

Turkey's Strategic Vision and Syria

For most of the 20th century, Turkey chose not to get involved in Middle Eastern affairs. During the past decade, however, in a remarkable departure from this Kemalist tradition (based on the ideology of the republic's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk), Ankara has become a very active and important player in the region. Under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government since 2002, Turkey has established closer ties with Syria, Iran, and Iraq, assumed a leadership position in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), attended Arab League conferences, and contributed to UN forces in Lebanon. It has also mediated in the Syrian–Israeli conflict as well as the nuclear standoff with Iran. Ankara's diplomatic engagements with Iran and Hamas have led to differences with the United States and Israel, leaving many wondering if Turkey has been turning away from its Western orientation or if it was just a long overdue shift East to complete Turkey's full circle of relations.

Fundamentally, analysts make a major mistake in analyzing Turkish foreign policy when they speak of a “pro-Western” versus “Islamic” divide in Ankara's strategic choices. This is an understandable fallacy. Turkey's population is almost fully Muslim, and the AKP, a political party with Islamic roots, has won consecutive election victories. Many policymakers, analysts, and scholars thus equate the notion of Turkish divergence from the West—or the fear of “losing Turkey”—with the idea of an Islamic revival. Moreover, this is exactly how some members within Turkey's Kemalist establishment—the military, the Republican People's Party (CHP) founded by Atatürk, and the judiciary—describe some AKP policies in the Middle East. While the growing importance of religion in Turkey should not be dismissed, such an analysis gives superficial credibility to the fallacy of an “Islamist” foreign policy in Turkey.

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But how then should Turkey's current foreign policy be characterized and understood? To answer this question, one has to look first at the three grand strategic visions that have driven Turkish foreign policy: Neo-Ottomanism, Kemalism, and more recently, Turkish Gaullism. The common denominator of these strategic visions is that they transcend the erroneous narrative prevalent in Western media focusing almost exclusively on the dichotomy between Turkey's Islamic and secular factions. In particular, the way in which Turkey has handled the continuing implications of the 2011 Arab awakening helps to clarify Turkish grand strategy, or its continuing balancing act among these three strategic visions, as Ankara has faced a more challenging strategic environment, most specifically in its estranged relations with Bashar Assad's Syria.

Neo-Ottomanism

Three factors help to define the Neo-Ottoman tendencies of the AKP. The first is its activism, or a willingness to come to terms with Turkey's Ottoman and Islamic heritage at home and abroad. Neo-Ottomanism does not call for Turkish imperialism in the Middle East and beyond, nor does it seek to institute an Islamic legal system in modern Turkey. Instead, it favors a moderated version of Kemalist secularism at home and a more activist policy in foreign affairs, particularly a willingness to mediate conflicts. In this Neo-Ottoman paradigm, Ankara exerts more soft power—political, economic, diplomatic, and cultural influence—in formerly Ottoman territories such as the Middle East, North Africa, and the Balkans, as well as in other regions where Turkey has strategic and national interests. This broad vision for Turkish foreign policy requires embracing the Ottoman great power legacy, and most importantly it calls for a redefinition of Turkey's strategic and national identity.

Since the AKP came to power in late 2002, its foreign policy has been based on what Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's top foreign policy adviser and now foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, calls "strategic depth" and "zero-problems with neighbors." Davutoğlu's main argument is that Turkey is a great power that has neglected—partly because of its obsession with the West—its historic and cultural ties as well as its diplomatic, economic, and political relations with its immediate strategic hinterland in the Middle East, North Africa, and Eurasia.¹ Instead of a security-first approach that often resulted in confrontational relations with neighbors such as Greece, Iraq, Syria, and Iran, the "zero-problems" policy favored a more self-confident strategy of diplomatic engagement with all countries surrounding Turkey.

The Neo-Ottoman vision, which also builds on the approach of former President Turgut Özal (1989–1993), seeks to rediscover Turkey's imperial legacy and a new consensus at home among the country's multiple identities: Western,

Muslim, secular, Kurdish, and Turkish. Such emphasis on the Ottoman legacy is *not* part of a plan to Islamize Turkey or Turkish foreign policy; it is an attempt to balance and broaden the geostrategic horizons of a country which until recently has been obsessed with following an exclusively Western trajectory.

