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A key text to understanding the mindset of the architect of the new foreign policy: civilizational self-perception

Vol 1

01 November 2010, Monday / AYŞEGÜL TAŞKAPU,

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Professor Ahmet Davutoğlu, the man behind Turkey's assertive new foreign policy, is well known in the West for his important book 'Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position.' Davutoğlu also authored a book-length article that must be studied in order to understand his paradigmatic framework; the article is titled 'Civilizational Self-Perception' and was published in the Turkish journal Divan in 1997

The basis of Ahmet Davutoğlu's lengthy article, "Civilizational Self-Perception" is a critique of two seminal works on the clash of civilizations, one by Basil Mathews, a Western missionary, written in 1926, and the other by Samuel Huntington, penned in 1993. The main argument of Davutoğlu's article is that "the major factor enabling the foundation and rise of a civilization and its resistance to potential foreign domination is self-perception which ensures the emergence of a civilizational prototype." (p. 10) The primary drive for the sustenance of a civilization in different geographies despite the presence of hegemonic powers is attributable to self-perception.

In his seminal book "Young Islam on Trek: A Study in the Clash of Civilizations," which serves as the basis of Davutoğlu's article, Mathews refers to the modernization movements in the Islamic world as a Western-style conversion. He cites the Western-style modernization attempts in the newly founded Turkish state as evidence for his assertion. For Mathews, the transformation in Turkey is a national conversion. He argues that in order to attain its modernization goals and become a strong actor in international politics, Turkey decided to emulate the Christian West and abandon Islam, which it thought had held it back from becoming a civilized nation for seven centuries.

According to Huntington, Turkey is a torn country, ambivalent over which civilization it belongs to. The Turkish elites are ambitious to make Turkey part of the Western world and the people actually support this endeavor. These are the two out of three conditions for a nation's confirmation of its civilizational identity. But the third does not apply to Turkey because Turkey, the converted civilization, has not been welcomed by Western civilization.

Both approaches agree that the notions of modernization and Westernization are identical. Modernization, in the words of Huntington, is a civilizational conversion that is exactly the same as Westernization as identified by the agents of the dominant civilization. However, this view fails to explain the revival of some local cultures that arguably faced a great danger of extinction in the presence of the monopolistic forces of the West. Instead of considering that civilizations possess a core institution that enables them to survive, theorists like Huntington sought to provide some pragmatic explanations. Davutoğlu's main argument is that the major force behind the creation and success of a civilization and its ability to resist potential domination by other civilizations is self-perception, which ensures the emergence of a civilizational prototype. (p. 10) The fundamental factor that helps the emergence of self-perception is *Weltanschauung*. For this reason, unless the transformation transferred from another civilization to the recipient civilization leads to the creation of a new self-perception, it is impossible to destroy the spirit of the target civilization. This is the main force that enables non-Western nations to stand against the West. What needs to be done in order to create a new self-perception is to destroy the existing self-perception and *Weltanschauung*. It is not possible to destroy the civilization's self-perception by relying solely on political influence and authority. For this reason, the Western-style secular Turkish identity has been unable to eliminate a Turkish self-perception that is based on Islamic civilization despite the political authority's efforts.

There is an important connection between self-perception and the lifeworld. The term "lifeworld" is a translation of the Husserlian concept "lebenswelt," which emphasizes a state of affairs in which the world is experienced, or the world is lived; for Husserl, the lifeworld is fundamental for all epistemological enquiries. There is link between a man of Islamic self-perception and the society he constructs, or between a man of a cultural Chinese self-perception and his social order. Civilizations able to maintain the direct connection between self-perception and the lifeworld enjoy a process of revival, whereas decline plagues civilizations where this connection is less visible and weaker. If a civilization is unable to establish a connection between self-perception and the lifeworld and if man fails to establish his self-perception as the meaning of his existence, he will eventually suffer from an identity shift. The recent pursuit of different identities in Turkey, including secret Ottomanism, symbolic Islamism and symbolic secularism, is the outcome of Turkey's failure to establish its self-perception as the meaning of its existence.

The five versions of civilizational self-perception

To better illustrate the role of self-perception in the formation of a civilization, Davutoğlu studies self-perception as five different prototypes. Such a classification is important for proving the influence of self-perception in the process of civilization formation and for locating the psycho-cultural impact of otherness on plurality.

