Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Photo: PIXABAY

The Erdoganian Amalgam: The Ottoman Past, the Ataturk Heritage, and the Arab Upheaval

Gallia Lindenstrauss and Remi Daniel

The rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey in 2002 brought many changes to Turkish foreign policy. During the party's first terms, soft power predominated in Turkey's foreign relations, and Turkey expanded and deepened its relations with many Middle East countries. Since 2016, however, Turkey has reverted increasingly to the use of hard power tools, and its relations with many political actors in the Middle East have become increasingly hostile. This article assesses the changing pattern in Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East since 2013—both the degree of Ankara's activism and its new directions. The main contention is that the geopolitical changes resulting from the Arab upheaval and domestic trends in Turkey have led Erdogan to draw from the Turkish Republic's traditional foreign policy and the Ottoman past, thereby creating a foreign policy amalgam that is unique in Turkish history. Both the Islamic dimension and the nationalist line, which pits Turkey against some of Israel's allies, create certain risks for Israel.

Keywords: Turkey, Middle East, Arab upheaval, Erdogan, Syria, Libya, Israel

The rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey in 2002 was accompanied by changes in Turkish foreign policy. During the party's first terms in office, soft power predominated in Turkey's foreign relations, and Turkey successfully expanded and deepened its relations with many Middle East countries. Since 2016, however, Turkey has increasingly reverted to the use of hard power tools in its foreign policy, and its relations with many states in the region have grown increasingly hostile. Overall, during the two decades in which the AKP has been in power, Ankara has pursued a more active and assertive policy that has more than once substantially deviated from patterns typical of the Turkish Republic. In particular, Turkish intervention in the internal affairs of neighboring countries to help determine who will control them is new for Ankara. For example, while Turkey and Syria were on the verge of war in 1998, Ankara did not attempt to overthrow the regime of Hafez al-Assad, as it later did with the regime of his son Bashar.

From the Turkish Republic's traditional foreign policy, Erdogan has adopted nationalism, militarization, and suspicion toward the rest of the world. From the Ottoman past, he has assimilated the religious dimension, the element of territorial expansion, and revisionism. Since this is an amalgam, the relative weight of the respective dimensions varies over time.

The purpose of this article is to assess the factors behind the changing patterns in Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East, regarding both the extent of Ankara's activism and the shifting direction of that activism—from a country making extensive use of soft power tools to a country making greater use of hard power tools. Following a short review of Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East since 2003, the article discusses the contribution of geopolitical interests, the "neo-Ottoman" factor, constraints resulting from domestic Turkish politics and economics, and ideological motives in Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East, focusing on Turkish foreign policy since 2013. This year was selected for two main reasons. One is the fall of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi in 2013, which was a blow to the vision of an axis of countries dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood movement, an axis that Turkey had hoped to lead. The second reason is the Gezi Park demonstrations that year. Furthermore, as part of the escalating struggle between religious leader Fethullah Gulen and then-Turkish Prime Minister (and current President) Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his supporters, extensive corruption was revealed that same year that changed Erdogan's perception of the internal threat. Our main contention is that the geopolitical changes resulting from the Arab upheaval and domestic trends in Turkey have led Erdogan to create a foreign policy amalgam that is unique in Turkish history. From the Turkish Republic's traditional foreign policy, he has adopted nationalism, militarization, and suspicion toward the rest of the world. From the Ottoman past, he has assimilated the religious dimension, the element of territorial expansion, and revisionism. Since this is an amalgam, the relative weight of the respective dimensions varies over time, depending on the issue and the period.

