



PERSPECTIVES

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As Turkey's Lira Tumbles, Erdoğan Pursues Neo-Ottoman Visions

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Turkish lira sank to a [record low](#) on October 22—a new blow for the Turkish economy, which has been battered by the coronavirus pandemic. The Islamist government led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is pursuing an increasingly daring neo-Ottoman policy throughout the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean, a push that is motivated in part by the need to help the economy bounce back.

Turkey has become the state leader of the regional Sunni Islamist bloc, whose most prominent other members are the Gulf state of Qatar and the Hamas terrorist group. The bloc also contains international networks of Muslim Brotherhood activists who cooperate with the coalition. A recent [100-page report](#) from a London-based think tank concluded that Qatar and Turkey are “bankrolling and supporting an interlinked network of Muslim Brotherhood organizations across Europe.”

Turkey's profile has been growing in the Palestinian arena too, as illustrated by the fact that for the first time, Istanbul hosted [talks between bitter domestic rivals Hamas and Fatah](#), who had previously used Egypt as a mediator. Fatah's willingness to send a delegation to Turkey for the talks indicates a potential willingness by Ramallah to give more influence to Ankara and the Islamist bloc it heads.

Erdoğan clearly and concisely expressed his neo-Ottoman and pan-Islamist vision of a renewed ascendancy of the old Turkish empire earlier in October, when [he declared](#) that “Jerusalem is our city” before referring to the Ottoman Empire's four-century rule over the city (from 1517 to 1917).

A Turkish-funded Islamic center in Jerusalem is reportedly hosting [tourists with Muslim Brotherhood links](#) and promoting messages by the Islamist

coalition led by Ankara. Hamas politburo chief Ismail Haniyeh has been a [guest of honor](#) in Turkey, and the country has acted as a base for a [Hamas headquarters](#) that attempted to orchestrate terrorist cells in the West Bank.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the more Erdoğan and his ruling AKP party are challenged domestically, economically, or by their ongoing [conflict with the Kurds](#), the more provocative they will become.

The AKP party is guided by a Turkish variant of Muslim Brotherhood philosophy, making it a natural ideological partner to Hamas—the Brotherhood’s Palestinian offshoot. Former Israeli ambassador to Turkey Pinchas Avivi held discussions with key AKP ideologue and former Turkish PM Ahmet Davutoglu, who pioneered some key party ideas.

[According to Avivi](#), the party’s ideological doctrine [is based](#) on a rejection of the secularism of the Turkish state founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk a century ago and a return to its role as the region’s pan-Islamic and geopolitical center of gravity, which would restore Turkey to its historical size and status.

Atatürk adopted Latin letters instead of Arabic, prohibited religious Muslims from entering the government and the military, and worked to attach Turkey to the West. The AKP wishes to see Turkey return to a leading position in the Middle East. On coming to power in 2002, the party began to focus on developing the poorer, more traditional eastern part of the country, an initiative that saw new highways, schools, and madrassas appear there.

Over the years, Turkey’s approach to the region has been increasingly driven by neo-Ottomanism, and Erdoğan’s rhetoric on Israel has grown more and more hostile. Yet Ankara has also maintained official diplomatic ties with Jerusalem and [increased](#) its bilateral trade with it, creating a quiet and pragmatic parallel channel of relations. (Ironically, the existence of this channel did not stop Turkey from [threatening](#) to cut ties with the UAE over its recent normalization pact with Israel.)

Despite maintaining economic and (at least on the official level) diplomatic ties, Turkey is gradually becoming a strategic problem for Israel. It has become even more [acutely problematic for Greece](#), as well as for pragmatic Gulf Arab states that view Ankara as a rival. The UAE has described Turkey’s 5,000 soldiers in neighboring Qatar as a destabilizing force.

In another sign of increasing assertiveness, Turkey sent soldiers and thousands of Syrian Islamist mercenaries [to fight](#) in Libya on behalf of the Islamist administration in the western part of the country.