A more concrete and tangible aspect of Turkish activism and sense of grandeur in former Ottoman lands is economic. Turkey's growing economy, its export capacity, and its entrepreneurial private sector are important drivers of Neo-Ottomanism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Under the AKP, Turkey's exports to the MENA region have more than doubled. This mercantilist dimension of Turkish foreign policy should not be neglected in the analysis of the AKP's approach to the Arab and larger Islamic worlds. To be sure, Turkey's exports to the European Union still constitute the largest part of its total export capacity, yet the EU's share of Turkish exports has not increased in the last 10 years. In fact, they have declined in the last two years due to the financial crisis in Europe. On the other hand, Turkey's exports to the Middle East went from 9.6 percent of total export capacity in 2002 to 20.3 percent in 2011.²

The second dimension of Neo-Ottomanism is its emphasis on multiculturalism. This is most visible in its rejection of assimilation-oriented nationalism, a trademark of the Kemalist camp. Since Neo-Ottomanism is at peace with the imperial and multinational legacy of the country, it opens the door to a less ethnic and more multicultural conceptualization of Turkish citizenship. Unlike the nationalist Kemalist camp,

Neo-Ottomanism sees no major threat behind Kurdish cultural rights and the expression of Kurdish national identity, as long as Kurds maintain a sense of loyalty to the Republic of Turkey. So when faced with Kurdish demands for cultural and political rights, the Neo-Ottoman perspective seeks to accommodate such demands in the framework of multiculturalism and Muslim identity. In other words, unlike Kemalist hardliners who insist on assimilating the Kurds, Neo-Ottomanism allows Islam to play a greater role in building a sense of shared identity.

While the Kurdish challenge historically has made Ankara reactive, cautious, and sometimes overly insecure, Neo-Ottomanism motivates Turkish policymakers to be more audacious, imaginative, and proactive. Neo-Ottomanism sees Turkey as a confident regional superpower. Its strategic vision and culture reflects the geographic reach of the Ottoman and Byzantine empires—Turkey, as a pivotal state, should play a very active diplomatic, political, and economic role in a wide region of which it is the center. Such grand ambitions, in turn, require a strategic vision at peace with its multiple identities, including its Muslim and multinational past.

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The third aspect of Neo-Ottomanism is its goal of not just reaching out to the Islamic world but embracing it as much as the West. It is important to note that the AKP's Neo-Ottoman vision is very different from policies advocated by the late Necmettin Erbakan, leader of Turkey's Islamic movement from the 1970s to the 1990s. While Erbakan sought to create an Islamic alliance with Muslim countries such as Libya, Iran, Malaysia, and Indonesia as an explicit alternative to an alliance with the West, AKP leaders want to reach out to non-Western regions to complement their ties to the West, not to replace them.

However, secularist critics of the AKP government maintain that Turkey's activism in the Middle East betrays the republic's Western vocation and orientation. These skeptics usually focus on the AKP's Muslim political pedigree and tend to see a hidden Islamic agenda behind the AKP's openings to the Arab world and Iran in the framework of the party's "zero problems with neighbors" policy, followed since 2002. However, like the imperial city of Istanbul which straddles Europe and Asia, Erdoğan's Neo-Ottomanism is Janus-faced, and the European legacy in fact matters a great deal to Neo-Ottomans.

In fact, many even argue that an Islamic agenda does not exist within the AKP because it is the most pro-EU and pro-democracy political party on the Turkish scene. Despite its Islamic roots, the AKP has indeed worked much harder than previous Turkish governments to improve Ankara's chances of EU membership.³ Such efforts were eventually rewarded with the opening of accession negotiations between Turkey and the European Union in December 2005. Not surprisingly, the AKP's ability to embrace the West and the European Union has not impressed the Kemalists. In fact, the traditional Kemalist establishment is increasingly suspicious of Westerners—particularly the European Union and the United States—whom they see as naïve regarding the AKP's brand of "moderate Islam."