Background

Ahmet Davutoglu, who became chief foreign policy advisor to the Prime Minister in 2003 and later served as Minister of Foreign Affairs, tried to promote both the idea of "strategic depth," whereby Ankara can and should play a more significant role in the areas adjacent to it, and a "zero problems policy" aimed at advancing a solution for existing problems between Turkey and its neighbors (Murinson, 2006, pp. 947-948; Aras, 2009, p. 134). As part of this policy, Turkey greatly improved its relations with Syria, and even mediated between Israel and Syria in four rounds of talks during 2008. Although Turkey opposed the Gulf War of 2003, the developments

that followed the US intervention in Iraq led Turkey to improve its relations with the Kurdish government in northern Iraq (Park, 2012, pp. 98-99). Not long before the outbreak of the Arab upheaval, Turkey also announced its intention to establish a free trade zone with Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan (BBC News, 2010).

When the Arab upheaval began, Erdogan was among the first leaders who called on Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to resign. Commenting on relations between Turkey and Egypt in a *New York Times* interview in 2011, Foreign Minister Davutoglu said, "That will be an axis of democracy of the two biggest nations in our region, from the north to the south, from the Black Sea down to the Nile Valley in Sudan" (Shadid, 2011). During this period, Turkey regarded itself, and was regarded by some in the West, as a possible model for countries weathering the upheaval (Friedman, 2015). Ankara encouraged Bashar al-Assad to carry out internal reforms in Syria (Cagaptay, 2020, pp. 116-117); only in November 2011, after six months of unsuccessful efforts at persuasion, did Erdogan for the first time publicly call on Assad to resign. In Libya, Turkey's policy was hesitant—it initially opposed a military operation against Libyan ruler Muammar Qaddafi, although following a UN Security Council resolution, took part in the NATO-led military intervention in Libya.

The downfall of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi in July 2013 was a turning point in Turkey's attitude toward the Arab upheaval. Until then, Ankara believed that Turkey was "on the right side of history" (Arkan & Kinacioglu, 2016, p. 396). Developments since the Arab upheaval, however, cast much doubt on whether Turkey's policy of clearly supporting one of the sides in the countries that experienced the upheaval was correct. Furthermore, the rise to power of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Egypt prompted a severe deterioration in relations between Egypt and Turkey. Since then, while Turkey has little ability to intervene directly in Egypt, it hosts Muslim Brotherhood exiles from Egypt, and Erdogan frequently uses the Rabaa sign, which has become a symbol for Morsi supporters (Kirisci, 2017, p. 164).

For many, the agreement between Turkey and Qatar in late 2014 on the establishment of a Turkish military base in Qatar was a watershed signaling a new direction in Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East. The Turkish presence in Qatar was actually one of the factors that led Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt to impose a blockade on Qatar in 2017, although Doha and Ankara believed that the Turkish presence was one of the factors that prevented the occupation of Qatar that year (Cagaptay, 2020, p. 190).

Assad's hold on power, and especially the Iranian and Russian intervention in the Syrian conflict, which tilted the balance in Assad's favor, prompted Ankara to take a series of actions pertaining to events in Syria. While Turkey initially gave active support to most of the Sunni factions that rebelled against Assad, including the extremist groups, since 2016 it has emphasized military intervention and a military presence in northern Syria in order to halt the Kurdish buildup in this region. In Libya, Turkey's interests led to its growing intervention there after the civil war was renewed in 2014, and to overt military intervention in favor of the Government of National Accord, which was officially approved by the Turkish parliament in January 2020 (Weise, 2020).

The Geopolitical Factor

Events of the Arab upheaval led Turkey to believe that guerrilla and terrorist operations by the Kurdish underground and terrorist operations by Salafi-jihadi groups in adjacent areas were jeopardizing its security (Kisisci, 2017, p. 152). Threats of this type also existed previously, but before the Arab upheaval, Syrian-Turkish relations had improved to the extent that the countries even conducted a joint military exercise for the first time in history.

After the civil war in Syria erupted, violence from Syria began to spread to Turkey, with

bombardments in border areas between the two countries. Turkey suffered many deadly terrorist attacks by the Islamic State organization, especially in 2015-2016. The deterioration in relations between Syria and Turkey and the damage caused to Turkey by developments during the civil war can explain Turkey's renewed use of hard power tools. At the same time, current Turkish foreign policy also resonates of earlier periods, when Turkey perceived the threat of the Kurdish underground as a central threat that justified strong military action.

