Turkish Hyper-Activity Reverberates throughout the Middle East

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**Turkey also displays considerable hyper-activity in Palestinian and Israeli issues. Turkey stands in solidarity with Hamas, Turkey’s partner and protégé in the Muslim Brotherhood camp. Turkish citizenship and passports were granted to a “dozen” Hamas activists, including convicted terrorists.**¹

**For the United States, Turkey’s military acquisitions present a problem. Erdoğan’s determination to acquire Russia’s advanced S-400 anti-aircraft missile system forced the United States to cancel a deal to supply F-35 Joint Strike Fighter aircraft to Turkey.**

**Do not underestimate President Erdoğan’s ability to utilize Turkey’s strategic assets to advance his bold strategies. To prevent Erdoğan from provocations against Israel, it must be made clear to him the limits to the actions that Israel is willing to tolerate.**

In recent months, Turkey has increased its efforts to enhance its position as a regional power following in the path of the Ottoman Empire, adopting daring measures that border on megalomania at home, in the region, and internationally. These steps reflect President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s worldview that sees himself – all at the same time – as the sultan of a resurgent empire, the leader of a modern and powerful Turkish nation, and an Islamic leader according to the “correct” theological interpretation, which he sees as that of the Muslim Brotherhood. He views himself as the pillar of the Brotherhood in the region.

This weltanschauung places Erdoğan as the leader of the return to the Ottoman Empire’s glory days and protector of Muslims against the plots of local and regional enemies (such as the Turkish dissident leader Fethullah Gülen, pragmatic Muslims led by the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Saudi Arabia), and foreign foes (Greece, Israel, Europe, and the United States).

A video with distinct nationalistic themes was recently broadcast by the Turkish Ministry of Information.² The film is entitled, “The Red Apple [kızıl elma],” which is a Turkish cultural concept describing Turkey’s ambition to achieve superpower status or some far-reaching goal no matter the sacrifice. Turkish policies reflect the official interpretation of the “Red Apple” and its implementation on a broad range of fronts.

Playing to Turkish and Islamic audiences, Erdoğan’s crowning moment in the video was the transformation of the historic Hagia Sophia church (built in 537 CE in Constantinople/Istanbul) from a museum to a mosque on July 10, 2020, and his arrival for Friday prayers there on July 24. It was a show of power domestically and to the Christian world. The move was also to serve as a boost for Turkish patriotism and Islamic adherence.

Beyond the context of Turkey’s religious battles in Istanbul, the Turkish video also displays a troubling appetite for Jerusalem and Saudi Arabia’s holy sites in Mecca and Medina. The first screenshot below shows the holy Kaaba in Mecca; the second shows the green dome over Muhammed’s grave in Medina, and the last shot of the video shows the Temple Mount with al-Aqsa Mosque on it. Indeed, Erdoğan ended a speech on July 10, 2020, saying that the “revival of the Hagia Sophia as a mosque is ushering the news for the liberation of al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem.”³
Ottoman “warriors” enter the Hagia Sophia museum, once a church, and now a mosque. (MEMRI, screengrab from Turkish video)

Erdoğan’s Adventures

The following are some of the bold steps Turkey has recently taken:

- Facing growing economic hardships, Turkey announced the discovery of a massive gas field in the Black Sea, which will ensure a bright and independent economic future and a robust international standing economically.

- Turkey continues to project its power to its Arab neighbors, particularly Syria and Iraq, in order to restrain the Kurds and strengthen radical Islamic forces who are battling against opponents supported by Iran and Russia, or the United States.

- Regionally, Erdoğan’s alliance with the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA), headed by Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj, stands out. This places Erdoğan in a confrontation with parties of the pragmatic Islamic camp, headed by Egypt and the Emirates, and indirectly with Russia, which supports his rival Marshal Khalifa Haftar of the Libyan National Army.
Turkey’s alliance with Libya's Sarraj comes at a time of conflict over energy resources in the eastern Mediterranean that Erdoğan launched against Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt, who are supported by France, Italy, and the Emirates. Erdoğan’s agreement with Sarraj on the division of the economic zones of the sea between Turkey and Libya, ostensibly in reaction to an Israeli-Greece-Cyprus agreement on a gas pipeline from Israel to Europe, has led to growing military tensions. France, Italy, the Emirates, and Israel have rallied to assist Greece.

