpedo this by disrupting a historical opportunity.

The panelists then discussed the recent AKP closure case. **All agreed that the U.S. should not get involved in internal debates, and should stand on the side of democracy only.** Mark Parris noted that the U.S. will be blamed whether it engages or disengages.

Panel 2: “Turkey’s Challenges and Opportunities in its Region: Iraq, Iran, the Caucasus and the EU Process”

**Moderated by Talha Kose, George Mason University**

**Steven Cook, Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations**

**Kemal Kirisci, Bogazici University and Carleton University**

**Taha Ozhan, Coordinator for Economic Research at SETA**

**Steven Cook** said that Barack Obama will withdraw a significant number of troops from Iraq in the next 18-24 months. With the PKK and Kirkuk issue unresolved, it will be a cause of tension with Ankara. He said the new administration should continue intelligence sharing on the PKK, pressure its allies in Iraqi Kurdistan, and push for Turkey to improve its relationship with Kurds in the southeast. **Cook said Turkey’s warm relationship with Syria is now an asset to the U.S.** He said Obama would be in a good position to support and use this relationship regarding peace talks with Israel. He said that the U.S. must appreciate the importance of strategic relations between Turkey and Iran, largely due to energy supply issues. Cook said that Turkey’s political and economic transformation is a direct result of the EU acting as the anchor of reform. The AKP’s historic embrace of the EU served to constrain the role of the Turkish military, and foster a Turkey that is more democratic, more plural, and more modern.

**Cook noted that the U.S. now needs Turkey as a partner in every U.S. interest in the region.** He said the U.S. has limited resources and influence in the region, and multilateralism no longer means the U.S merely asking its allies to contribute money and soldiers to its engagements. He said Barack Obama’s willingness to accept U.S. allies as partners in decision-making will help relations enormously.

**Kemal Kirisci** characterized the ‘new’ Turkish foreign policy. He said that foreign policy is no longer just in the hands of the military and the ministry of foreign affairs like in the past. The
media and the public are more involved, and think tanks are proliferating. He said that without EU engagement since 1999, this transformation would have been improbable at best. Kirisci said the change is structural, though consolidation is not complete. He said EU engagement is still critical, as it is the only anchor that ensures a likelihood of continued democratization.

He noted the irony that Turkish foreign policy is increasingly clear and assertive and self-confident, yet its domestic political identity is fractured and uncertain.

Taha Ozhan discussed Turkish interests in Iraq. He noted that the Turkish private sector is invested heavily in Iraqi Kurdistan. He said there is no genuine sociological border between Turkey and northern Iraq, and economically, the Kurds of Iraq know that Turkey represents their only reliable gateway. He said that the Kirkuk issue must be resolved, as it has major implications for the future of Iraq and Kurdistan. He also said the PKK must be removed or it will have the potential to torpedo every positive trend.

Panel 3: “The Domestic Scene: The Continuing Battle for Turkey’s Soul”

Moderator: Ibrahim Kalin
Mustafa Akyol, Turkish Daily News
Bulent Ali Riza, Director of the Turkey Project at CSIS
Omer Taspinar, Director of the Turkey Project at Brookings

Mustafa Akyol discussed Turkey’s political liberalization. He said a small group of liberals have argued for the new orientation for a long time, and urged a move away from traditional state veneration in favor of the rights of the individual. He said conservatives and observant Muslims have increasingly moved toward this line, and see liberal democracy in their interest. Akyol noted that the AKP was a synthesis of traditional conservative Islamic values and modern liberal values. He said the AKP speaks and acts more liberal on the rights of ethnic and non-Muslim minorities than so-called secularists. He called President Gul a great leader in this liberal-conservative synthesis.

Akyol said that the AKP never said they wanted to infringe the secularity of the state. He said Prime Minister Erdogan is not anti-secular, but is critical of Turkish secularism and its relationship with religious practice in society. The issue is that practicing Muslims should have the same rights as those with a secular lifestyle. He said the ultra-secularist Kemalists feel forever threatened, and now see Islamists and liberals as abhorred enemies.

Akyol said that a major impediment on the Kurdish issue is that most Turks are not taught about Kurds, the PKK, or the salience of the Kurdish issue in school. Average Turks do not know that there is a Kurdish tragedy and a tragic narrative of repression that motivates them.

Omer Taspinar agreed with other panelists that Turkey is asserting itself in solving the world’s problems, but it cannot solve its own problems. Taspinar said he is pessimistic about the Kurdish issue in Turkey. He said the root cause of the PKK issue is the problem of identity. He said the AKP is increasingly a nationalist populist party unwilling to take on the serious problems
of identity, assimilation, and multiculturalism. The AKP is becoming complacent from the absence of a viable political alternative. He agrees that Turkey must embrace the EU as an external anchor to solve these entrenched problems.

Taspinar said the AKP does not want to fight with the military over Islam or head scarves anymore. It is looking for areas of commonality, and he fears a growing convergence on the Kurdish issue. However, they will deal with it without dealing with the domestic dynamics of multiculturalism and issues of identity that undergird it. Such an approach will come at the expense of the EU agenda and democratization.

He urged the Kurds to fight for freedom of speech and association and language rights. He said the Kurds should push for the EU agenda and distance themselves from the PKK. The Kurds should stop speaking the language of Kurdish nationalism and separatism. He said Turkey is unequivocally a unitary state, and such nationalism only provokes a virulent Turkish-Kemalist nationalism. Taspinar said the solution to Turkey’s domestic problems are found in the framework of liberal democracy.

Bulent Ali Riza said the AKP has stalled since the closure case, and understandably so. He said the problem is that AKP can win elections, but cannot govern. There is still a strong judicial and military check on AKP’s ability to deal with Turkey’s fundamental identity issues. He said there is now no drive or vision within the AKP to deal with the secularization issue. The quandary will continue until there is national consensus, and Turkey is far from that now. He said the ideology of Kemalism is fundamentally unequipped to deal with the growing religiosity in Turkish society. On the Kurdish issue, Ali Riza stressed that even if the AKP wins every seat in southeastern Turkey, the problem of identity and multiculturalism will not go away.