1. The first version is the strong and rigid form of self-perception. The reason for the strength of this sort of perception is because it is based on a comprehensive and coherent Weltanschauung. Its tough nature is attributable to its ability to exclude other civilizations, to remain monopolistic, hegemonic and power centered and to effectively prevent others from infiltrating. The self-perception of Western civilization is similarly strong and rigid. The exclusivity of this sort of self-perception enables the total exclusion of a given civilization from all others. This is strikingly visible in the categorical classification of "The west and the rest" by Huntington. This classification suggests that the West is absolute and fixed whereas all others are volatile and passive. The reference to the concept "others" allows Western civilization to assume the right to define and restrict the other civilizations' world of common experience.
2. The second prototype is strong but flexible. This sort of self-perception is strong as it is based on a comprehensive and coherent world of common experience; however, unlike others, it has a flexible structure. This allows infiltration by others. In other words, it is open to the elements of other cultures. Such civilizations seek interaction rather than attempting to create a hegemonic center by eliminating others. They are based on the right of diverse cultures to coexist. This sort of self-perception is observed in both Islamic and Ottoman civilizations. Both civilizations embraced the geographies over which they claimed domination. Instead of defining subject territories as belonging to the "other," they regarded them as their own. There are two elements that make Islamic civilization flexible. First, it is easy to infiltrate Islamic society as it doesn't consider a certain race, tribe or social group to be privileged or superior. Second, the right of people from different faiths to observe their rituals is recognized in this system.
3. The third prototype of the self-perception is a strong but local civilization. Such civilizations limit their comprehensive and coherent world of common experience to an understanding of local civilization. Most times, it does not seek to become a hegemonic power except in its own geography. A fine example of this sort is the self-perception found in traditional Chinese culture. The Great Wall of China was actually built to isolate Chinese civilization from all others and to preserve this strong culture from external influences. The exclusivity of this type of self-perception is different from the exclusivity of Western civilization because it does not seek to universalize its local character. On the other hand, it transforms change exported from the outside into a new paradigm consistent with its own self-perception. This is the reason for the specific versions of capitalism and socialism witnessed after contact with Chinese values.

4. The fourth version of self-perception is both weak and rigid. It is weak because it incorporates a fairly local and limited world of common experience. It is rigid as it adopts a repressive and militaristic structure and an exclusive approach. These civilizations are typically short lived. This type of civilization emerges out of a process where dynamic nomadic groups are gathered around a central political authority. The Mongolian self-perception as represented by Genghis Khan's vast empire is an example. After the demise of the empire, members of this civilization were influenced by the self-perceptions of their host civilizations.

5. The final prototype of self-perception is of a weak and flexible civilization. Because its world of common experience is simple and local, this type of self-perception is weak and it allows interaction with other civilizations. Since they are flexible and weak, such civilizations easily fall under the hegemony of other civilizations. The American natives and the Australian aborigines who welcomed Western colonizers have this type of self-perception.

Davutoğlu puts great emphasis on Western-style strong-rigid self-perception and on the strong-flexible self-perception of Islamic civilization. He further elaborates on the dominant line of thinking in those two self-perceptions by use of Johan Galtung's six assumptions.

Johan Galtung's six assumptions

These six assumptions were offered by Johan Galtung -- a Norwegian sociologist -- as a way to identify the formation of the mindset of occidental civilization. Davutoğlu discusses how these assumptions are interpreted and implemented in Islamic civilization.

1. The first assumption focuses on the understanding of space. The occidental man holds that the Occident, particularly Western Europe and North America, constitutes the center of the world, the rest being the periphery. Colonialism is the outcome of this understanding of space. The Occident made the regions it colonized extensions of the center with migration or considered them useful tools for economic exploitation. Migrations converted America, Australia and New Zealand to the natural extensions of the center and eliminated native cultures. Likewise, African nations were also exploited and their local cultures were simply destroyed. Such a view of space leads to double standards in international law. There are certain differences between the legal rules that apply to Western states and those applicable to non-Western countries. The primary reason for the aggressive and assertive stance held by Turkey, which has pursued a peaceful foreign policy, in the recent assault against the Mavi Marmara by the Israeli military is an example of this double standard. Turkey insists that the

rules and standards of the laws of civilized nations should be honored; however, Israel, which enjoys the unconditional support of the occidental world, disagrees.

