



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Give War a Chance: Turkish Leader Finesses Political Defeat

by Burak Bekdil

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 2,109, July 30, 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Turks are hungry for fairy tales. Any feel-good news propaganda—including Erdoğan’s “The West, including the Germans, are jealous of us!” tirade—finds millions of receptive listeners in Turkey’s postmodern marketplace of absurdity.

The article “Give War a Chance: Arab Leaders Finesse Military Defeat,” [by Daniel Pipes](#), president of the Middle East Forum, and published in the Summer 2021 edition of *Middle East Quarterly*, is a fascinating historical account of the way disaster on Middle Eastern battlefields can be politically useful—not just against Israel or the US, but also in intra-Arab conflicts and in clashes with Iranians, Africans, and Europeans.

Pipes notes that when Saddam Hussein’s spokesman Tariq Aziz met with US Secretary of State James Baker on the eve of the First Gulf War in January 1991, Aziz said something remarkable: “Never has [an Arab] political regime entered into a war with Israel or the United States and lost politically.”

Pipes also quotes Elie Salem, Lebanon’s FM during most of the 1980s and a noted professor of politics, as concurring: “The logic of victory and defeat does not fully apply in the Arab-Israeli context. In the wars with Israel, Arabs celebrated their defeats as if they were victories, and presidents and generals were better known for the cities and regions they had lost than for the ones they had liberated.”

Pipes writes that “in the sixty-five years since 1956, military losses have hardly ever scathed Arabic-speaking rulers and sometimes benefited them.” He offers an analysis that establishes this pattern through 21 examples—19 brief discussions and two longer analyses.

His “Examples 1956-2014” are the Suez Crisis (1956); Egypt’s war in Yemen (1962-67); the clash between Syria and Israel (April 1967); the Six-Day War (June 1967); the Battle of Karama (1968); the Yom Kippur War (1973); Algeria’s war in Western Sahara (1975-91); Syria’s occupation of Lebanon (1976-2005); the Iraq-Iran war (1980-88); Israel vs. Syria (1982); Israel vs. the PLO in Beirut (1982); the PLO withdrawal from Tripoli (1983); the US bombing of Libya (1986); Chadian militias vs. Libya (1987); Iraq vs. Kuwait (1990); Hezbollah vs. Israel (2006); Hamas vs. Israel (2008-09); Hamas vs. Israel (2012); and Hamas vs. Israel (2014). Pipes’s Case Studies I and II are the Kuwait War (1991) and Hamas vs. Israel (2021).

Whence this impunity? Pipes asks. He says six factors help account for it: honor, fatalism, conspiracism, bombast, publicity, and confusion.

He notes that “[m]ost recently, [Turkish President] Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s dismal military adventures into Syria and Libya have not dented his power. This pattern of surviving or benefiting from defeat extends to other Muslim leaders.”

Precisely. The Turkish-Islamist psyche is just as susceptible as the Arab-Islamist psyche to the pitfalls of honor, fatalism, conspiracism, bombast, publicity, and confusion. But there is more.

The myth

This author grew up in classrooms filled up with mottoes like “A Turk is worth the world,” “Turks have had to fight the seven biggest world powers,” and “A Turk’s only friend is another Turk.” Our textbooks taught us that the supreme Turkish race dominated the entire world for centuries; that the Ottoman Empire collapsed only after a coalition of world powers attacked it; that we lost WWI because we had allied with the Germans, who were defeated (not us); and that one day, we will make the entire planet Turkish. We were taught that an Ottoman warrior could keep on fighting even after having been beheaded by the [Byzantine] enemy.

Feel-good propaganda

I have been a journalist for 34 years, and the most frequently repeated headline I have seen in my life in Turkey is this: “We are about to finish off the PKK.” The Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), a separatist terrorist organization, has been up and running since its first attack in Turkey in 1984. Thirty-seven years after it made its violent debut, Turkish newspapers are still heralding, on a practically daily basis, that the PKK is about to vanish.

Similarly, Turks feel good when their heroic army crosses the border into Iraq or Syria, or raids PKK strongholds outside Turkish territory. They feel equally good when their army returns quietly home. They feel proud when their navy challenges Greek, Cypriot, or French navies in the Eastern Mediterranean, and just as proud when their warships return to their home ports with the country's leaders fearing stronger Western sanctions. It's always a win-win.

Post-truth

In June 2010, just after the Mavi Marmara incident, Turkey's Islamist rulers pledged to internationally isolate Israel. After 11 years, Turkey is probably the most isolated country in the Eastern Mediterranean basin, and Turkey's Islamists are still championing Hamas. Amid escalating tensions in the Israel-Hamas conflict in May of this year, a set of three images featuring military vehicles was shared on social media with the [claim](#) that a Turkish force was coming to Gaza to defend Hamas. The caption to one such set of images, along with a poster in support of Palestine, read: "Turkish Army on its way to Gaza #FreePalestinians #FreeGaza." No Turkish military vehicles ever reached Gaza during the May conflict.

Similarly, a [video](#) that has been viewed more than five million times on Facebook and Twitter claims to show Erdoğan meeting Palestinian children after the deadly clashes between Israel and Hamas in May. "The son of a lion has reached Palestine. Maybe to listen to the voices of oppressed Palestinians," reads the post's Urdu-language caption. The footage shows Erdoğan hugging a group of children, several of whom appear to be crying.