Kemalism

There are clear differences between Kemalism and Neo-Ottomanism in three main aspects of strategic culture emphasized: its activism, multiculturalism, and rebalanced relations with the West and Islamic world. Where Neo-Ottomanism favors an ambitious regional policy in the Middle East and beyond, Kemalism opts for modesty, caution, and non-involvement in the Arab world. Where Neo-Ottomanism favors multiculturalism and a more moderate version of secularism, Kemalism prefers militantly secularist measures against political Islam and assimilationist policies vis-à-vis Kurdish ethnic identity. Where Neo-Ottomanism favors pursuing EU membership and good relations with

Washington, Kemalism is actually increasingly resentful of the European Union and the United States.

The Kemalists' turning against the West is a new development, as they were once Western-oriented. Since the arrival of the AKP to power, Turkey's domestic and foreign policy dynamics have turned upside down. In

its first three years in power, the AKP passed more pro-EU legal reforms than most of the previous secularist governments in Turkish history. As noted, this formerly Islamist party became the strongest advocate of Turkey's EU membership. This happened for one simple reason: it wished to clearly prove its democratic and pro-Western credentials to critics who believed the party still secretly nurtured an Islamic agenda.

Yet the Kemalist opposition remained very skeptical. What had caused this sudden change of heart among former Islamists? Was their pro-EU stance tactical? The Kemalists came to the conclusion that the AKP was engaged in *taqiyya*—dissimulation of real intentions. According to this logic, the Islamists were pushing for EU reforms to weaken the role of the Turkish military. Given their disdain of Muslim masses and distrust of conservative politicians like Erdogan, they saw the Kemalist military as the main bulwark against political Islam.

It is not surprising that such an interpretation of the AKP's intentions changed the way the Kemalist elite approached the European Union, and more specifically Brussels's demands for civilian supremacy over the military as a prerequisite for democratization. The military already had concerns about the EU's human and minority rights agenda because of the Kurdish problem. Now, with the additional complication of an Islamist pro-EU agenda in power, there was no willingness in the Kemalist camp to see Turkey move closer to the European Union. This was the end of the love affair between Kemalism and Europe. The tables had turned—Kemalist elites were now increasingly anti-European while former Islamists appeared in favor of pro-EU reforms. The fact that, after 9/11, Washington praised the AKP as a model for the Islamic world and spoke of Turkey as a “moderately Islamic” country exacerbated the Kemalist sense of frustration with the West. For example, in 2002, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice called Turkey “an excellent model, a 99 percent Muslim country that has great importance as an alternative to radical Islam,” and President Bush stated that Turkey “provided Muslims around the world with a hopeful model of a modern and secular democracy.”⁴ Such praise for Muslim Turkey was perceived by the Kemalist camp as a naïve approach to AKP's Islamist agenda.

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These circumstances explain why Kemalism has recently come to be associated with an anti-Western stance, sometimes referred to as the neo-nationalist Eurasian alternative. Hardliners in Turkey's Kemalist establishment believe the United States and Europe are helping to erode Turkey's secular identity by promoting "moderate Islam" and are convinced that the West supports an independent Kurdish state in Iraq. The Eurasian alternative thus favors closer ties with secular authoritarian states such as Russia, China, Syria, Azerbaijan, and the Central Asian republics, as this would enable Ankara to take action against the Kurds more freely without worrying about the reaction from the liberal West.

According to Kemalists, the AKP's Neo-Ottomanism promotes a domestic agenda of Islamization and a foreign policy of aimless adventurism. To them, the idea of allowing the Kurds to have cultural rights and giving Islam more political

space amounts to a dangerous departure from the secular and national norms of the republic. Kemalist foreign policy refutes Neo-Ottoman openings toward the Middle East mainly on the grounds that they are part of a larger ideological agenda of Islamization or religious solidarity. Kemalist foreign policy thus puts a high premium on maintaining the status quo and confronting the threat of Kurdish separatism.