The deterioration in relations between Syria and Turkey and the damage caused to Turkey by developments during the civil war can explain Turkey's renewed use of hard power tools.

The tough policy adopted by Erdogan against Assad meant that Assad's continued rule in Damascus in effect constituted an ongoing potential threat to Turkey, above all in the event of future Syrian encouragement of operations by the Kurdish underground against Turkey from Syrian territory, as indeed occurred under Hafez al-Assad. Turkey's need in 2013, as a result of the escalating civil war in Syria, to ask NATO to station Patriot missile barriers in Turkish territory was one of the justifications cited by Turkey for its purchase of the S-400 air defense system from Russia in 2017.

Cooperation between the international coalition in the war against the Islamic State and the Syrian branch of the Kurdish underground (PYD) also contributed to the Turkish threat perception and concern about the creation of an independent Kurdish entity in northern Syria. Although the coalition's support for the PYD was part of a broader framework of aid for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Turkey asserted that the PYD was the dominant element in the SDF (Park, 2020, p. 196). Ankara alleged that the arms sent to the SDF would not be collected after the defeat of the Islamic State, and therefore constituted a direct threat to Turkey. Turkish concern about the creation of a Kurdish belt separating Turkey from the rest of the Middle East, which in the worst scenarios included a Kurdish state with access to the sea independent of Turkey, was a result not only of developments in northern Syria, but also of developments in northern Iraq. Had they not been thwarted by countries in the region, the Kurds in northern Iraq would have wanted to declare independence following the independence referendum in the autonomous Kurdish region in 2017.

The prevailing idea in the Middle East dating from the Obama administration and continuing into the Trump administration was that the United States sought to reduce its involvement in the region. This in turn created a vacuum that encouraged countries in the region, especially Turkey, to take independent action. The realization that Moscow has more influence in Syria than Washington also explains why Erdogan holds frequent talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin (Van Bladel, 2020, pp. 207-209). The harsh Russian response after Turkey shot down a Russian warplane in November 2015 left a severe scar. Furthermore, what Ankara regarded as a lack of support from NATO in this crisis heightened Turkish fears that they were essentially alone. After Turkey and Russia restored normal relations in June 2016, Ankara was visibly cautious vis-à-vis Moscow, and tried to achieve understandings with Russia in advance when planning its intervention in northern Syria. The fact that the process of Turkey's accession to the European Union has bogged down, in part because of opposition by France and Germany, which are important members in NATO, also contributed to Turkish suspicion of the West.

In addition, Ankara's recognition of the changes in the international order, from a US-dominated unipolar order to a multipolar order in which it is possible, and indeed necessary, to diversify the parties to rely upon, has led Turkey to take more and more actions that deviate from what would normally be expected

from a loyal NATO member. In particular, the purchase of S-400 air defense systems from Russia, despite severe warnings against such a purchase from the United States and the other NATO members, has created a dynamic of responses that further weakened the alliance. For example, the exclusion of Turkey from the F-35 stealth aircraft project, even though Turkey manufactures a few of the plane's parts and had planned to buy about 100 of the aircraft, has put the Turkish air force in a position in which it lacks an adequate replacement for its aging inventory of F-16s.

The issue of the Uyghurs, an ethnically Turkish Muslim minority in China suffering from harsh repression by the Chinese government, also illustrates Turkey's considerations in the context of changes in the world order. Despite the broad scope of the repression and the various campaigns within Turkish society to arouse awareness of this issue, Erdogan has been moderate in his comments in recent years in order to avoid offending the Chinese government, which can be useful to Turkey as an ally in certain matters, or at least helpful from an economic standpoint (Erdemir & Kowalski, 2020a; IISS, 2020, p. iv).

