



Turkey's future

Is it too late for Ankara to move back into the Western orbit?

TURKEY HAS been the problem child of NATO for the last two decades, with Sultan Erdoğan's neo-Ottoman vision of an idealized past trying to reclaim its rightful role as leader of the Muslim world. Straddling the crossroads of Asia, Europe, and Africa, it remains as it has been for ages, a large and looming presence for good or ill at the center of the Middle East.

Can Turkey return and look West again as it did in the 20th century, when secular democracy held sway, or is the nation under the authoritarian Erdoğan too far gone on a path away from America, from its former allies including Israel, and all Western interests?

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is in a difficult position in Syria. The Turkish people don't want any more refugees entering the country and they want a way out of the Idlib quagmire, where millions of fellow Sunnis are besieged by Syria, Russia, and Iranian-controlled militias.

Erdoğan is now turning back somewhat to the United States and Europe, as he sees that his Russian connection may be fool's gold, Turkish interests being opposed to Russia's in Syria and Libya. The problem is, Moscow is still the primary address if you want to get anything accomplished in Syria, as it has become the de facto power broker in the region since Assad called President Obama's bluff, crossing his "red line" with chemical weapons, and Russia was invited to step in.

According to the Hudson Institute's Michael Doran, Turkish hostility to America is justified because of our support for the Syrian Kurds, who Erdoğan claims are part and parcel of the Turkish separatist and terrorist Kurds (PKK), and a danger to his country. Doran further argues that it "makes no strategic sense...of ditching a major...NATO ally that straddles Europe and Asia...where we have bases, intelligence platforms and (the) ability to stop the Russians through the Bosphorus."

On the other hand, opposing that view, Steven A. Cook writing for the Council on Foreign Relations says, "While Turkey



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

remains formally a NATO ally, it is not a partner of the United States...Erdoğan's consolidation of power... suppression of journalists, academics, civil society organizations, and minorities contradicts the underlying principles of American society and Turkey's own (NATO) membership." Turkey's involvement in the Syrian civil war highlights its conflicting interests with America and the West. Turkey's anti-Kurdish agenda in Syria is in direct opposition to American interests, as the Kurds remain the most effective fighting force against the resurgence of the Islamic State, hindering the Trump administration's principle reason for remaining engaged in Syria, while Turkey, as defender of Syria's Sunni population in Idlib province, protects, among those Sunnis, Salafist terrorists, no friends of the US. To be fair to Turkey, if Syria conquered Idlib, Assad wouldn't think twice about cutting a deal with al Qaeda, as long as they didn't threaten his regime.

According to the Washington Institute's Dana Stroul's testimony for the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, the Syrian

war has "implications for virtually all strategic challenges to U.S. interests: Russia's role in the Middle East, counterterrorism threats, Iran's projection of power, and the Syrian refugee crisis." By this logic, many American interests would be advanced with a Turkish victory in Idlib except for sacrificing our Kurdish allies.

The US has very conflicted feelings about Turkey. Despite Turkey working at times with Russia and Iran against American interests, Erdoğan's enemy is Assad, which places the Turks on the American side of that conflict. The schizophrenic American response was evident when the United States' special Syrian representative James Jeffrey reaffirmed America's commitment to Turkey in Idlib, stating "Turkey is a NATO ally.... As a NATO partner we share information, intelligence... and we are going to ensure that they have what they need there."

But in short order, the State Department changed its mind and said there will be only humanitarian aid to Turkey in Syria, as the US is still furious with Erdoğan for

buying and intending to incorporate Russia's S-400 missile system into NATO defenses.

If there was ever a better description of a frenemy than Turkey, I don't know it.

Turkey thinks it has the US over a barrel as it believes the American airbase in Incirlik, Turkey, is an indispensable and non-replaceable American asset. It is not, and that point can be made clearly to Erdoğan if the UAE as rumored will finance a new airbase to replace Incirlik. Erdoğan shut down the Incirlik base during the failed coup against him in 2016, endangering American servicemen.

What had been the only democratic Middle Eastern Islamic nation that prided itself on moderation and secularism now jails the most journalists in the world. Its judiciary, military, media and educational system have been systemically purged of secular adherents, with many fleeing the nation and the unfortunate languishing in prison. The purge of thousands of independent judges by Erdoğan has turned the judiciary into his rubber stamp.