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The Turkish Third Way: Turkish Gaullism

Turkish Gaullism is where Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism converge. It is a more recent manifestation of Turkey's strategic vision and provides a common denominator for the AKP and CHP's approach to some key issues. Despite the important differences between Kemalism and Neo-Ottomanism described above, both share a strong sense of patriotism and attachment to the Turkish nation-state. Neo-Ottomanism represents a more pragmatic and liberal mindset than Kemalism, but it has successfully internalized the Kemalist paradigm of Turkish nationalism. The concept of the nation-state and the achievements of the modern republic are neither questioned nor rejected by Neo-Ottomans. At the end of the day, both AKP's Neo-Ottomanism and CHP's Kemalism share a state-centric view of the world and Turkish national interests. In addition to being very sensitive about outside pressures on Turkish national sovereignty, they also share illiberal tendencies regarding individual freedoms, resulting in limits on democratization in Turkey.

Seen through the prism of rising Turkish self-confidence in the last few years, there is a certain convergence between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism. This

third vision of Turkish foreign policy seems to unite the country around a sense of Turkish grandeur and independence. The West might witness the emergence in Turkey of not so much an Islamist foreign policy but of a much more self-confident, prestige-oriented, and occasionally defiant strategic orientation—in short, a Turkish variant of “Gaullism.” A Gaullist Turkey might in the long run decide to no longer pursue an elusive

The forces driving Turkish foreign policy are nationalism and self-interest, not Islam or the West.

EU membership, and might even question its military alliance with the United States. Burdened by a sense that it never gets the respect it deserves, Turkey might increasingly act on its own in search of full independence, full sovereignty, strategic leverage, and most importantly, Turkish glory and grandeur.

As France did under Charles de Gaulle in the 1960s, Turkey might opt for its own “force de frappe”—a nuclear deterrent—and its own “Realpolitik” with countries such as China, India, and Russia. It could even contemplate leaving the military structure of NATO, as France did under de Gaulle, while maintaining its political membership in the organization. The current analysis of Turkey in U.S. circles constantly refers to the tension between “secularism” and “Islam” or “Eastern” versus “Western” proclivities. Such focus often comes at the expense of the most powerful force driving Turkish foreign policy: nationalism and self-interest. One should not underestimate the emergence of a nationalist and self-confident Turkey that transcends the over-emphasized Islamic–secular divide.

To understand Turkish Gaullism, one needs to look at Turkey’s impressive economic performance. Today’s Turkey offers a considerably different picture than Turkey in the 1990s. During the “lost decade” of the 1990s, the Turkish economy was plagued by recessions, an average inflation rate of 70 percent, structural budget deficits, chronic financial crises, and constant political instability. Turkey managed to surprise most analysts with its remarkable economic recovery and political stability in the last 10 years. Shortly after the lost decade culminated in early 2001 with the worst financial crisis in Turkish history, the country began structural economic reforms and cleaned up its financial and banking system under the stewardship of Finance Minister Kemal Derviş. Economic and political reforms continued after the AKP came to power in 2002. In the last nine years, the Turkish economy has managed to grow by an average of 7 percent to where it is now the sixteenth largest economy in the world. In the last decade, Turkish per capita income nearly doubled from \$5,500 to \$10,500.⁵

Such economic performance, coupled with political stability, has fueled an unprecedented sense of self-confidence and pride in Turkey. The AKP, under

Erdoğan's charismatic and mercurial leadership, personifies this sense of Turkish "hubris." Until relatively recently, the majority of Turks were still enthusiastic about their country's EU prospects. Yet, recent polls show that Turkey's patience and interest is wearing thin. According to the results of the German Marshall Fund's 2010 Transatlantic Trends Survey, the percentage of Turkish respondents who are still enthusiastic about EU membership dropped to 38 percent from 73 percent in 2004. Only 13 percent of the surveyed Turks were in favor of cooperation with the European Union.⁶ Given French and German insistence on giving Turkey a status less than full membership ("privileged partnership"), it is not surprising that most Turks believe there is Western prejudice, a double standard, and a lack of respect toward their country.