Taspinar asserts that Turkish foreign policy should be regarded as a Turkish version of Gaullism (Taspinar, 2010), with Erdogan playing the role of a Turkish de Gaulle in his attitude toward NATO and his emphasis on the importance of Turkey taking an independent line in its foreign policy. The consequence of such a policy line is greater self-reliance. Indeed, Turkey was previously more dependent on arms imports, especially imports of advanced weapons, but has since made significant progress in its ability to manufacture arms by itself. This includes progress in the production of drones, which have served Turkey well, including in its intervention in Syria and Libya. Turkey opposed sanctions against Iran in the context of the Iranian nuclear program and helped Tehran evade the sanctions, and Erdogan stated publicly for the first time in September 2019 that Turkey might also develop an independent military nuclear capability, which is in line with the Gaullist attributes of his policy. The growth in independent capabilities has enabled the country to act boldly without external pressures, including in regions far from its borders, with Libya a prominent example.

The natural gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea have made the delineation of economic waters among the various countries a critical matter.

Turkey's geographic location between the Middle East and Europe also contributes to the pressure exerted on it on the one hand, and to its being perceived as influential in the region on the other. Despite the severe damage to Turkey from terrorist activity by the Islamic State, international elements accused Turkey of cooperation with the organization, and asserted that Ankara was one of the parties providing the Islamic State with freedom of action. Approximately one million refugees fled to Europe in 2015, most of them via Turkey. Turkey and the European Union subsequently signed agreements in which €6 billion were given to Turkey to help with the refugees and prevent them from crossing the Turkish-EU border. From time to time, Ankara threatens to open its border and send the refugees to the European Union. It appears, however, that the European Union is striving to prevent the entry of many more Syrian refugees into its territory by means of a combination of preventive measures (such as construction of a land fence between Turkey and Greece) and additional monetary incentives for Turkey.

The ties between the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean have become closer, and have affected Turkey's geopolitical calculations. Since 2010, in parallel with the deterioration in Turkish-Israeli relations, Israel's relations with Greece and Cyprus have improved markedly. In tandem, relations between Egypt, Cyprus, and

Greece have also become closer. The natural gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea have made the delineation of economic waters among the various countries a critical matter. Egypt's success in spearheading the founding of the EastMed Gas Forum (EMGF) in 2019, in which Turkey is not a member, gave Turkey the feeling that it was surrounded (Rivlin, 2020). Turkey's military intervention in Libya, for example, in parallel with a military cooperation agreement with the Government of National Accord, must be understood with reference to the agreement signed by Turkey delineating the economic waters of Libya and Turkey. This latter agreement clashes with some of the Greek claims to territorial waters. Turkey is thus a connecting element between these two theaters: for example, Ankara recruited Syrian rebels to fight on the side of the Government of National Accord in Libya. This Turkish policy of linking the different regions and conflicts may have achieved some success in the various theaters in the short term, but it can also generate a basis for new connections among players hostile to Turkey.

The Ottoman past plays an increasing role in Turkish society as a whole, and especially in statements by Erdogan to justify certain activity.

Historical Legacies: Neo-Ottomanism, the Sèvres Syndrome, and the Shadow of Ataturk

One of the terms appearing frequently in descriptions of Turkey's foreign policy is "neo-Ottomanism." Many commentators, both media and academic, often label Erdogan a "sultan" and refer to his policy as neo-Ottomanism. Use of the term did not begin with Erdogan; it was used extensively to describe the changes in Turkish politics instituted by Turkish President Turgut Ozal in the 1980s (Yavuz, 2016). It takes note of revolutionary changes in comparison with the Turkish Republic's policy since the days of Ataturk, who advocated adherence to the status quo. It refers to growing Turkish activism, and the introduction of pan-Turkish and Islamic elements into the political narrative. Today, among the general public, "neo-Ottomanism" is used primarily by parties hostile to Turkey in order to allege expansionism, or to condemn measures that conflict with Western interests. In an extreme case, the term is used to accuse Erdogan of intending to establish an area under Turkish influence and control corresponding to the borders of the old Ottoman Empire, or even "to re-establish the Ottoman Empire."

