Episode Transcript

Episode Title:
Erdogan’s Middle East Policy

Guests:
Ambassador James Jeffrey
Jon Alterman:
Ambassador James Jeffrey joined the Wilson Center in December 2020 as the chair of the Middle East Program, just coming off a term as the Secretary of State's Special Representative for Syria Engagement and Special Envoy to Defeat ISIS from 2018 to 2020. From 2008 to 2010, he was the U.S. ambassador to Turkey and followed that with a term as the U.S. ambassador to Iraq. Jim, welcome to Babel.

James Jeffrey:
Thank you very much for having me today, John. I'm looking forward to having a discussion, having a debate.

Jon Alterman:
I'm not sure we're going to debate. I'd like to draw you out, though, a little bit. When you were ambassador to Turkey, it feels to me like Turkey didn't really have much of a Middle East strategy in the late 2000s. It seemed to me that a lot of Turkey's strategy was zero problems with the neighbors. What changed? Was it really just the Arab Spring or was something else driving a change in Turkey's relationship to the Middle East?

James Jeffrey:
I think three things changed from the Turkey that I worked with. First of all, it begins with Erdogan. He became more dictatorial, more reluctant to listen to advisors, be either economic or diplomatic advisors, more sure of himself, and more determined to drive an Erdogan policy. A lot of that is Erdogan and his different approach to politics.

The second thing is because of his push for a constitutional change, which everybody thought was to eliminate democracy because people are very skeptical about Erdogan, it turned out it pushed him into a far more democratic system with the need to have a parliamentary majority in a different way than he needed it before. As his party, the AKP, started losing votes, he had to find a coalition partner. He found that in the National Action Party under Devlet Bahçeli, which is an extremely nationalistic successor to the essentially right wing violent movement, the Grey Wolves, and they have pulled him to an anti-foreign, anti-Western approach.

James Jeffrey:
Then the third thing is Erdogan feels that he was repeatedly disappointed by the West. He cites the Annan Plan for Cyprus that he agreed to. The Turkish Cypriots overwhelmingly voted for it, the Greek Cypriots turned it down. The action of the European Union was to invite Greece in without resolving the internal conflict. He was unhappy with France in particular, but also Germany, thumbing down his effort to try to have a serious accession road to pass forward for EU membership. He was unhappy with the Armenian reaction to his outreach, and he had lingering concerns about the United States from 2003 because the government said under no conditions would it support an American invasion of Iraq. Erdogan said, "I will, but I need my parliament to vote on it." The parliament did vote on it. They voted a majority for it, but
because of the rules for something as important as launching an invasion out of your country, given its history of getting into World War I was just such a thing in 1915, you didn't get the full majority to vote for it.

James Jeffrey:
But we then blamed, unfairly, our total failure, post-conquest of Iraq, on the Northern Offensive. You needed a fall guy. That was Turkey. He resented this very, very greatly. Then, finally, it was we and the rest of the coalition embracing the YPG, the Syrian branch of the PKK, as our ally against the Islamic State. Now, he went along with that in 2014.

What changed was that first of all, he was forced into a coalition, or he had to go into a coalition, with Bahçeli.

Secondly, the cease fire with the PKK broke down in 2015. Thirdly, he began to see that the United States was not just helping the Kurds fight the Islamic State in Kurdish areas, but that we were using it to expand into Arab areas, Manbij, the Euphrates, as our primary infantry to take down the entire Islamic State.

James Jeffrey:
Firstly, he saw this as expanding the power of the pseudo-PKK by giving it essentially enough weapons to field 100,000-man force. Secondly, Erdogan believed, with some accuracy, that the Sunni Arab areas along the Euphrates and in Manbij were areas where he had influence and he didn't want the Kurds moving into them.

Thirdly, he thought—he couldn't prove that—deals were made behind closed doors in the field to essentially give the YPG/PYD the entire North of Syria if they would do something that cost them tens of thousands of casualties and move into the Arab areas.

So for all of those reasons, he became very, very bitter at the United States. This fed into not an Erdogan fear, but a fear of most Turks that the great powers are always trying to keep Turkey down by playing off various elements to their flanks, the Armenians, the Greeks, the Kurds, to try to put pressure on Turkey.

Turks all the time cite that Woodrow Wilson tried to advocate for an independent Kurdistan, as he did an independent Albania, in 1918-1919. This is writ from above for Turks as part of a hundred year plot against them by Washington. Of course, nobody in Washington knows that they're participating in such a plot.