The space perception of Islamic civilization is, on the other hand, shaped by the faith in tawhid: belief in one and only one God. Regarding the Creator as the cause of existence and nature as the space of existence is a fundamental tenet of tawhid, and this defines the mindset of the Islamic man. The self-perception of Islamic civilization does not employ a center-periphery distinction. The Quran is the basis of this approach: "To Allah belongs the East and the West; Whithersoever ye turn, there is the presence of Allah." (al-Baqarah, 2:115). The flexibility of Islamic civilization that allows it to coexist peacefully with other civilizations is attributable to this space perception. Islamic civilization did not seek cultural cleansing of the space over which it maintained control. Instead, it incorporated that space as its own. The Ottoman policy pursued over five centuries in the Balkans and Eastern Europe is an example of this sort of space perception. It is impossible that the occidental civilization's perception of space could allow for true globalization since globalization's philosophical foundation dismisses a center-periphery distinction. Authentic globalization is only possible through a reinterpretation of the space perception used in Islamic civilization.

2. Galtung's second assumption discusses the occidental man's perception of time. The underlying premise of this assumption is that "social processes are uni-directional, with progress from low to high, etc., but also with crisis to be overcome, possibly ending well, with a positive Endzustand." (p. 24). Occidental civilization places itself at the center of time, also assuming a role in determining the future. The past of humankind is the work of occidental civilization, which claims a right to determine its future as well. This is the Western perception of linear history. However, history has witnessed the collapse of a number of other civilizations, and the future will not be the outcome of linear history.

Islamic civilization views time as a linear trace, part of which we have traveled and part of which remains to be traveled ahead of us. Time is a static absolute, and there is no way that man could have an impact on it. The end of time is already obvious, and we are traveling the remaining time.

The Islamic man who opposes the linear approach to history takes action knowing that no civilization will be able to remain dominant forever. Davutoğlu, a man of Islamic civilization who rejects the idea of a linear progression, is aware that African countries will not remain Third World countries for all time. Over the last eight years, Turkey opened 15 additional embassies on the African continent, bringing the total from 21 to 36. Obviously, this is a reflection of a different approach to the history of the world.

3. Galtung's third assumption analyzes the Occidental man's perception of knowledge. This assumption suggests that "the world can be understood in terms of a very low number of dimensions." (p. 26). The Catholic Church's dogmas that were dominant in the West during

Medieval times, excluding the rational knowledge as well as the scientific-secular epistemology that emerged in reaction to these dogmas, employ a unilateral focus on knowledge. In this proposition, the reason-science-progress trio, the idols of the Enlightenment, enjoys an inevitable ground of legitimacy. This self-perception reduces all historical scientific developments and progress to the one-dimensional view of knowledge found in Occidental civilization. This unilateral and one-dimensional theory of knowledge is the primary reason for the prejudice that assumes religious education is a primitive and outdated mode of knowledge transfer. However, the Occidental one-dimensional theory of knowledge leads to social conflict when applied to other civilizations. The ongoing discussion on religious education in Turkey is actually a result of the resistance of the Turkish people to this one-dimensional theory of knowledge.

Unlike Occidental civilization, Islamic civilization relates religious knowledge to a sacred text, the Quran, rather than an institution, preventing it from becoming the object of a sociopolitical and socioeconomic power institution. Revelation is analyzed by objective linguistic instruments rather than using subjective knowledge generated by a social institution that claims sanctity. For this reason, religious epistemology did not lead to an anti-scientific discourse, and scientific epistemology to an anti-religion discourse in Islamic civilization. Islam attaches importance to reason, promoting scientific endeavors. Davutoğlu holds that Islamic civilization's alternative conception of knowledge and education suggests that the world may be understood through a harmony of multidimensional sources of knowledge and that knowledge may not be attributed to one single source alone. (p. 42) In order to overcome problematic approaches Islamic civilization requires multidimensional scholarly leaders who embrace the accumulated knowledge of civilizations.

4. Galtung's fourth assumption on the relation between Man and Nature suggests that "Man is over Nature." This approach made nature the source of an economic and political rivalry. Nature has been constantly degraded and undermined over the period starting from the Industrial Revolution. The occidental civilization, based on a strong and rigid self-perception, views itself as the absolute power and assumes legitimacy to exploit nature without being subjected to any moral or legal limitations. This eventually caused an ecological catastrophe that threatens the existence of the universe.

Davutoğlu's alternative proposition on man-nature relations underlines that nature, where Allah's might and glory is reflected all the time, is a gift to humankind to sustain its ontological existence. (p. 44). There is an existential relation between man and nature; and Islamic man avoids any action that would probably inflict some harm on nature which reflects the signs of the Creator; instead, he views it as a consignment that needs to be protected. Such a man-nature interpretation will help mankind overcome the current environmental crises.

