Erdoğan: Ideological but not Suicidal

by Burak Bekdil

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Turkey’s radical shift in crises, first with Russia and then with America, shows that while President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan can be confrontational along ideological lines, he is not suicidal. He cannot afford to risk a punishing economic crisis that might him cost his power.

Is Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan a devout ideologue or a pragmatist? The answer is both. Perhaps a more relevant question is: When is he a devout ideologue and when a pragmatist?

In late 2010, at the peak of the diplomatic crisis between Turkey and Israel after the Mavi Marmara flotilla incident, a senior Israeli diplomat asked this author: “Is there a way to push Erdoğan from blind (anti-Zionist) ideology to rationalism so that we can normalize our relations?” My answer was, “Costs… If a crisis costs him economically, then politically, he will switch from ideology to reason.” A comment on that conclusion made by a friend of the diplomat explains why Ankara and Jerusalem have had erratic but deeply hostile relations since 2009: “Israel is a powerful country but not big enough to make Turkey pay a price for its antagonism.” After a theoretical normalization of diplomatic ties in December 2016, Turkey and Israel once again downgraded their diplomatic missions in May 2018.

In 2009, then-PM Erdoğan (or his Islamist/ideologue self) boldly challenged Beijing when more than 100 Muslim Uighurs were killed in clashes with China’s security forces. This was at a time when Turkey’s economy was performing spectacularly and posting high growth rates year after year. Championing his “leader of the umma” persona, Erdoğan called the deaths of Uighur Muslims “a genocide.”
Today, with Turkey’s economy badly ailing over record-high inflation and interest rates and the national currency having lost a third of its value against major western currencies since the beginning of the year, a much different Erdoğan is on display: Not a word against Beijing from the “leader of the umma” in the face of a crackdown in which China has forcibly put hundreds of thousands of devout ethnic Uighurs in “rehabilitation camps.” Erdoğan has also rejected relocating Uighur militants fighting in northern Syria into camps on Turkish soil. Why Erdoğan’s reasonable self all of a sudden instead of his ideological self, which champions the Uighur cause? Simple: He needs loans, investment, and more trade from China.

In September and October 2015, Turkey started to complain of airspace violations by Russian military aircraft along its border with Syria. It announced that it had changed the rules of engagement with foreign aircraft violating Turkish airspace: Such (Russian) aircraft would be shot down. In November of that year, the Turkish military did indeed shoot down a Russian Su-24, claiming it had violated Turkish airspace. Then-PM Ahmet Davutoğlu announced that the same rules of engagement would be applied if there were further violations. Erdoğan boldly demanded of the Russians, “What business do you have in Syria? You don’t even have a border with Syria.”

An angry Vladimir Putin immediately installed Russian air defense systems in northern Syria in a not-so-subtle move to threaten Turkish military aircraft flying over Syrian skies. The Turkish military had to stop flights in Syrian airspace. Putin also announced scores of punishing economic sanctions on Turkey and Turkish companies doing multi-billion dollar businesses in Russia. The sanctions included bans on Turkish exports and a travel ban that quickly hurt Turkey’s tourist industry. More threateningly, Putin said the Russian sanctions could include “military retaliation,” reminding the Turks of their less-than-glorious military past with pre-Soviet Russia.

It took a mere six months for Erdoğan to move from demanding an apology from Moscow to personally apologizing to Putin. In June 2016 Turkey and Russia “normalized” their frozen diplomatic ties. Since then, Ankara has committed to acquiring the Russian-made S-400 air and anti-missile defense system despite warnings from its NATO allies, and will become the first NATO member state to deploy that system on its soil. Erdoğan has said Turkey would also consider buying the S-500 system now under development. Non-military trade normalized too, and flocks of Russian tourists have arrived at Turkey’s Mediterranean resorts.

More importantly, Turkey has radically moved from “what business do you have in Syria” to allying with Russia in Syria. The two countries, along with
Iran, are partners in the Astana process. Moscow orchestrates every strategic move in northern Syria, and Ankara simply complies with its dictates.

Enter America. In the first half of 2018, Ankara and Washington went through their worst diplomatic crisis in decades over several major disputes. Turkey claimed that America was harboring its most wanted terrorist, Fethullah Gülen, a Muslim cleric in self-exile in Pennsylvania accused of being the mastermind behind a failed coup against Erdoğan in July 2016. Also, a senior Turkish government banker was in a US prison, with his bank a potential target of billions of dollars in US sanctions for violating the Iran sanctions. In addition, Ankara accused Washington of equipping what it calls “Kurdish terrorists” east of the Euphrates in northern Syria. America views them as allies in its fight against ISIS.

The US responded to Ankara’s purchase of the S-400 system by threatening to suspend delivery of the new generation F-35 fighter to Turkey. Washington also sanctioned two Turkish ministers and doubled its tariffs on imports of Turkish steel and aluminum. Ankara retaliated by sanctioning two US secretaries.

At the heart of the matter was an American pastor, Andrew Brunson, held in a Turkish prison on charges of espionage and terrorism. “As long as I am in power,” Erdoğan once roared, “that spy (Brunson) will never be set free.”

Then came the reversal. The Turkish lira lost more than 40% of its value in eight months. In what traders called the Brunson effect, the markets went into a meltdown. Turkish bond yields rose to record highs and recession loomed, with huge conglomerates knocking on banks’ doors demanding debt restructuring. Several large-scale companies announced bankruptcy.

In October, “the spy who would never be set free” was released, flew to America, and posed for the cameras with President Trump. Markets sighed with relief, and the lira is now trading at its highest point since August. On Nov. 2 Ankara and Washington bilaterally dropped sanctions against their ministers.

Erdoğan can be offensive and confrontational, in keeping with his neo-Ottomanist ideology. But he is not suicidal. He knows that an austere economic crisis can quickly turn into a political crisis that could cost him his closely guarded power, and he will change his tune accordingly.

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