Turkey seeks both geopolitical influence and opportunities to extract large quantities of natural gas and oil from under the Mediterranean Sea. Ankara has aggressively challenged an Egyptian-Greek demarcation of Mediterranean maritime borders that nullified its own agreement with Libya, and [reportedly](#) sought help from Muslim Brotherhood elements to attack the demarcation agreement announced by Athens and Cairo in August.

Turkey's non-recognition of the Egyptian-Greek deal is a continuation of its attempt, together with Libya's GNA, to create a maritime buffer between Egypt and Greece and disrupt their plans to exploit energy in the area. Turkish battleships have repeatedly entered gas exploration zones in the eastern Mediterranean in areas claimed by Greece in recent months, prompting Athens to warn of a potential military clash. Tensions over energy rights have been intensified by Turkey's claim to the Greek island of Kastellorizo and [sending of warships](#) in its direction. Tensions further escalated when Ankara sent an [energy exploration](#) ship to an area near Cyprus, backed by two Turkish naval auxiliary ships. This move led Greece to condemn Ankara's "destabilizing role."

Since coming to power in 2002, the AKP party has worked tirelessly to reverse the secular character of the modern Turkish state. As Avivi has [noted](#), Atatürk ended the Ottoman Empire and shifted the country sharply toward a secular state. Erdoğan envisions a return to the days of a Turkish sultan exercising vast political-military control over the Middle East and central Asia.

In Syria, Avivi said, Turkey believed it could turn ISIS against the Kurds, but found itself at war with both ISIS and the Kurds (though Ankara has [reportedly employed a revolving door policy](#) when it comes to captured ISIS activists). Turkish armed forces and their proxies have occupied northern Syria since 2016 and [entrenched themselves there](#). They show no signs of leaving.

"Erdoğan has three identities—Islamist, Turkish, and Ottoman—and he sees no contradiction between any of these. He combines them," said Brig.-Gen. (ret.) Yossi Kuperwasser, a senior fellow at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs and former head of the research division in the IDF military intelligence branch.

Despite all the recent developments, the Islamist bloc led by Turkey is growing weaker, Kuperwasser argued, and the bold move by the UAE and Bahrain in normalizing ties with Israel is evidence of that. Still, he said, "that doesn't mean the bloc has been weakened in every area. Erdoğan's forceful conduct has had some achievements."

In response to the normalization shift by Gulf states, Fatah has, at least temporarily, contemplated whether to move closer to the Muslim Brotherhood camp, Kuperwasser said, though Fatah has not confirmed that it will do this. “This would be a surrender to Hamas,” he said. Such a shift could lead to Fatah’s adopting more radical positions and placing its West Bank rule at greater exposure to infiltration by Hamas, which would directly undermine its own interests.

Qatar, for its part, handles public relations for the Islamist bloc, and uses its vast treasure to provide financial support for the coalition’s activities. “Hamas brings the struggle and the direct friction with the enemy [Israel],” Kuperwasser said.

Turkey’s close cooperation with Hamas is continuing despite the fact that its headquarters left Turkish soil last year. Turkey has [granted citizenship](#) to dozens of Hamas members over the past two years, [including](#) senior members of a Hamas terror cell, according to one report.

On October 22, the *Times* of London, citing Western intelligence services, [reported](#) that Hamas had “set up a secret headquarters in Turkey for carrying out cyberwarfare and counter-intelligence operations,” adding that the cyber operations are being run out of Hamas’s official offices in Istanbul.

Meanwhile, Turkey’s maneuvers are shaking up international power balances due to its membership in NATO. Ankara reportedly [test-fired](#) the Russian-built S-400 missile defense system in October, drawing condemnation from Washington. Turkey signed a \$2.5 billion contract with Russia for the system in 2017, with deliveries beginning in 2019—a development that led the US to eject Turkey from the F-35 fifth generation fighter jet program last year.

Ultimately, it seems that economic challenges at home will do little to slow Turkey’s pursuit of a neo-Ottoman Islamist foreign policy. Its satellite companions, Qatar and Hamas, will continue to form a Sunni Islamist coalition that is affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood brand—one that will have to be watched closely.

This is an edited version of an [article](#) that appeared in the Investigative Project on Terrorism on October 23, 2020.

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