5. Galtung's fifth assumption elaborates on the relation between Man and God: "God, or some Ideology/Principle is over Man." (p. 30). In Occidental civilization, God has been replaced by the state. Offenses are committed against the state, not against God, and the relevant punishments are imposed by the state. The secular state structure reinforces this arrangement. The attempts of the newly emerging ideologies to create a new type of man carried some kind of indirect claim of divinity in referring to the ability to create a perfect man, something distinct from the ordinary man God created.

In the Islamic world, on the other hand, a self-perception independent of God-perception is out of the question. The idea that Allah is close to man, "closer than the jugular vein," serves as the basis for a strong feeling of confidence. Neither religious institutions nor political structures like the state are allowed to define the relationship between Allah and Man. Islamic man feels Allah everywhere without resorting to mediators and relies on His glory and might. The harmony and coherence between these two perceptions, which are considered opposites in the West, is one of the major successes of Islamic civilization.

6. In his final assumption, Galtung points to the relationship between men. In the mindset of occidental civilization, this relationship is based on the premise that "Man is over Man, as individuals and as classes and nations; that some are more equal than others." Despite frequent references to equality, occidental civilization actually considers itself superior to others. The special privileged status attributed to the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and the authority given to the G-7 group to rule over the distribution of resources in the international economic system suggest that a group of people actually enjoy a greater sphere of autonomy and authority than others.

Davutoğlu's alternative Man-Man relation as informed by Islam opposes the idea that some people are more equal than others. The idea that "people enjoy absolute equality as recognized by the ontological status bestowed by Allah; that no group of people is allowed to claim superiority over others and that all other matters should be handled by reference to this basic principle" (pg. 49) will effectively address human rights violations and the use of double standards. Islamic civilization does not recognize class discrimination. As it developed, it adopted a policy of cultural plurality. Islamic civilization admits and welcomes anybody from any race or color. The interpretation of Islamic civilization's self-perception will bring a more liberal understanding of civilization.

What kind of Europe do we have in mind?

The main emphasis in Davutoğlu's article is the dominant self-centered illusion in occidental civilization and the problems caused by this illusion in the international system. Occidental civilization seeks to protect its hegemony by pursuing exclusionary policies by relying on its strong and rigid self-perception, but it must go through a process of self-criticism. In his speech delivered on the occasion of European Day in 2009, Ahmet Davutoğlu underlined that Western civilization should open itself up to other cultures: "What kind of Europe do we envision for the future? What is the sense of 'Europe' in our minds as Europeans, as Turkey part of the EU and as an active subject that is incorporated in almost all sorts of problems associated with the EU? I would like to share its three main elements with you:

"The first is the cultural aspect. We need to put to the forefront the consolidating rather than the divisive nature of cultures. We imagine a Europe that communicates well with the whole accumulation of human culture that unifies the principle of plurality with 'common good' and 'ethics of coexistence.' In the period ahead we imagine a Europe of 2057 that is not based on an 'egocentric illusion' as conceptualized eloquently in the 'Study of History' of Toynbee nor as a monolithic cultural understanding but a Europe that is cognizant of the idea that the history of civilizations is indeed a history of borrowing from one another as underscored in 'The Grammar of Civilizations' of Braudel. Europe imagined as such is commensurate with the 'unity in diversity' approach of Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman. Europe as such will be a part of a culture that is intermingled and amalgamated with universal and human accumulation.

"This understanding of culture might require Europe to encounter various internal problems as well as confrontations. However, Europe this time stemming from its own experience will be a Europe that has transformed the understanding of identifying the 19th century history with European history into an understanding of integrating with world history. Europe that is integrated with real global culture can only be realized in this manner. We imagine a Europe that can confront and that is intermingled with all cultures, that circumvents human culture with all these elements rather than a cultural understanding which is single-dimensional."

The Europe that Davutoğlu dreams of here is an echo of Turkish-Islamic self-perception: A Europe able to interact with all cultures and embrace the culture of the entire mankind instead of a one-dimensional and unilateral understanding of culture. Just like the flexible structure of Islamic civilization, Davutoğlu's foreign policy is designed to create a brand new interpretation of Islamic civilization. This is not Islamicization of the Occident, but an attempt by Islamic civilization to penetrate the rigid structure of occidental civilization. Turkey's ambitions to abolish visa requirements and barriers with countries such as Serbia and Russia, which were considered threats to the national security of the country in the past, can't be anything else but product of such attempts.