In the academic world, some experts have tried to find a neutral definition of neo-Ottomanism in order to make the term more useful in research, but there is no real agreement on its meaning. Neo-Ottomanism is a dynamic phenomenon that depends on whether it is examined from the perspective of Turkey's internal or foreign policy. The meaning also depends on which aspect of the Ottoman Empire is analyzed (Danforth, 2014). Because of the differences of opinion and the difficulty in defining it, it appears that the term neo-Ottomanism is not precise enough for use as an effective analytical parameter, especially in the field of foreign policy (Wastnidge, 2019).

However, it can still be argued that Turkish foreign policy is neo-Ottoman in the sense of its greater activity and activism (Tanchum, 2020), and that the Ottoman tint is undeniable in a number of Turkish actions in the international theater. Indeed, although the Turkish leadership avoids any use of the term neo-Ottomanism, particularly as a description of its policy, the Ottoman past plays an increasing role in Turkish society as a whole, and especially in statements by Erdogan to justify certain activity. For example, in talking about Jerusalem, the Turkish President stated in October 2020, "In this city that we had to leave in tears during the First World War, it is still possible to come across traces of the Ottoman resistance. So Jerusalem is our city, a city from us" (Ahren, 2020). Territory that belonged to the Ottoman Empire has a significant position in Turkey's

international efforts in Syria, Iraq, Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean, and to some extent in the Balkans. Nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire likewise plays a considerable role in Turkey's soft power policy, as demonstrated by the great success of the Turkish "historical" television series—in the Middle East, the Muslim world, and even in the Balkans (Bhutto, 2020).

Nevertheless, the term neo-Ottomanism should be used with great caution. First of all, the growing scope of Turkish activity in recent years extends to theaters that have no connection to the Ottoman Empire, such as West Africa. Turkey's increasing presence in these areas highlights the limitations of any analysis giving excessive weight to the effect of the Ottoman Empire's heritage. Similarly, the conflict with the Kurdish underground, a key focus of Turkish foreign policy, has little to do with the Ottoman legacy. Furthermore, if historical events are indeed shaping current Turkish policy, the period of the Ottoman Empire is only one of these multiple historical events, and possibly not the most important one. Exaggerated emphasis on the Ottoman period or excessive use of the term neo-Ottomanism can obscure other seminal processes and detract from a true understanding of the complex historical roots of current Turkish foreign policy.

The early 20th century, which saw a decade of almost continuous fighting on Turkish territory, internal unrest, and hostile actions by the major powers, left an especially strong mark on Turkish public opinion. The symbol of these processes in Turkish consciousness is the Treaty of Sèvres, signed in 1920, in which the European powers divided up most of Turkey's territory among themselves and their regional allies. Turkish collective memory has been so strongly affected by this event, which is repeatedly mentioned in political speeches, that references to a "Sèvres Syndrome" are common (Schmid, 2015). The term describes a Turkish geopolitical perception of the constant threat posed by an alliance of international and regional actors allegedly operating within and outside the country in order to weaken Turkey. This concept was revived on various occasions in the 20th century, for example in the Cypriot crisis in the 1960s and 1970s and the struggle against the Kurdish movements, and is still an important factor shaping current Turkish foreign policy (Tharoor, 2020). For example, Turkish hostility to the relations between Greece, Cyprus, Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates, with support from the United States and several European countries, can be attributed to this perception. The relations between these countries ostensibly feed the Sèvres Syndrome, which is a better explanation for the Turkish response than neo-Ottomanism.

Another important period in Turkish history is the rule of Kemal Ataturk, founder of the Turkish Republic. Despites Erdogan's obvious efforts to place himself outside the classic Kemalist framework, Ataturk remains a model for Turkish leadership, even for a politician from an Islamic political party. In many international theaters, it appears that the current President is trying to eclipse the country's first President by completing processes portrayed in retrospect as partial successes by Ataturk (Akyol, 2016).