The claim is a lie. What the video is really showing is Erdoğan meeting children in the Turkish city of Ordu during the mayoral campaign of 2019.

Self-aggrandizing

In 2012, Erdoğan's then-PM, Ahmet Davutoğlu, [predicted](#) that Syria's president and Erdoğan's regional nemesis, Bashar Assad, would be deposed "within weeks or months." In 2016, Erdoğan [sacked](#) Davutoğlu. Assad is still president of Syria in 2021.

Honor and self-deception

In response to Turkey's acquisition of the Russian-made S-400 air and anti-missile defense systems, the US-led multinational consortium that is building the next-generation fighter jet, the F-35 Lightning II, suspended Turkey's membership. Turkey's top defense procurement official, Ismail Demir, pretended to be happy about this, with Pipes's "honor" factoring in his explanation of the defeat. "With this decision, we will build our

indigenous fighter jet quicker and better. Sanctions cannot deter our success," he [said](#) in February. Demir badly contradicted himself when his "honor" euphemism collided with reality. In the same month, Ankara [hired](#) Washington-based law firm Arnold & Porter to lobby the US government to allow Turkey back into the F-35 program. The Turkish people still don't know if getting kicked out of the program was good or bad. Even if they do know, they won't say, because doing so might besmirch Turkish honor.

Collective fear

On June 7, 2015, Turkey held parliamentary elections. Erdoğan's nationwide share of the vote fell to 37.5% and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) lost its parliamentary majority for the first time since it came to power in 2002. At that point, a terrible [wave of violence](#) gripped Turkey. First, the PKK, which had been fighting a guerrilla war from mountain hideouts in northern Iraq, declared an end to the unilateral ceasefire it had begun in 2013. Then, on July 20, a Turkish suicide bomber killed more than 30 people at a pro-Kurdish gathering in the small town of Suruç. Claiming that the Turkish state had a role in the bombing, the PKK killed two policemen in the town of Ceylanpınar. The three-decades-old violence between the Turkish and Kurdish communities had suddenly roared back with a vengeance. In one of Turkey's bloodiest summers ever, more than 1,000 PKK fighters and Turkish security officials were killed.

Then, in October, ISIS conducted an attack in the Turkish capital. Two suicide bombers, one Turkish and the other Syrian, killed some 100 people at a pro-peace rally in the heart of Ankara, the single worst terror attack in the country's modern history. By then, Erdoğan had already dissolved parliament and called for early elections on November 1, calculating that the wave of instability would push frightened voters toward single-party rule.

His gamble paid off. The elections gave the AKP a comfortable victory and a mandate to rule until 2019: 49.5% of the national vote, or 317 parliamentary seats, sufficient to form a single-party government.

Fatalism à la Turca, or Turkish Stockholm Syndrome

In early 2014, opposition MPs requested a parliamentary investigation into a privately owned coal mine in Soma, Western Turkey, because they suspected serious safety flaws. The request was rejected by Erdoğan's ruling party benches.

Two months later, on May 13, 2014, the mine in Soma exploded, killing 301 miners. Erdoğan visited the town, where he was captured on video slapping a

mourner. One of his advisors was filmed kicking another mourner who was being held on the ground by a couple of police officers.

In a piece published after the disaster, I [wrote](#) that I would bet all my money that Erdoğan would win the largest share of the vote in Soma in the presidential election in August later that same year, just four months after the explosion. Sure enough, Erdoğan got the biggest share of the vote there.

The following year, in the June 7, 2015 parliamentary election, Erdoğan's party won the biggest share of the vote in Soma—39%. And on November 1, a year-and-a-half after the mining disaster, nearly half (49.6%) of the locals in Soma voted for Erdoğan's party.

Money and education

Of course, in December 2015, Erdoğan's government [compensated](#) the families of the victims of the Soma mine disaster to the tune of 400,000 liras each, or approximately \$139,000 at that period's [exchange rate](#). Keep in mind, too, that the average Turk is a [seventh-grade dropout](#).

Take a proud, historically successful, militaristic nation with a former empire that survived six centuries. Add a series of humiliating defeats by the world's new major powers. Add a century of poverty. This recipe is made even less edible by the lack of a single major success story in Turkish science, technology, culture, or arts.

In 2021, 98 years after it was founded, Turkey's per capita income is less than \$8,000. The US dollar trades at 8.3 to the lira, and one euro is worth 10.1 liras. Forty percent of all workers are [minimum wage earners](#) who earn 2,800 liras, or \$330 a month.

Conclusion

Turks are hungry for fairy tales about the good life they did not get to enjoy over the past century, but believe they deserve. Any feel-good news propaganda, even Erdoğan's famous "The West, including the Germans, are jealous of us!" [tirade](#), finds millions of receptive listeners in Turkey's post-modern marketplace of absurdity.

Turks want someone to tell them, rightly or wrongly, that their noble nation deserves a place in world history.

In the 1970s, when the Turkish football was at its nadir and the national squad was facing one humiliating defeat after another against its European rivals, Turkish newspapers took to announcing defeats with headlines like, "Lost but

not humiliated: 0-3" or "We almost did it! 1-2" or "We'll get you next time: 0-2".

The Turkish national team improved, and took third place at the World Football Championship in 2002. But the Turkish collective memory has not changed since the 1970s.

Burak Bekdil is an Ankara-based columnist. He regularly writes for the Gatestone Institute and Defense News and is a fellow at the Middle East Forum.