Even fewer Turks were interested in partnership with the United States: a dismal 6 percent were in favor of working closely with Washington.⁷ The perception that the United States supports Kurdish separatism in Iraq and in Turkey—the so-called "greater Kurdistan"—is probably the main reason behind such popular resentment toward Washington. Not surprisingly, many Turks are in favor of Turkey's acting either alone or in partnership with Middle East countries which respect Turkey. New obstacles to EU accession, perceived injustice in Cyprus, growing Western recognition of the "Armenian genocide," and Western sympathy for Kurdish national aspirations are all major factors forcing Turkey to question the value of its long-standing pro-Western geostrategic commitments. On the Armenian question, Turks refuse the label of "genocide" on the grounds that what happened during WWI was a civil war between the two communities. In Cyprus, Turkey also feels unfairly accused by the EU despite Ankara's support for a solution in 2004, when the majority of Turkish Cypriots voted in favor of reunification while the Greek side voted overwhelmingly against.

Turkey Amidst the Arab Uprisings

As this visionary struggle and the increasing support for Turkish Gaullism evolved over the last decade, the 2011 pro-democracy wave sweeping the Arab world presented challenges and opportunities for Ankara. After stumbling out of the block, Turkey moved to play a leadership role in the ongoing turmoil and presented itself as an example of a successful Muslim democracy. Today, the Arab awakening presents a mixed blessing for the Neo-Ottoman and Gaullist ambitions of Turkey. Most Turks are proud that their country is referred to as a model for democratizing Arab states. Yet, the dizzying pace of events is rapidly changing the balance of power in the Middle East, potentially leading to the re-emergence of Egypt as a competing regional leader, and causing problems for

Foreign Minister Davutoğlu's "zero problems with neighbors" policy, particularly as far as relations with Syria are concerned.

The outbreak of conflict between Arab governments and their populations made the "zero problems" policy no longer tenable: Ankara had to take sides. In fact, as things stand today, instead of a "zero problems" situation, Turkey seems to be facing "zero neighbors without problems." To make things worse, Turkey's own relations with Iraq, Syria, Iran, Israel, Russia, and Armenia have significantly deteriorated in the last couple of years. Ankara in many ways is caught between several considerations: a legacy of having built good relations with rulers in the region; large contractual and business interests with many regimes, particularly in the construction sector of Libya; a public political platform built—at least at home—on values of democracy and accountable government; and Erdoğan's high profile as a legitimate Muslim Sunni ruler with strong principled positions.

Egypt, Libya, and Bahrain

Initially, Ankara stayed quiet about events in Tunisia in December 2010, but when the spark of revolution jumped to Egypt in January 2011, the AKP realized that serious change was underway. Erdoğan was the first world leader to call for President Hosni Mubarak to step down, and President Abdullah Gül was the first head of state to visit Egypt after Mubarak's downfall. This made Turkey and its leadership very popular among the Egyptian public, so much so that Erdoğan was welcomed with adulation when he visited Cairo in September 2011. Erdoğan also brought a large business delegation with him to Egypt, as Turkey was eager to expand its economic relations with the largest Arab country. Egyptians appreciated Turkey's principled stand with the pro-democracy revolution, and many Islamists looked to the AKP as an example of a successful, moderate, and pragmatic Muslim political party. They decidedly preferred it to the Iranian model of government or the strict and/or radical variations offered by the Saudis, the Taliban, and al-Qaeda.

As the uprising commenced in February 2011 in Libya, Turkey found itself unsure about what to do, in contrast to its courageous stance during the Egyptian revolution. Turkey had \$10 billion worth of contracts with the regime, and 25,000 Turks were working in the country. Unlike in Egypt, Erdoğan refused to take a clear stand with the rebels and against Muammar Qaddafi, and sought to broker a compromise, warning of an Iraq-like scenario if the fighting continued. When Arab and Western opinion turned in favor of a no-fly zone over Libya, Erdoğan flatly refused to consider it, on the grounds that America's and NATO's involvement would lead to an Iraq-like invasion. Anti-Turkish demonstrations erupted in Benghazi, denouncing Erdoğan by name. After evacuating Turkish nationals, and after the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1973

authorizing a no-fly zone, Turkey finally reversed its position, sent its navy to participate in the NATO no-fly zone operation as well as facilitate humanitarian aid to Libya, and tried to make up for lost time.