It may be hard to imagine, but just 20 years ago Erdoğan's Islamist AKP party (Justice and Development Party) was banned from running in the secular Turkish state. Today, Islamization dominates the government and military, and while the Turkish people do vote in large numbers for Erdoğan's AKP party, today we see cracks in the wall of Turkish Islamism that could be an opportunity for it to turn toward the West out of need, if not desire.

There are significant signs of resistance to Erdoğan and his Islamist party, especially in the loss of the mayoral elections in Istanbul and Ankara showing that people in its largest cities, if given free choice, could turn against him. Meanwhile, previous Islamist allies like former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and Ali Babacan, a former confidant of Erdoğan, are forming their own parties and are planning to run against him in the next election in three years.

How else has Turkey undermined American interests?

Tracing the shifting alliances of the Islamic countries is like gazing into a tropical fish tank. When the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) led, the government of Morsi fell in 2013, an adversary of American interests, and the leadership of the Egyptian Islamist organization found ref-

uge in Turkey and Qatar. Although Qatar should in theory be aligned with the other fossil fuel-rich conservative Gulf States, which oppose Erdoğan, it too has also been a financial supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood that includes MB aligned Hamas.

Qatari and Turkish interests converge in supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, and in its antagonism toward the Saudis and the UAE. Turkey has even sent troops to Qatar to protect it from its conservative Sunni cousins in the Gulf. Qatar, like Turkey, works with Iran, but, in its case, it is because they share the world's largest gas field and all dislike American influence in the Middle East.

Iran had historically been a Turkish adversary, but Turkey not long ago gave them a pathway to launder a billion dollars of Iranian oil, with the help of an Iranian-Turkish gold trader to evade American sanctions over its nuclear program.

Although Turkey and Iran are on different sides of the Syrian divide, Turkey and Syria also work with Iran for common interests primarily against the US, but over time Turkey should become an Iranian adversary again, not only because the Turks are Sunni and the Iranians are Shi'ite, but because their visions are different, both wanting to dominate the region as in days of old – the Ottoman Empire and the great Persian kingdoms of antiquity, respectively.

Russia is also not a natural ally of Turkey. Erdoğan needs Russia as it is the only mediator to advance its interests on suppressing the flow of refugees, reining in the Kurds in northeast Syria, and as a restraining force on the Syrian regime. However, that relationship is being sorely tested as Iran and Russia militarily support the genocidal Assad government's advance on the Turkish positions in Idlib. Again their common interest of wanting to weaken America has masked their natural differences.

Turkey claims it helped defeat the Islamic State but what is little known is that Turkey supported the Islamic State by allowing thousands of Islamists to transit into Syria while also looking the other way as IS sold oil to support its jihad. Today, Turkey protects a wide range of Syrian Sunni Salafist rebels living along with the non-militant Sunni population of northwest Syria (Idlib). In Turkey's defense, it needs to stem the tide of millions

of refugees from Idlib into Turkey, who could cripple their economy that is already strained with millions of Syrian refugees from the 10-year-old civil war.

One possible American strategy to deal with Erdoğan would be to wait him out and hope that in future decades a new leadership emerges. But the Syrian civil war has created opportunities and dangers that will test American administrations who just want to get out of the Middle East.

As time goes on, America needs to be on the lookout for any opportunities to get Turkey to reengage with Israel. That might not sound possible now, but think about the Israeli relationship with the Gulf States today, something that could have never seemed possible in the 20th century. Israel still enjoys significant trade with Turkey, with both nations looking the other way on trade, while Erdoğan spouts his anti-Semitism.

Turkish hegemonic ambitions in the Mediterranean and the Maghreb (northern Africa) threaten Israeli energy concerns and Mediterranean trade. Turkey has become the patron of the Muslim Brotherhood aligned UN-recognized government of Libya, and their new Mediterranean trade agreement poses a challenge to all Mediterranean trading nations, including Israel, Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, Italy, and everyone else who uses the Suez Canal.

Closer to home, Turkey is threatening its neighbor Cyprus, claiming against all international norms that Cypriot energy rights belong to it. Turkey has controlled Northern Cyprus and transferred ethnic Turks into Cyprus with no objection beyond lip-service from the international community for over 40 years.

Bottom line, Turkey will continue for the foreseeable future to cause significant challenges to American and Israeli interests. In the short-term, economic sticks and isolation, not carrots, are the better option. But eventually, there should be an opportunity for Western reengagement, and we will need to seize it to advance our interests. ■

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