



PERSPECTIVES

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Erdoğan's Turkey: A Step Closer to the Orient

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Despite Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's charisma as a politician, he has failed to promote stability in the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East due to his maximalist ideas. Erdoğan's negligent decision-making in foreign affairs is leading Turkey away from the West and closer to the instability of the Orient.

In politics (unlike war), chance plays a minor role, if any. Great historical personalities are not merely the products of their times, but shaped their ages through conscious decision-making. And while charisma is vital to any politician to face the challenges of public life, not every charismatic politician survives in the demanding arena of applied politics.

There is no doubt that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the child of a middlebrow family from Kasimpasa, is equipped with a plethora of skills that proved vital to his ability to charm the Turkish electorate. But do they serve the interests of the state?

Initially, not only Turkey but the whole of the western world fell under the spell of Erdoğan's charms. The young mayor of Istanbul (1994-98), who had been imprisoned by the Kemalists because he recited verses by Islamist poet Ziya Gökalp, managed an impressive electoral win in the general elections of 2002. He became the first Turkish Islamist politician to form a one-party government in a state where a reference to its Ottoman past could have put you in prison.

On top of that, during his first period in office, Erdoğan managed to charm the international system. Western political theorists invented a preposterous new term against every form of political thought – "Islamodemocrat" – to describe

Erdoğan's ideology. Western leaders saw him as able to combine mild political Islam with fundamental western values. Esteemed international media corporations dedicated much of their prime time to promoting him and his staunchly conservative ideas.

Erdoğan never tried to hide his true colors, however. He never denied that he was a genuine supporter of political Islam and that his desire was to become the new Atatürk ("father of the nation") in a de-Kemalized state. In addition, Erdoğan saw Ankara's western positioning not as a grand strategy choice but as a necessity to serve his political maximalist theses.

Turkey adopted a "neo-Ottoman" foreign policy agenda formulated by the skillful academic and close Erdoğan associate, Ahmet Davutoğlu. At first, no one considered Davutoğlu's "strategic depth" anything more than nationalistic wishful thinking. When I published articles (in [2008](#) and [2014](#)) suggesting otherwise, I was accused of being unfair to Turkey. Alas, I was proven right, at least regarding Ankara's hegemonic aspirations and Erdoğan's profound anti-Semitism.

Turkey is now at a crossroads. It is generating more volatility that the eastern Mediterranean can tolerate or absorb. Its main preoccupation is post-civil war Syria, and in particular the probability of the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish zone.

Ankara considers such a zone a security threat for many reasons. First, the Kurdish Militia People's Protection Unit (YPG) is fighting very well against ISIS, and Ankara fears its successes will strengthen the Kurdish separatist movement inside Turkey due to the YPG's close relations with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Second, Ankara believes the creation of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq can no longer be halted, and will inevitably modify the regional balance of power at Turkey's expense. Third, the maximalist Erdoğan views Turkey as a formidable world power that should be consulted regarding the shaping of tomorrow's global balance of power.

As a consequence of all these issues, Turkey has elected to exercise a *sui generis* form of chaotic diplomacy on a wide regional scale. It aims thereby to disrupt the existing status quo in the eastern Mediterranean and lead the construction of a new one – a status quo that will be much more committed to Ankara's goals and concerns.

Thus, Ankara is trying to raise tensions in the Aegean by questioning the existing border status quo, a move that applies considerable pressure to the already disorganized government of Athens; it is openly threatening Brussels with an increase in refugee flow from the Turkish coasts to Europe; it is refusing

to evacuate the Turkish army from its positions in Cyprus, set up after the 1974 invasion; it openly supports Hamas against Israel at every opportunity; it maintains ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, and more.

However, the most alarming development to derive from Erdoğan's narcissism is the newly advanced Turko-Russian relationship. After the failed coup d'état of July 2016, Erdoğan set forth an openly pro-Russian agenda, blaming the Western nations for the attempted coup. He is particularly exasperated with the US because of its refusal to deport his former-friend-turned-bitter-enemy, imam Fetullah Gülen, from Pennsylvania.

Thus, Ankara has bought the Russian anti-aircraft weapon S-400 Triumf and is developing closer relations with Iran and Pakistan. The Kremlin has also allowed the Turkish army to establish a buffer zone on Syrian soil – an area from which Ankara plans to challenge the Kurds, not ISIS or any other Salafi groups.

Turkey and Russia have a long history of bad relations dating back to the Tsarist-Ottoman era. Can this odd rapprochement lead to a new hard power pact in the eastern Mediterranean region?

The immediate answer is no (though in politics, it is better to avoid the word "never"). Both states are working hard to enhance their influence in the Balkans, and this will eventually generate great tension between them. However, the relationship has already caused damage. Turkey's attitude is inflicting serious wounds to the unity and effectiveness of the southern flank of NATO, while Moscow has been handed a great opportunity to question NATO's unity. That will be very useful to Russian officials as they attempt to diminish NATO's integrity to Ukraine, Georgia, Serbia, and elsewhere.

Most worrying of all is Erdoğan's dominance over the Turkish political scene, which has severely damaged the relationship of Turkish society to western democratic values – a relationship that was problematic even before 2002. The Turkish masses are now addicted to radical rhetoric and excessive doses of nationalism and populism. The only adept opposition to Erdoğan's dominance seems to be coming from Meral Aksener, a member of the extreme right wing with ultra-nationalist views on Turkish foreign policy and the domestic agenda. Her nickname is "Asena," the Turkish word for "she-wolf" – the central figure in the ethnogenic myth of the Turkic race.

These two future contestants are dancing a strange tango, with steps and music that are more Oriental than western. This will affect the regional balance of power and the fragile status quo.

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