In the Persian Gulf, where Qatar is at odds with the Emirates and other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Turkey has allied itself with Qatar. Some 5,000 Turkish soldiers are stationed in Qatar to help Doha protect itself and deter enemies. A sizeable Turkish base is being built in the state. In 2019, Erdoğan named the base after one of Mohammed’s famous military commanders in the seventh century, Khalid bin Walid. In an account in the Persian press, a new base will be “inaugurated” for the Qatar-Turkey Combined Joint Force Command adjacent to the “Tariq ibn Ziyad” camp. [Tariq was a 7th-century Islamic general who captured Gibraltar, originally called Jabal Tariq, “Tariq’s mountain.”]

Turkey has sent forces to the Horn of Africa region as well, particularly to Somalia, and to a lesser degree, to Djibouti. Some 200 Turkish sailors/soldiers are in Mogadishu. Turkey has also leased the Sudanese port of Suakin on the Red Sea, once a major Ottoman Port.

For the United States, Turkey’s military acquisitions present a problem. Erdoğan’s determination to acquire Russia’s advanced S-400 anti-aircraft missile system forced the United States to cancel a deal to supply F-35 Joint Strike Fighter aircraft to Turkey. Turkey also keeps close relations with Iran in a way that undermines the U.S. economic sanctions. On September 8, 2020, Erdogan and Rouhani led a joint leadership meeting aimed at widening the economic relations between the two countries.
The Turkish base in Mogadishu claims to have trained 10,000 Somali soldiers.5 (YouTube screengrab)

S-400 air defense missiles arrived from Russia in Ankara in July 2019. (Turkish Defense Ministry)

• Turkey also displays considerable hyper-activity in Palestinian and Israeli issues. Turkey stands in solidarity with Hamas, Turkey’s partner and protégé in the Muslim Brotherhood camp. Erdoğan met on August 23, 2020, with Hamas’ leadership and granted Turkish citizenship and passports to a “dozen” Hamas activists, including convicted terrorists.7
Erdoğan meet with Hamas leadership in Istanbul today.

Second from Erdoğan’s right is Saleh al-Arouri, Hamas deputy leader. US has designated him a senior terrorist and has a $5m bounty on his head but Erdoğan hosts him openly.

• At the same time, Turkey is happy to provide support for the entire Palestinian governance. It is making its presence known in Jerusalem, both in the Islamic and economic sense, thereby challenging the traditional positions of Jordan and Saudi Arabia in the city. Turkish activities center on the al-Aqsa Mosque. The bellicose Turkish video mentioned above ends with a photo of the Temple Mount. (The Ottomans, of course, lost control of Jerusalem to the British in 1917.)
The closing picture from the Turkish video, showing the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock.

Ottoman leaders Enver Pasha and Jamal Pasha visiting the Dome of the Rock in 1916. (Library of Congress)
The American peace plan and the peace agreement between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, which both weaken the Palestinians’ bargaining ability, drew rage in Ankara. Turkey leveled fierce criticism even though it maintains diplomatic relations and a very extensive financial relationship with Israel, all the while trying to present itself as the Palestinians’ greatest supporter.

**Erdoğan’s Strategic Advantages**

Turkish policies are under criticism for creating instability, for their pretentiousness and presumptuousness that do not always match Turkey’s real power or its few accomplishments, which actually show the limits of Erdoğan’s power. But one should not underestimate President Erdoğan’s ability to utilize Turkey’s strategic assets to advance his challenging strategy. Erdoğan recognizes these assets at his disposal:

- Turkey’s unique geo-strategic position as the link between Europe and the Middle East and as the bridge over which a large part of the Middle East refugees reach Europe. The European nations’ fear of waves of more refugees makes them vulnerable and potential extortion targets; it weakens their bargaining ability with Turkey, despite the growing criticism of Erdoğan’s policies.

- A large population of Turkish ex-pats in Europe has dual Turkish-European citizenship and is located in key countries in Europe, particularly Germany. It is clear to Erdoğan that even if European countries increase their criticism of Turkey’s provocation of Greece, a member of the EU, Turkey can presume that Germany will prevent the imposition of any significant sanctions on Ankara.

- Turkey’s situation as a member of NATO, especially the only Muslim and Middle Eastern country in the alliance, requires the West’s vigilance in reacting to Erdoğan’s whims.

- Turkey’s military strength gives it an advantage against any of its neighbors and in any course of action. Turkey, for instance, has a clear advantage in the naval order of battle against Greece.

- Turkey has the political boldness and the readiness to invest military and economic assets to further its policies against other countries and players, many of whom are reluctant and hesitant to set clear limits on Turkey’s actions – for various reasons. Notable examples are Europe and the Christian world, who barely responded to the change of the status of the Hagia Sophia shrine, and Israel, who refused to respond to Turkish provocations and agreed to solve the *Mavi Marmara* ship crisis by acceding to most of Turkey’s demands, to placate the United States and prevent harm to economic ties with the Turks.