So for all of these reasons, it’s become very difficult to deal with Erdogan’s Turkey.

Jon Alterman:
So what you've described is a combination of emotions and tactics. From a strategic point of view, can you discern any desired Turkish end state? What are the goals? What are they trying to do in an enduring way? What are they trying to secure?

James Jeffrey:
We do not know, because this is totally Erdogan. It is not clear. When he had a high-powered foreign minister, Davutoğlu, Davutoğlu was out there talking all the time about zero problems. Turkey as a state and as a population is Europe manqué, that is the orientation of the Turks, and for that matter, largely the Ottoman Empire before it was Europe, the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Black Sea Area, and deeper into Europe in one or another way. Be it the two marches on Vienna or be it the almost 4 million Gastarbeiter families, or descendents of them, in Germany.

The Turks are economically united with the European Union, with the EU Customs Union. They are focused on eventual EU membership, however unlikely that is. It is simply not a place that fits well into the Middle East, but by its power, its geographic location, its shared Islamic religion, it is also a Middle Eastern country. Erdogan has tried to focus it more on the Middle East with limited success because there is no strategy. There is no particular interest. There are not significant trade interests. They get some oil and there is no other major trade.

**Jon Alterman:**
It feels like, as you said, they're getting more involved in the Middle East. Certainly their Eastern Mediterranean Strategy.

**James Jeffrey:**
But the Eastern Mediterranean is an offshoot of two things. One is their need for energy. The Achilles heel of the Turkish economy long has been their current account deficit.

**James Jeffrey:**
But the second and bigger thing is their longstanding battle with the Greeks about essentially the necklace of islands stretching from Cyprus to Lemnos. Greek islands held by a hostile partner right off the coast of Turkey and the implications of that in military, in economic, in navigation, and in under sea exploration terms. This is a long-term struggle between the two, where Greece wraps international law, as Greece sees it, around itself—sovereignty and the Law of the Sea.

**James Jeffrey:**
The Turks wrap around themselves about eight or nine international agreements. Erdogan, in moving this into the Eastern Mediterranean, again, first of all, that was not a move into the Middle East. It was a move against Cyprus and against Greece, as Turkey would see it, in their long-standing struggle. They did it in such a way that they got not only the European Union lined up against them, but also countries that had been working with Cyprus, that is Israel, Egypt, and even Lebanon.

**Jon Alterman:**
Although, it extends even further. It extends into Libya. Were you surprised that the Turks got involved in the Libyan Civil War?
James Jeffrey:
No, for two reasons. The Libya adventure is a spinoff of two things. One is the participants in this consortium for the Eastern Mediterranean stumbled into this fairly innocently. But of course, Cyprus, at the end of the day, while they have economic interests, their interest is confronting Turkey. Therefore, it was unwise of the others to think, “gee, should we go into this while excluding Turkey?” They let themselves be entrapped.

Turkey's response was to figure out a way to get around that and Libya offered them an opportunity. The other thing is the Turks have a longstanding relationship with Libya that goes back to family ties. It was one area of the Middle East that they were very interested in. So, they see Libya as a special place that they know well as compared to most of the Arab world.

James Jeffrey:
So, the Libyan thing is primarily a spinoff of the conflict on the Eastern Med because their main goal is to get a deal with Libya where they get a very expansive set of sea claims to counter the sea claims that the Cypriots are making. Then the other thing is Turkey, despite its friendly relations at the head of state level with Russia, sees itself as a deterrent to Russia in the region. It doesn’t want Russia to expand particularly in the region and sees that as a threat. They have enough problems with Russia to its North and to its Northeast in their Caucasus and thus the Turks have taken a tough position against Russia, both in Syria and Libya.

Jon Alterman:
As you point out, it feels like the Turks have almost no partners in any of this.

James Jeffrey:
They've had no partners.

Jon Alterman:
I mean, to some extent they cooperate with the Qataris, which is a small but wealthy partner to have.

James Jeffrey:
Okay, so that's one.

Jon Alterman:
Right. But do you think that's intentional? I mean, they're increasing tensions with the Saudis, as you've noted, over the Brotherhood. Certainly the Emiratis are very concerned about Turkey's relationship to the Brotherhood. They have a worsening relationship with Israel. Their relationship with Iran has always been a little bit strange, as you've noted. Is it intentional that they're doing this largely on their own?