As an uprising began in February 2011 in Bahrain, Turkey was also caught between multiple considerations. It had important economic interests with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), had to respect GCC security concerns, and did not want to encourage Iran to meddle in Southern Gulf affairs. However, it wanted to show its diplomatic leadership and avoid an intensification of Sunni–Shi'a tensions which affect stability in the entire region. Ankara offered to mediate a political resolution to the crisis, recommending restraint to the Bahraini authorities and urging them to avoid another Karbala (a reference to the 7th-century martyrdom of Imam Hussein in Karbala, in southern Iraq, which is at the origin of the Sunni–Shi'a split in Islam), and reached out to Shi'a leader Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Basra to help calm sectarian tensions. Erdoğan wanted to emphasize Turkey's regional diplomatic role as well as point out that, beyond its role as a major Sunni power, Turkey could compete with Iran in looking out for Shi'a interests and managing Sunni–Shi'a relations. The GCC effectively ignored Erdoğan's overtures and proceeded to militarily crush the uprising with troops from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other GCC countries. Iran denounced the action as an invasion, while Turkey issued a bland warning about the risk of escalating tensions in the region.

Although Turkey has suffered considerable economic losses as a result of sudden change and instability in key Arab countries, it generally has viewed the Arab Spring as a long overdue correction toward more accountable, and hence sustainable and effective, governance. It also has been pleased that the Muslim Brotherhood and affiliated movements tied to moderate Islamist trends have stood to gain more power in the new political systems. Ankara correctly surmised that these movements would look more to the AKP for guidance than to examples provided by Saudi Arabia or Iran, and that they were positively oriented toward economic globalization and trade. Although the Arab Spring is still evolving dynamically, it appears that Turkey might be one of the main regional beneficiaries from recent developments—unlike Israel, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, who all seemed to be losing ground or are on the defensive.

Syria

The Syrian crisis, however, is where Ankara has been most deeply torn, forcing Turkey to reevaluate many of its revitalized assumptions and policies about the region, which have evolved over the last decade. The Syrian–Turkish bilateral relationship is a remarkable story of a journey from enmity to strong friendship and now back to serious confrontation. During most of the 1980s and 1990s, Damascus was a strong supporter of Kurdish separatism in Turkey. Syrian support

for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) was partly a response to Turkey's policy of seeking to maximize the use of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers for irrigation and energy projects in southeastern Anatolia. In 1998, after considerable coercive diplomacy and under Turkish military duress, then-President Hafiz al-Assad finally stopped supporting the PKK and its leader, Abdullah Öcalan. Relations between Ankara and Damascus began to normalize and slowly improve after 1999.

With the arrival of the AKP to power, Ankara invested in Bashar al-Assad, who succeeded his father as president in 2000, and in good political, security, and economic relations with Syria. The two countries set up a higher council for strategic cooperation, lifted visa restrictions, and Turkey regarded Syria as a gateway to the Arab east. Ankara also played a key role in bringing Assad out from regional and international isolation after the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri in 2005 by increasing economic, cultural, and diplomatic relations with Damascus. Erdoğan felt he had a special avuncular relationship with the young Syrian president, and that he could continue to coax Syria in a moderate and pragmatic direction. Turkey also played a crucial role in 2007 and 2008 with its very effective mediation efforts between Israel and Syria. These secret negotiations over the Golan Heights came very close to a resolution in late 2008, but to Erdoğan's great irritation, the process collapsed with Israel's Gaza operation in December 2008.

When rebellions began in Syria in March 2011, Erdoğan announced that he had spoken with Assad and counseled quick implementation of social, economic, and political reforms, while offering Turkish help to achieve the changes. Erdoğan hoped that his protégé could harness the regional change and avoid being a victim of it, as was happening to rulers in other Arab countries. This angered Syrian protestors as well as pro-change public opinion around the Arab world, as Turkey appeared to be standing by an Arab dictator against his own people. Erdoğan's position soon changed.

