



PERSPECTIVES

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Erdoğan's Mission Impossible: Sustainable Turkish-Arab Solidarity

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who firmly believes it is religion that should shape national friendships and enmities, has tried singlehandedly to inject love for the Arab into Turkish society. The desire to accomplish this has implications for Turkish foreign policy. Erdoğan's grand design has crashed not only into the Arab Spring but also into Middle East realism. The Saudi-led Gulf siege of Qatar came as a complete shock: one Sunni brother had taken out the sword against another.

The modern Turkish language refers to an impasse without a solution as "an Arab's hair." To convince others he is telling the truth, a Turk swears: "I should be an Arab if I am telling a lie." If Turks wish to describe a negative that is accompanied by something tempting, they say, "Neither an Arab's [ugly] face nor sweets from Damascus."

Most of the dozen or so common and rather racist Turkish proverbs denigrating Arabs and their culture date back to Ottoman times, despite the fact that during that period, Turks and Arabs lived in peace, shared a common religion, and did not have major political disputes. After the founding of the modern Turkish state in 1923, however, the Turks' dislike of Arabs gained rational ground. Modern Turkish textbooks teach children how treacherous Arabs stabbed their Ottoman ancestors in the back during WWI, how Arabs collaborated with non-Muslim western powers against Muslim Ottomans, and how Arabs fought Ottoman soldiers in desert battlegrounds.

All that ingrained anti-Arabism in the Turkish psyche had to be reversed after a Sunni imam took over as Turkey's prime minister in 2002. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, now president, firmly believes religion must shape friendships and enmities

between nations – and even among members of the same nation. With that in mind, he has tried systematically to inject love of the Arab into Turkish society.

Since Erdoğan came to power, the number of students enrolled at imam schools – where pupils are taught to pray in Arabic, among other classes – has risen from 60,000 to more than 1.2 million. The Education Ministry added Arabic courses to its curriculum. The state broadcaster, TRT, launched an Arabic television channel.

An exponentially growing number of Turkish Islamists and pundits rediscovered Arabia and its culture. Islam, they argue, and the *umma* “which one day will unite under a single banner,” should iron out its cultural and linguistic differences. Ali Bulac, a prominent Islamist columnist and one-time Erdoğan favorite (now jailed for belonging to a rival Islamist community, the Gülenists), wrote an op-ed in 2008, “Sushi and Oratorios,” criticizing world-renowned (and secular) Turkish pianist Fazil Say. He wrote, “First of all, music is not a universal product, music belongs to a time, a religion and a place. Say does not play our music, he plays Western music. Our music is Umm Kulthum, Mohammed Abdul Wahab and Abdul Khader Marari. Our people will never enjoy theater, opera, an oratorio or a symphony forced on them by the republican elites.” In Bulac’s mentality, Say’s symphonic masterpieces are not Turkish, but the tunes of Kulthum, Wahab, and Marari – all Arabs – are “ours.”

That kind of thinking has implications for Turkish foreign policy. Erdoğan and then foreign minister (later prime minister) Ahmet Davutoglu launched a charm offensive in 2009 that they hoped would make Erdoğan a “rock star” on the Arab street. To accomplish this, they reflexively confronted all things Israeli or Jewish. This tactic had the desired effect: tens of thousands of Arabs greeted Erdoğan passionately in the main squares of Beirut and Cairo.

This was good, but not enough. Erdoğan and Davutoglu devised a plan to launch a Muslim EU and Muslim NATO all in one. In that regional design, two countries were of great strategic importance: Saudi Arabia, which has regional clout; and Qatar, which has money and an ideological commitment to the Islamist cause.

The Saudi-led Gulf siege of Qatar imposed on June 5, therefore, came as a complete shock to Erdoğan and his pro-Sunni optimists. One Sunni brother had taken out the sword against another.

Once again, Erdoğan chose religious ideology as his lighthouse. He did not abandon his ideological bond with his brothers in Doha, the same bond he has with his brothers in Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood. His pro-Qatar, pro-Hamas, and pro-Brotherhood position put him on the same wavelength as al-

Qaeda, which, in a video, condemned the sanctions against Qatar and pledged support for the Brotherhood.

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said, "At the top of the quality chain, if I can call it that, there are elements of Muslim Brotherhood that have now become part of governments. There are members of parliament in Bahrain that are parts of government. There are members in Turkey that are parts of government."

Not even one-time Sunni brothers in Saudi Arabia are sympathetic to the Turkish position. Erdoğan offered to build a Turkish military base in the Kingdom, but Saudi officials turned him down.

On a doctrinaire and rhetorical level, too, Erdoğan is showing signs of inconsistency. On June 13, he said Gulf sanctions on Qatar were inhumane and violated Islamic values. Which Islamic values? one might be tempted to ask. Erdoğan likened the sanctions to the death penalty, but this was the first time he had ever objected to the death penalty as imposed by his Saudi "brothers." Naturally, the Saudis show no inclination to be educated about "Islamic values" by a man who dresses in western suits and ties.

Taha Akyol, a prominent Turkish columnist, recently noted some research conducted by the pollster Zogby in 2016. The poll found that 67% of Egyptians, 65% of Saudis, 59% of United Arab Emirates citizens, and 70% of Iraqis had an unfavorable opinion of Turkey. If "polling" had existed a century ago, similar numbers would likely have been found in Arabia.

This is the century-long Turkish alienation. Turkey is too far away and alien to Asian Muslims, too western for Middle Eastern Sunnis, too Sunni for the Shiites, and too Turkish for Arabs of all religious denominations.

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