



PERSPECTIVES

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The Turkish Sultan's Dubious Charm Offensive

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Turkey's Islamist strongman, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, knows he needs to win Western public opinion in order to achieve international legitimacy. But try as he might, his propaganda efforts are instantly undone by his routine authoritarianism.

In an [article](#) published in 2016, "Erdoğan: The World's Most Insulted President," this author suggested that the perpetually angry Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, president of Turkey, would do well to take a moment and consider why he is perhaps the most disrespected president on earth.

He is no more popular four years later. Between 2014 and 2018, some 17,500 people were sued for insulting Erdoğan, according to the Turkish Justice Ministry. In 2018 alone, some 26,000 new investigations were [opened](#) for an offense punishable by one to four years in jail. Of those suspects, hundreds are minors.

Not all these alleged insulters of Erdoğan are Turks, though most apparently are. In one sensational case filed in Germany, Erdoğan invoked an obscure German law, dating back to 1871 and still in effect in 2016, which had been used by the Shah of Iran and by Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet to silence dissidents in the 1960s and 1970s. The archaic law allows prosecution in Germany for insulting a foreign leader, but only with the consent of the government. German Chancellor Angela Merkel reluctantly granted her consent for the prosecution of German comedian Jan Böhmermann for insulting Erdoğan but [promised](#) that the law would be repealed.

As a rebuff to Erdoğan's efforts to prosecute Böhmermann for having written an offensive poem about him, the British magazine *The Spectator* held the "President Erdoğan offensive poetry competition" (2016), in which thousands of entrants competed to win the £1,000 reward. The winner was former

London mayor and now British premier Boris Johnson, who prevailed with a [limerick](#) that called Erdoğan a “wanker” and depicted him as having sex with a goat.

Erdoğan elected to swallow his pride and ignore Johnson’s offensive poem. On April 20, 2020, he sent a letter to Johnson in which he addressed the PM as “dear friend.” After wishing Johnson well after his treatment for coronavirus, Erdoğan [wrote](#):

In order to show that we stand in solidarity with the United Kingdom, which is a friend and ally that has been going through difficult times, we...ensure that the medical aid supplies are delivered to your country today by an aircraft of our Air Forces.

In return, British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab [called](#) the Turkish supplies an “indication of strong friendship between two countries.”

He’s trying, but Erdoğan is still Erdoğan. In October 2019, his lawyers filed a criminal complaint at a Turkish court against French *Le Point* journalists Etienne Gernelle and Romain Gubert for allegedly insulting him. In its front page headline, *Le Point* called Erdoğan “The Eradicator” after Turkey launched a military campaign against the Syrian Kurds. The piece contained the [phrase](#) “ethnic cleansing, Erdoğan's method.”

More recently, on April 7, Erdoğan sued Fox TV anchorman Fatih Portakal for saying the Ankara government might soon request that its citizens pay for efforts to combat coronavirus. Erdoğan’s criminal complaint [accused](#) the anchor of “spreading lies and manipulating the public on social media.”

But Erdoğan is also embarking on a charm offensive to try to persuade Western observers that Turkey remains a staunch ally that stands ready to help the whole world as best it can at a time of crisis. His Goebbels-esque propaganda machinery is working round the clock to portray Turkey as a benevolent, peaceful country whose sole desire is to make the world a better place.

State broadcaster *TRT* said Turkey has delivered aid to at least 57 countries around the globe to help fight coronavirus, including Israel and the Palestinian-controlled territories, though the “aid to Israel” was a commercial [contract](#) for the sale of medical equipment. *TRT* quoted Erdoğan as saying Turkey would send medical gear, including protective suits and masks, to the US to help it contain the virus. “At a time when even developed countries are asking for Turkey’s support, we have offered our support to a wide geography, from the Balkans to Africa,” he [said](#).

The pandemic and Turkish aid have given Erdoğan an opportunity to boost his international propaganda campaign to win hearts and minds, and he is making the most of it. Turkish news [reminded](#) the world that officials from Italy and Spain, as well as EU Turkey rapporteur Nacho Sanchez Amor, thanked Turkey and the Turkish people for their solidarity in combatting coronavirus after Ankara flew medical aid to Italy and Spain.

In an op-ed piece in *The Hill*, Sasha Toperich said that throughout the pandemic, Turkey has proven itself a key supporter of world efforts. Toperich [wrote](#):

In an effort to fight COVID-19, Turkey has also minimized its troop movements in Syria. This comes at a time when tensions between Turkey and (Syrian President Bashar) Assad's regime runs high ...

... as the countries and communities around the globe unite in radical measures to help beat the coronavirus, placing economies on hold, having people staying at home and practicing social distancing, it is worth giving credit where credit is due: Turkey is rightly deserving.

Toperich's generous words remind one of Lt. Gen Michael Flynn, who had an extremely brief tenure as President Donald Trump's first US national security advisor. Also writing in *The Hill* in November 2016, Flynn [opined](#):

We must begin with understanding that Turkey is vital to U.S. interests. Turkey is really our strongest ally against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), as well as a source of stability in the region. It provides badly needed cooperation with U.S. military operations...

History repeats itself when people repeat the mistakes of the past. It is time we take a fresh look at the importance of Turkey and place our priorities in proper perspective...

We need to adjust our foreign policy to recognize Turkey as a priority. We need to see the world from Turkey's perspective.

Four months after the publication of Flynn's article, in March 2017, the former director of *Defense Intelligence Agency* filed documents with the federal government indicating that he had earned \$530,000 in 2016 for consulting work "that might have aided the government of Turkey." In the filings, Flynn [admitted](#) that he had received payments from Inovo BV, a Dutch company owned by a Turkish businessman with ties to Turkey's president and that [reviewed](#) the draft before it was submitted to *The Hill*. Flynn was fired after a month as President Trump's NSA.

Erdogan needs to win Western public opinion and institutions in order to earn international legitimacy—praise for his Islamism here and there from a Gaza shop owner or a Pakistani businessman is not going to cut it. He knows he needs credible Western media outlets to present his new image to a Western audience. What he does not seem to understand is that what he spends months trying to build via propaganda he destroys in a day's routine authoritarianism.

As an EU ambassador said in a telephone interview on April 24:

We appreciate Turkey's efforts in the global campaign against COVID-19. But we don't see any link between those efforts and [Erdogan's] claims that Turkey is a global power and a democracy.

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