James Jeffrey:
It is a manifestation of two things. First of all, I always underline Erdogan. The second is a
general Turkish belief that the only friend of a Turk is a Turk, and a kind of belief that the
outside world is trying to stop Turkey's inevitable growth to be a major power. So therefore,
doing deals with people, they think do we need to do deals with people? We're so powerful
ourselves, and they'll only cheat us and get in our way. It is extraordinary how few friends
Turkey has and how it has badly treated the friends it does have, and I would include the United
States in that category.

Jon Alterman:
What does that mean about its treaty partners in NATO using NATO as an instrument either to
help secure aspects of the Middle East or partnering with Turkey on common goals in the
Mediterranean? Can Turkey be a partner or does this mean that Turkey is unable to be a
partner with its allies?

James Jeffrey:
That question is more to NATO than it is to Turkey. What is NATO today? It is no longer an
alliance whose sole purpose is to deter the Soviet Union. Turkey was a very important member
of that alliance. It is now a loose military cooperation vehicle between the United States and
Europe to deal with a variety of problems, and they're almost boutique problems. On these
boutique things, Turkey has been across the board helpful. So therefore, I just scratch my head
and say, wait a second. It doesn't have an overarching purpose, rather, it has a set of boutique
responses to threats on its far boundaries and areas of instability where a Western military
presence can be helpful.

Turkey, in each one of these things, has been very helpful. I know of no operation that Turkey
didn't participate in other than the sorry Libyan one. You can't really do a whole lot in the
broader Middle East, the Caucasus, and such, without Turkey's airspace and access to the Black
Sea. So therefore it is a good partner on all of NATO's boutique activities. So from that
standpoint, it's an extremely important and a very useful NATO ally. Now, you then get into,
“but what about the NATO philosophy, what about democracy?”
“Hey, Turkey today is far more democratic than Franco Spain, and it was a member of NATO for
two decades.”

Jon Alterman:
Throughout this period, the role of the military in Turkey has changed drastically. The Turkish
general staff is not nearly as independent as it was. Has the Erdogan strategy toward the
Middle East helped move the military to a different position, and does the military have a
similar approach to the Middle East that Erdogan does at this point?

James Jeffrey:
Nobody has the same approach to the Middle East that Erdogan does. As I said, Turkey has
serious national security interests that all Turks share. That's the Eastern Mediterranean and
Aegean. That is the six threats from Syria. That is the PKK threat from Iraq and the concern that Iran would dominate Iraq and undercut Turkey's closer relationship with the Kurdish Federation in the North of Iraq, which is one of Turkey's few partners.

James Jeffrey:
But the military on one hand as an internal player has been almost entirely stripped of power under Erdogan. With much encouragement, by the way, by the European Union. Less so by the Bush administration, but certainly by the Europea Union. So he got them out of politics, which was a good thing, not a bad thing.

Secondly, however, he has given them very important missions to carry out, independent military operations. They've gotten suddenly very good at it as we saw in Idlib, Tripoli, and Nagorno-Karabakh in the last eleven months. So the military basically has worked out very well their relationship with Erdogan. It is a very strong relationship, beginning with the minister of defense, General Akar. I see no tension particularly between them.

Jon Alterman:
You've attributed a lot to Erdogan's personal approach, Erdogan's personal drivers, do you see in a post-Erdogan age a natural role for Turkey in the region, sort of a reversion to something, or do you think that all routes are open and Turkey may maintain a number of aspects that Erdogan introduced?

James Jeffrey:
Yeah. Turkey's Middle Eastern policy falls into two categories. One is a continued concern about its near abroad for existential or critically important reasons. That near abroad is the Caucasus, the Black Sea, Iran, Northern Iraq and Iraq, generally, Syria, in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Aegean, and the Balkans. Turkey's independent foreign policy for many decades has revolved around those areas in dealing with challenges coming from either the Kurds, or Iran, or Russia, or the Armenians, or the Greeks, and its interests in undersea exploration. That won't change.

The broader Middle East policy is essentially Erdogan's fantasy baseball with this idea that he has that he is some kind of spiritual leader of the Muslim Brothers and they are some kind of fifth column that can undermine Sunni Arab states. This is all hogwash.

I didn't meet people who were particularly pro-Muslim Brothers, and I spent a lot of time with the more Islamic folks in places outside of Istanbul and Ankara when I was ambassador there. Many of them were business folks—that's much of the core of Erdogan's support—and these guys all want to export to America, to the Far East, and to Europe. They have little interest in the Middle East. They haven't traveled there. It's rare to find someone who speaks Arabic other than diplomats and that's the Middle East policy that Erdogan has.

Jon Alterman:
Jim Jeffrey, thank you very much for joining us.