



Erdoğan's Eastern Med Repentance: Too Little, Too Late

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Turkey's string of failures and increasing isolation in the Eastern Med have forced President Erdoğan to recalibrate his policy toward the region.

Yet another Turkish diplomatic embarrassment has been caused by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's self-aggrandizement.

Turkey's neo-Ottoman strongman would topple Syrian dictator Bashir Assad and replace him with Sunni Islamists while kicking the US and Russia out of Muslim lands; embolden the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt; internationally isolate Israel and champion the Palestinian cause; be a game-changer in the Eastern Mediterranean, with Ankara becoming the lead player in hydrocarbon exploration; alienate Saudi Arabia and the UAE; and build a Turkey-friendly regime in Libya.

But after a decade of trial and error and one failure after another, Erdoğan, who is now deeply embarrassed both internationally and domestically, is trying to find a way of out of the mess into which his delusions of grandeur have drawn him.

It has been nine years since his former PM (and now political rival) Ahmet Davutoğlu [predicted](#) that the fall of the Assad regime in Syria would come in a matter of weeks or months. Egyptian president Abdel Fattah Sisi was [demonized](#) at Erdoğan's election rallies for years, with Erdoğan making the "[raba'a sign](#)" at every party convention in support of ousted Muslim Brotherhood leader Muhammad Morsi.

In August 2013, then-PM Erdoğan appeared on TV and in a soft voice read a letter written by the Muslim Brotherhood's Muhammad Beltagy to his daughter Asmaa, a 17-year-old who had been killed in Cairo when security forces stormed two protest camps occupied by Morsi supporters. Asmaa had been shot in the back and chest. "I believe you have been loyal to your commitment to God, and He has been to you," the father wrote in the letter. "Otherwise, He would not have called you to His presence before me." Erdoğan's tears were [visible](#).

In 2018, Erdoğan declared a [personal war](#) on Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman after the killing of dissident Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. Erdoğan pledged to bring the Saudi prince to international justice by any means necessary.

In 2020, when the UAE established diplomatic relations with Israel, Erdoğan [threatened](#) to recall the Turkish ambassador to Abu Dhabi—apparently forgetting that Turkey itself has had diplomatic relations with the Jewish State since 1949.

Meanwhile, the domestic situation in Turkey is a mess. Several grocery stores in big cities like Istanbul have started to sell [stale bread](#) for the first time. A stale loaf sells at \$0.05, which is a dime cheaper than the market price for bread and draws thousands of customers. There are [long queues](#) in front of municipality-run shops selling subsidized bread.

On the diplomatic front, Turkey is the only East Med country to have been totally shut out of multinational exploration efforts in the region. Ankara fears additional, and this time punishing, EU sanctions if it threatens once again to use force to block exploration by a friendly group of European and Middle Eastern countries.

Is a quiet reset possible? It won't come easy.

At the beginning of May, Erdoğan sent a delegation of diplomats, led by Deputy FM Sedat Önal, to "tyrant Sisi's Egypt" in the hope of indirectly mending fences with the "Egyptian dictator"—a man with whom Erdoğan once refused to be seated at the same dinner table in Washington. Before the visit to Cairo, as a goodwill gesture, his ruling Justice and Development Party [proposed](#) a parliamentary friendship group with Egypt.

Turkish FM Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu [said](#) in April that his country is seeking to improve diplomatic relations with Egypt. In response, Egyptian FM Sameh Shoukry [said](#): "Official statements are not enough, and they should be

supported by actions, and I can also say that actions are the only way to restore relations with Turkey to their normal position.”

The word “actions” in Shoukry’s statement means, among other things, a conclusive end to Erdoğan’s ideological and logistical support for hundreds of Muslim Brotherhood men on Cairo’s list of terrorists based in Turkey. What if Erdoğan complies, and the Brotherhood men respond by revealing how Ankara once supported their acts of violence? Tough choice.

Though Riyadh has never publicly said it boycotts Turkish goods, Saudi businesspeople and retailers implemented the move last year, crippling Turkish exports to the kingdom. As a result, Turkish exports to Saudi Arabia all but dried up in April, according to official data, and remain at a historic low. Sales to Saudi Arabia [plunged](#) 94.4% year-on-year to only \$11.25 million, according to the Turkish Exporters Assembly.

The geopolitical cost to Turkey is not only in lost export contracts. In March, Turkey’s traditional Aegean rival Greece held joint drills with Saudi Arabia to develop the skills of their air and technical crews, with Saudi F-15s and Greek F-16s, Mirage 2000s, and F-4 Phantom fighter jets taking part. In April, Athens and Riyadh signed an agreement to move a Greek Patriot battery to Saudi Arabia as protection from Houthi rebels in Yemen. “Engaging with Greece on such an important aspect of military technology sends a strong political signal,” [said](#) Yezid Sayegh, Senior Fellow at the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center.

Turkey was shocked to learn that it is no longer wanted even in “friendly Libya.” In early May, Erdoğan dispatched two cabinet heavyweights and top intelligence officials to Libya in the hope of cementing Ankara’s close ties with the Tripoli government, one of the warring sides in the civil war.

After meeting with FM Çavuşoğlu and DM Hulusi Akar, Najla Manqoush, FM of Libya’s interim government, urged Turkey to implement UN Security Council resolutions demanding the repatriation of more than 20,000 foreign fighters and mercenaries from Libya. “We call on [Turkey] to take steps to implement all the provisions of ... the Security Council resolutions and to cooperate together to expel all foreign forces and mercenaries from the Libyan territories,” Manqoush [said](#).

These remarks were a cold shower for the Turkish team, a clear rebuke to Ankara for having deployed troops and Syrian mercenaries to fight with Tripoli militias when forces of eastern-based military commander Khalifa Haftar launched an offensive to wrest control of the capital in 2019. Turkey

also relies on its 2019 deal with the Libyan government to maintain its claim to an exclusive economic zone in parts of the Mediterranean.

All an appalled Çavuşoğlu could [say](#) in response was that Turkish forces were in Libya as part of a training agreement that was reached with a previous Libya administration. That's last year's opera tickets at the Tripoli theater.

The Eastern Mediterranean, once an Ottoman lake, is now a reminder to Turkey that self-aggrandizement can be costly.

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