

# Turkey past Erdogan: The Turkish Expansionist Policy in the Region

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## Key Points

- Turkey is one of the most active players on the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean chessboard. From Syria to Libya, Ankara plays a leading role in the main conflicts and crisis contexts.
- Erdogan's Turkey uses the Kurdish organization to take root in upper Mesopotamia.
- Turkey's role in the Syrian crisis.
- A new Gaza: Turkey's border policy in northern Syria.
- Turkey's policy of power projection in Syria would not have been possible without a prior agreement with both Russia and Iran, an unstable agreement subject to continuous negotiations and redefinitions.
- Nostalgia to restore Ankara's influence in the ancient regions of the Ottoman Empire.
- Turkey's expansionist policy in the region, with economic and dominant interests which led to the progressive isolation of Ankara from the countries of the Muslim brotherhood.
- The role of Turkey within NATO: a disturbing ally. Will Turkey still be allowed to use Erdogan's strategy of swinging between East and West in the future?

## Introduction

From the Middle East<sup>1</sup> to North Africa via the eastern Mediterranean, Turkey is trying to assert its influence in a region undergoing profound reorganization, and which is still highly unstable. Driven both by the ambition to become a regional power, and by specific geopolitical and energy interests, Ankara has pushed to be a player in the big game. While it is not easy to say whether there is a "grand strategy" behind Turkey's moves and ambitions, there is no denying that Turkey is one of the most active and assertive players on the Middle East chessboard and its robust policy,<sup>2</sup> from Syria to Libya to its controversial energy explorations off Cyprus,<sup>3</sup> has raised many questions and fears in western powers and other countries in the region.

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<sup>1</sup> TRT World News, "Turkey's moves to assert itself as a key player in the Middle East," January 6, 2020, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/turkey-s-moves-to-assert-itself-as-a-key-player-in-the-middle-east-32746>, (Accessed December 28,2020).

<sup>2</sup> Gonul Tol, "Viewpoint: Why Turkey is flexing its muscles abroad," BBC News, October 16, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe54547304> (Accessed December, 28).

<sup>3</sup> Galip Dalay, "Turkey, Europe, and the Eastern Mediterranean: Charting a way out of the current deadlock," January 28, 2021, Brookings, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/turkey-europe-and-the-eastern-mediterranean-charting-a-way-out-of-the-current-deadlock/> (Accessed January 28,2021).

Turkey's identity is not just as the Turkish Republic. The present-day Turkish state is the successor of the polyethnic, multireligious, and centuries-old Ottoman Empire (1299-1923). The psychological impact of loss of its empire remains, and has rationalized both its perception of existential threats and strategies.

Turkey's security apparatuses are enabled to suppress revolts, especially those with a separatist tone. The Kurds are their preferred target. Even the plots of apparatuses belonging to external powers, the infamous Gulenists,<sup>4</sup> apparently vanquished after the failed coup of 2016. Gülen defines himself as an authoritative Muslim, Turkish scholar, thinker, author, poet, opinion leader, and educational activist who advocates interreligious and intercultural dialogue, science, democracy, and spirituality, and opposes violence and the use of religion as a political ideology.<sup>5</sup>

It is naive to attribute so much security emphasis to the overwhelming hegemony of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Of the previous Turkish prime ministers, Bülent Ecevit, established Turkey's special geopolitical conditions necessitate a special kind of democracy.<sup>6</sup> Today, Erdogan is represented in the West as the almighty sultan of an aspiring caliph. He is a controversial iconographer for us, and fascinating for others, especially Sunni Muslims. In his mental map of the Turkish world, Erdoğan advocates the political union of all Islamic peoples in a single state institution evoking his triple face: leader of the Turks wherever they are, heir to the Sultan of Constantinople, then Ottoman caliph.