- The apparent American interest expressed in both political parties to minimize military commitments in conflicts of secondary importance to the United States and the need to preserve freedom of action for U.S. aircraft based in the Turkish Incirlik airbase restrains American ability to act against Turkey.

**Limited Achievements**

Despite these strategic advantages, the data and statistics of the global and regional arena do not indicate Turkish achievements; rather, they reflect Ankara’s limited and accurate weight:
At home, the regime is facing acute economic difficulties that have led to a significant drop in the value of the Turkish lira. With the continuing pressures created by the coronavirus, major damage hit the tourism sector. In addition, although Erdoğan's status is solid, the political situation is uncomfortable for him, as his opponents have won in some of the local elections.

In the regional arena, the pragmatic camp has been strengthened because of the agreement between Israel and the Emirates. This allows Israel to back this camp more significantly than in the past. At the same time, the Muslim Brotherhood continues to weaken, both due to the agreement and because the parties representing the movement in Jordan and Egypt were outlawed.

Turkey’s allies in the region are suffering from weakness. This can be said both about the Palestinians who are at an unprecedented nadir and about the Government of National Accord in Libya that almost disintegrated recently and remained alive only because of Turkish intervention. Turkish pretensions in the Palestinian context, including the attempt to gain status in Jerusalem and in the al-Aqsa Mosque, currently have produced no tangible results.

In the face of the mobilization of Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Russia to halt Turkish moves in Libya, and with France, Italy, and the UAE mobilizing to defend Greece from Turkish threats, Erdoğan must recalculate his steps and recognize the limitations of his power.

The United States is willing to deal with the Turkish provocations only to a certain extent, and the cancellation of the F-35 deal was evidence of that. In addition, against the background of Moscow’s sharp reaction to the downing of the Russian plane by Turkey in 2015, Russia also restricts Turkey’s freedom to act in northern Syria, given Moscow’s commitment to the survival of its ally, Assad.

So what is Turkey’s next step? The “Red Apple” video exposes the depth and roots of Erdoğan’s aspirations for hegemony in the region. As any regional bully, Erdogan will not hesitate to expand his control and influence vis-à-vis those who are willing to bow down to him or those who, out of their weakness and ideological affinity to the Muslim Brotherhood, are ready to ask for his support in promoting their interests and are ready to pay by allowing Erdogan to gain a foothold and economic benefits.

On the other hand, when Erdoğan is met with determination and willingness to set clear boundaries, he will try to avoid confrontation because, deep in his heart, he is aware of the limitations of his power. Thus, the policy that the EU will adopt towards Turkey at the expected meeting of the EU heads of states on September 23, 2020, will determine to a large extent how Turkey will act in regard to Greece in the conflict over oil exploration rights. The same is true for the other friction areas in which Turkey is involved.

Israel is perceived by Erdoğan as a powerful rival that threatens Turkish and Islamic interests and promotes an ideology opposite to that of Turkey. This can be seen, among other things, through Israel joining the pragmatic Sunni camp in the region, led by the Emirates, Turkey’s sworn rival that does not hesitate to confront Turkey in every arena, including Libya, the eastern Mediterranean, Qatar, the Palestinian camp, and Saudi Arabia – the ultimate destination of Turkish hegemonic aspirations. That can also be seen in the video, which presents images of the Kaaba in Mecca, Mohammed’s grave in Medina, and the al-Aqsa
Mosque in Jerusalem.

The Turkish provocation against Israel is unrestrained and is reflected in the Turkish opposition to Israel’s normalization of ties with the Arab world, its attempts to thwart the plan to lay a gas pipeline from Israel to Europe, and, of course, in its championing the Palestinians’ cause including that of the radical and murderous Hamas.

At the same time, Erdoğan recognizes Israel’s military and political power (especially its relations with the United States, Europe, and Russia) and realizes that without relations with Israel, its ability to intervene in the Palestinian system would diminish. Turkey also recognizes the importance of diplomatic and economic ties with Israel. That is why Erdoğan avoided irreversible moves that would damage his country’s diplomatic relations.

To prevent Erdoğan from provocations against Israel, it must be made clear to him the limits to the actions that Israel is willing to tolerate. Legitimate criticism and political disagreements are certainly within the allowable limit, while harming Israel’s vital interests and aiding terrorist organizations may lead to a determined Israeli response.

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Notes

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