By early June, he was beginning to describe the Syrian crackdown as inhumane and stated publicly that Assad had not made good on his promises of reform. Erdoğan also appeared personally affronted by Assad's having effectively lied to him about intending reform—much as he had been personally angered by Ehud Olmert's hiding the December 2008 Gaza war from him in a meeting, just days before Israel launched that operation. By November 2011, Erdoğan called on the Syrian President to step down and Turkey went on the offensive, hosting several meetings of the Syrian opposition and the second "Friends of the Syrian People" Summit in Istanbul in April 2012. Suddenly, Turkey became a key player backing the revolution in Syria.⁸

Simply put, the destabilization of Syria is not in Turkey's national interest. Yet, the Assad regime's actions potentially have paved the road for a sectarian

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civil war in the country. As Syria’s only democratic ally, Turkey realized soon enough that it had a moral and political responsibility to severely condemn the killing of hundreds of protesters by Assad’s brutal regime. At the same time, Turkey was uniquely positioned to apply some friendly advice to Syria. The obvious problem is that Damascus is in no mood to listen. It should not be particularly surprising that when a dictator is faced with regime survival, outside pressure seldom changes his behavior.

As a result, Turkey is now rapidly discovering the limits of its regional influence and “zero problems” policy. In case the refugee crisis in Syria gets out of hand, Turkey is likely to consider establishing a buffer zone at the border, which may turn into a safe haven for the Syrian opposition. The Assad government is predictably blaming Turkey for supporting the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria. Although Ankara tries hard to avoid sectarianism, there is an element of truth in the perception of Turkish support for the Sunni majority of Syria. Turkey is a predominantly Sunni country and its government and public opinion have been increasingly irritated by a minority Alawite regime massacring Sunnis.

Syria Policy and Turkey’s Evolving Strategic Vision

So where does Turkey’s Syria policy fit in the framework of Neo-Ottomanism, Kemalism, and Turkish Gaullism? The short answer is that the policy has elements of all the trends outlined above. The willingness to engage in grand diplomacy by organizing conferences and the urge to take the lead in regional efforts (by hosting the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian National Council) are clear examples of Neo-Ottoman activism. The AKP’s sympathy for the Sunni majority of Syria and its occasional display of anti-Alawite bias also has clear elements of Neo-Ottomanism.

On the other hand, Neo-Ottomanism fails to explain the caution displayed in avoiding unilateral action (military or humanitarian) and the reluctance to unilaterally establish a buffer zone or a safe haven within Syria. The fear that Assad might use the Kurdish card against Turkey by helping the PKK, and the emphasis on international law, multilateralism, and international legitimacy before taking any action, are vintage Kemalism.

Finally, Turkish Gaullism is present in the grand narrative of independence and pursuit of national interests. Foreign Minister Davutoğlu often underlines that all steps taken by Turkey vis-à-vis Syria are in pursuit of Turkish national

and security interests without any pressure or directives coming from the United States. Turkey is also trying hard to maintain a sense of grandeur and influence over Syria and the region, as evidenced by Davutoğlu's speech to the Turkish Grand National Assembly in April 2012, where he stated that Turkey would continue to be the inspirational leader for Arab democratization and liberation efforts.⁹ With a touch of Neo-Ottoman glory, such a narrative of influence is vintage Turkish Gaullism.

At the end of the day, the unfolding tragedy in Syria clearly has displayed the limits of Turkish influence over its neighbor. Turkey has not had the power to alter the behavior of Bashar Assad, which Prime Minister Erdoğan has taken personally given the brotherhood and influence he thought he had with the Syrian president. Much of Turkey's Syria policy stems from a sense of betrayal. The rest can be explained by a mixture of Neo-Ottomanism, Kemalism, and Turkish Gaullism.

In dealing with the Middle East, the challenge for Ankara will be to carefully balance its Neo-Ottoman, Kemalist and Gaullist instincts. In the short term, the Kurdish question is likely to remain the central factor in the formulation of Turkey's national security policy. The terrorist threat posed by the PKK will continue to play into the hands of hardliners within the Kemalist camp. Nationalist elements within the Turkish Gaullism would also favor a security-first approach. Although Ankara has legitimate concerns about Kurdish terrorism, it is clear that military means alone will not solve the Kurdish question. In an ideal world, Ankara would address Kurdish discontent at home with democratic reforms, take bolder steps toward EU membership, and continue its soft-power oriented approach with the Middle East. This grand strategy would require a delicate calibration between the self-confidence of Turkish Gaullism and the overly ambitious narrative of neo-Ottomanism.

Turkey's Syria policy has elements of all three Turkish strategic visions.

Notes

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