### Background Information

Costly mistakes made in the Levant and Mesopotamia are at the heart of Anatolian geopolitics. It goes back at least to Turkey's participation in the first American invasion of Iraq, a decision that led the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces Necip Torumtay<sup>7</sup> to resign in controversy. This prompted the birth of Iraqi Kurdistan and the PKK's settlement in the Qandil mountains enabled by the US and Israel. Circumstances over the next thirty years forced Ankara to squander its precious resources to fight the Kurds strategically. In this sense, Turkey radically changed its approach to military operations. These operations against the PKK, carried out within its national borders, have allowed the Armed Forces to dismantle the Anatolian structure of the Kurdish organization.<sup>7</sup> Turkey launched in May 2019, the first of the three phases of the Pençe (Claw) operations acted to sever the logistics network of the PKK in Iraq. Since the previous year, Turkey had also conducted the Pençe-Kartal (Claw-Eagle) air operation in the same region, which on 17 June 2020 was superimposed on the land offensive named Pençe-Kaplan (Claw-Tiger).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Killian Cogan, "Erdogan's Purges Have Replaced One Islamic Sect with Another," *Foreign policy news*, January 15, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/15/erdogans-gulen-gulenist-purges-have-replaced-one-islamic-sect-with-another-menzil/> (Accessed December 20, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Salih Yucel, "Fethullah Gülen - Spiritual Leader in a Global Islamic Context," *Journal of Religion & Society*, <http://moses.creighton.edu/JRs/2010/2010-4.pdf>, (2010), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Yohanan Benhaïm and Kerem Öktem, "The rise and fall of Turkey's soft power discourse," *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, <http://journals.openedition.org/ejts/5275>, 21 2015, 02 March 2016, (Accessed March 10, 2021). <sup>7</sup> Hugh Pope, "Turkish Army Chief Quits; Policy Split Indicated," *Los Angeles Times*, December 04, 1990, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-12-04-mn-6029-story.html> (Accessed January 23, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> ISDP, "Turkey's Kurdish Conflict: 2015-Present," Institute for Security and Development Policy, December 14, 2016, <https://isdip.eu/publication/turkeys-kurdish-conflict-2015-present/> (Accessed January 23, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Max Hoffman, "The State of the Turkish-Kurdish Conflict," Center for American Progress, August 12, 2019, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2019/08/12/473508/state-turkish-kurdish-conflict/> (Access January 23, 2021).

Turkish progression in Iraq and Syria is not solely based on defeating PKK. It uses the PKK issue as a pretext to operate in upper Mesopotamia. When the Islamic State conquered Mosul and invaded the Iraqi Kurds' territory in 2014,<sup>9</sup> Turkey was unable to deter terrorists and was forced to sacrifice its local consulate. Today, Turkish drones operate up to the Arbol-Sulaymaniyah line. The Turkish Armed Forces are present even beyond the border. The dynamics and the outcome of any future event, similar to the expansion of the Islamic State in Northern Iraq, will be completely different.

There is currently no real prospect of a Turkish breakthrough in the Levant. The US, Russia, and Iran have long since closed the window of opportunity that opened in front of Erdogan in 2011. The moves played across the border could backfire bitterly against Ankara. Due to the Russian-American agreement on Syria, the Turkish-controlled pockets are likely to become entities analogous to the Gaza Strip.<sup>10</sup> As on the Turkish-Greek border, Turkey is betting on the deconstruction of the local balance and power relations in Iraq and Syria. The military assets deployed in Idlib are, for example, clearly exaggerated to defend the patch of land around the provincial capital.

Turkey's action in Syria reveals the nature of Ankara's long-term strategy. The four operations carried out since 2016 (Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, Source of Peace, and Spring Shield) Turkey has focused on supplying electricity, water, healthcare, education, and other essential services. In cities of Turkish Syria, Turkish is taught alongside Arabic as a first language. The flag of the Republic of Turkey flutters alongside that of the Syrian revolution. Ankara's presence in these areas fully recognized and appear as an extension of Turkish territory.<sup>11</sup>

## Analysis

There is a tendency among international observers to ascribe Turkey's moves in the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East to Erdoğan's ambitions or conservative Islamism. There is also the general idea that once he leaves office, Turkey will stabilize its actions and improve its relations with Europe. This may not be the case as Erdoğan is not the sole driver of Turkey's strategy.

Napoleon once said, that knowing the geography of a country allows you to predict its foreign policy. Turkey seeks to project its strength into maritime areas of vital importance and along coastal states. Its refusal to be excluded from competition for energy resources should come as no surprise as well. To associate Turkey's recent boldness in the Eastern Mediterranean with Erdoğan's ambitions is to ignore the continuity of geostrategic thinking that informed Ankara's moves in the region since the Republic's founding. Historical examples include the annexation of the Syrian province of Alexandretta in 1939, Cyprus's invasion in 1974, and recent occupations of Afrin in 2018 and Rojava in 2019.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Cameron Glenn, Mattisan Rowan, John Caves, Garrett Nada, "Timeline: the Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State," October 28, 2019 <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state> (Accessed January 23, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Asli Aydintaşbaş, "A new Gaza: Turkey's border policy in northern Syria," European Council on Foreign Relations news, May 28, 2020, [https://ecfr.eu/publication/a\\_new\\_gaza\\_turkeys\\_border\\_policy\\_in\\_northern\\_syria/](https://ecfr.eu/publication/a_new_gaza_turkeys_border_policy_in_northern_syria/) (Accessed, January 23, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> Erwin van Veen - Jan van Leeuwen, "Turkey in northwestern Syria Rebuilding empire at the margins," Clingendael Netherlands Institute of International Relations, June, 2019 [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/201906/PB\\_Turkey\\_in\\_Northwestern\\_Syria\\_June\\_2019.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/201906/PB_Turkey_in_Northwestern_Syria_June_2019.pdf) (Accessed January 26, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> EDITOR, "Turkey Grand Strategy 1974: Invasion of Cyprus, 1939: Annexation of Alexandretta, 2018: Invasion of Syria," International Security Forum, February 06, 2018 <https://www.inter-security-forum.org/turkey-grand-strategy-1974-invasion-of-cyprus-1939annexation-of-alexandretta-2018-invasion-of-syria/> (Accessed January 23, 2021).

Since the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi ("AKP," or Justice and Development Party, led by Erdoğan) came to power at the end of 2002, the Middle East has become the prime ground of Ankara's foreign policy.<sup>13</sup> However, the years in which Turkey (promoter of a policy of "zero problems with neighbors") was viewed as a "model" for Arab countries in transition are long gone. In recent years, Ankara has instead found itself in a progressive isolation. Turkey provided increasingly ideological support to the Muslim brotherhood led to:

- the failure of diplomatic relations with Egypt's Abdel Fattah al-Sisi;
- alienation of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, fierce opponents of the movement; and
- an alignment with Qatar seen as a "win-win" policy for both: Turkish military support to the small emirate, and Qatar's capital to the troubled Turkish economy.

Ankara's activism thus fits into the broader competition for influence in the Middle East and North Africa. Recently, this competition has prompted Ankara to intervene to counter other nations' hegemonic aspirations. Turkey's interventionist approach has been and is being tested in Syria. Ankara's main challenge now is to secure a voice in Syria's future order and reconstruction. After the Russian military intervention prevented the overthrow of the Syrian regime, the Turkish government worked with Russia and Iran in the Astana peace process. At the same time, Turkey conducted three military operations - August 2016, January 2018, and October 2019 - in northern Syria to neutralize the People's Protection Units (YPG). As YPG is affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Turkey considers the group as a PKK-partnered terrorist organization. Ankara has been fighting the PKK internally for over thirty years. Despite the costs, the Turkish military maintains its presence both in northern Syria and in the positions around the de-escalation zone of Idlib.

Another example of projecting influence includes Turkey's approach to Libya. Ankara is seeking to force Libya into economic dependence on Turkey, exploit any gas reserves on the Libyan coast, impose a treaty in Tripoli to take control of a significant portion of the country's oil and gas wealth, and force Libya to back Erdoğan's territorial claims in neighboring countries. This is a classic example of Turkish imperialist policy.<sup>14</sup> Turkey has engaged in a remarkable series of geopolitical foreign interventions from Syria to Libya, Cyprus, and more recently, Azerbaijan.<sup>15</sup> Some have called this Erdoğan's "New Ottoman Empire" strategy. Yet a collapsing lira and declining national economy threatens to end its great geopolitical ambitions unexpectedly.

### Turkey's Position in Afghanistan

Ankara deployed troops to Afghanistan following Al-Qaeda's 2003 Istanbul attacks.<sup>16</sup> On 15 and 20 November, 2003, Al-Qaeda launch a series of suicide attacks in four different Turkish cities. Turkey enacted a law that allowed the Turkish Government to send troops to Afghanistan to support the NATO-led mission, Operation Resolute Support. In December 2020, the Parliament in Ankara authorized extending the Turkish mission to Afghanistan for

<sup>13</sup> Siri Neset Arne Strand, "Turkey's international relations," Chr. Michelsen Institute, February, 2019, <https://www.cmi.no/publications/6853-turkeys-international-relations> (Accessed December 20 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Ahmed Helal, "For Turkey, the Libyan conflict and the eastern Mediterranean are inextricably linked," Atlantic Council -Mena source, October 28, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/for-turkey-the-libyan-conflict-and-the-eastern-mediterranean-are-inextricably-linked/> (Accessed, January 31, 2021).

<sup>15</sup> International Crisis Group, "Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus," June 28, 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/250-russia-and-turkey-black-sea-and-southcaucasus> (Accessed January 20, 2021).

<sup>16</sup> Daily Sabah with AA, "Turkey to extend troop deployment in Afghanistan," *Daily Sabah news*, December 16, 2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/turkey-to-extend-troop-deployment-in-afghanistan/news> (Accessed January 28, 2021).

a further two years, starting on 6 January, 2021. Turkish troops are stationed in the capital, Kabul, and the central province of Wardak.

Turkey also acts as a mediator between Afghanistan and Pakistan on terrorism-related issues. The Afghanistan-Pakistan-Turkey trilateral summit began in 2007 as the "Istanbul Process." This is intended to build mutual trust between Kabul and Islamabad, and solve the problems arising from the Afghan Government's accusations that the Afghan Taliban are hiding undisturbed within Pakistan.

An essential aspect of Ankara's connection to Afghanistan is its relationship with the Taliban. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, an Afghan mujahideen, head of the Hezb-e-Islami party. Hekmatyar claimed Erdoğan held private discussions with the Taliban and stated that Ankara a "neutral venue" ideal for stakeholder mediation. Hekmatyar said, "I have a message for the Turkish people: Afghans love you, they love your brilliant past, and we expect you to revive the glory of those times and your role," and continued, "other Muslim countries have turned into military bases for foreigners. The Arabs are divided and have lost the glory and prestige of the past. Let us pray for the success of the Turkish people and their President."<sup>1718</sup>

## Conclusion

Today, Turkey is geopolitically stronger than in the past and is able to project its military power on neighboring countries. However, its geopolitical strategies have placed a strain on relations with its. In the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean, numerous nations see Turkey as a rival. It remains to be seen what level of autonomy Ankara will grant itself in foreign policy matters while remaining linked to the Atlantic Alliance.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, what would happen if it chooses to become closer to the Russian Federation? The latter option cannot be seen as a realistic alternative for fostering national interests. Relations between Ankara and the Western partners are troubled.<sup>19</sup> The level of mutual distrust between the US, Turkey, and the EU is very high. Turkey's plan to become an EU member is in a deep coma. Ankara's relationships are strained due to:

- its use of migratory flows to keep the European Union in check;
- tensions with Greece;
- the marriage of convenience with Russia; and
- antagonism with Israel.

Erdoğan did not initiate the process of re-Islamization of the masses, but he deserves the credit for having grasped the trend and knowing how to ride it and bring his vision to fruition. Turkey's military moves in Syria, support in Azerbaijan, and close relations with militant Islamic groups have generated in some of its allies a harsh reaction. In fact, Turkey's role within NATO has been questioned several times. Ankara has been criticized for having shown

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<sup>17</sup> Shadi Khan Saif, "Taliban, Afghan politicians prefer Turkey for talks," *AA 100 years news*, February 03, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/-taliban-afghan-politicians-prefer-turkey-for-talks-/1722698> (Accessed January 29, 2021). <sup>19</sup>

Max Hoffman, "Flashpoints in U.S.-Turkey Relations in 2021", Center for American Progress, Flashpoints in U.S.-Turkey Relations in <sup>18</sup>, "Center for American Progress, January 19, 2021, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2021/01/19/494738/flashpoints-u-s-turkey-relations-2021> (Accessed February 25, 2021).

<sup>19</sup> Gönül Tol, Yörük Işık, "Turkey-NATO ties are problematic, but there is one bright spot," *MEI@75 News*, February 16, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkey-nato-ties-are-problematic-there-one-bright-spot> (Accessed February 25, 2021).

an attitude that is not in keeping with that of an ally, accusing it of disturbing cohesion among the Alliance members. Of course, Turkey's increasingly close relations with Russia are of great concern.

Turkey's foreign policy as a neo-Ottoman policy focuses on restoring Ankara's influence in the regions of its former empire. The possibility that Turkey will continue its strategic game in the future, projecting its power without inhibition, and relying on the allies' passive attitude or reluctance to exert too much pressure, will be increasingly limited. The intention expressed by the Biden administration of strengthening transatlantic ties, restoring NATO cohesion, promoting democratic governance, and EU unity will directly influence Turkey's future. Western allies must decide how much Turkey's role weighs in the new strategic context and how far they are willing to go to keep the country an ally. The near-term future decisions made by Ankara will have heavy consequences for the country's strategic identity.

### **Recommendations for US/CENTCOM**

- Continue to develop credible defense and deterrence against Russia, in the framework of NATO, in order to support US national security priorities.
- Assess Russia's attempts to disrupt Turkey, EU, and NATO relationships.
- Encourage and support Turkey to have open dialogue and relations with Israel.
- Support Turkish efforts to establish a significant footprint in Syria and Iraq in place of the US withdrawal.
- Support Turkish efforts to reach peace talks in Afghanistan.
- Encourage Turkey to play a more significant role in the fight against terrorism in accordance with common Coalition goals.
- In coordination with the Turkish SNR and EUCOM, encourage Turkey's cooperation with NATO countries through the organization of training exercises by US CENTCOM.