For example, the Turkish operations in northern Syria and northern Iraq are in territories that the Turkish national movement defined as Turkish territory before Ataturk agreed to waive Turkey's claim to them. For many of Erdogan's supporters, the entry of Turkish forces into these regions is an achievement that compensates for this renunciation. In the same way, problems in delineating the maritime borders in the Eastern Mediterranean are a result of some of the provisions in the Treaty of Lausanne signed by Ataturk following the Turkish war of independence. Here, too, Erdogan can portray himself as going a step further than Ataturk (Gorvett, 2020). In many respects, the Turkish President's historical vision is to contrast himself favorably to the secular Ataturk, rather than being portrayed as a "new sultan."

The term neo-Ottomanism is therefore equivocal. While it does signify a real change

underway since the 1980s that was significantly accelerated under Erdogan's rule, accompanied by a strengthening of the Ottoman heritage in Turkish society and in various spheres in the country, it is not sufficiently precise or comprehensive as a tool in analyzing processes underway in Turkey's foreign policy, because it sometimes has hostile political connotations, which undermine its value as a research parameter. Furthermore, although the history of the Turkish people is often mentioned in speeches by the country's leaders, the effect of that history on foreign policy is more diverse and complex than a focus on the Ottoman Empire alone (Danforth, 2020).

Internal Dimension: Between Politics and the Economy

In Turkey, as in most countries, separating domestic considerations and the economy from foreign policy is impossible. The internal-political struggle between Erdogan and the military, and between Erdogan and the Gulen movement, as well as the issue of the Kurdish minority, are among the factors that have shaped Turkish foreign policy over the years. During his first decade in power, Erdogan saw benefits in large-scale political reforms and a generally more liberal approach, including toward the Kurdish minority, which was a significant contribution to Turkey's relations with the European Union. During his second decade in power, the conflict with the Gulen movement, the deadlock in the process of Turkey's accession to the European Union, and the negative effects of the Arab upheaval in Turkey led Erdogan to value an alliance with the nationalist groups. This led to a renewed emphasis on hard power, renewal of the violent conflict with the Kurdish underground, and alienation from the West.

During the AKP's first decade in power, the party's worst fear was overthrow by the Turkish military, and it therefore promoted liberal reforms aimed, inter alia, at reducing the army's ability to wield influence in Turkish politics. Toward the end of the decade, Erdogan and Gulen, who at that point were still cooperating with each other, had prominent figures in the army arrested on false, or at least exaggerated, charges of conspiring to remove the AKP from power. These developments in the domestic theater also had effects on foreign policy. One of the explanations for the AKP's consistent support for the Hamas movement since 2006 is Erdogan's claim that just as the election of the Justice and Development Party was initially not fully accepted, the international community did not recognize that Hamas won a majority in the 2006 elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council. Erdogan likewise perceived the overthrow of Morsi by the Egyptian army in 2013 as an event that foretold what was liable to happen to him, if he were not careful. His alienation from Israel can also be explained in part by the fact that the Turkish army was the primary advocate of good relations with Israel, and the cooling of relations with Israel figured in his efforts to weaken the army in the internal arena in Turkey.

2013 was a turning point for Erdogan and his supporters. The Gezi Park protests began in May and spread throughout Turkey. Although the protests originated in an environmental issue of preventing the destruction of a park in Istanbul, they rapidly turned into a cry against the abandonment of reforms designed to promote Turkish democracy. The rift between the Gulen movement and Erdogan and the AKP also became public that year when Gulen and his supporters in the police and the legal system exposed widespread corruption linked to Erdogan's family and close supporters (Barkey, 2020, p. 152). Gulen's organization has since become the main enemy of the government, which refers to it as FETO—the Fethullah Terrorist Organization, and portrays it as linked to Turkey's enemies in both the domestic and international arenas.

Erdogan had a growing need for partners in order to change the governmental system in Turkey from a parliamentary regime to a

presidential regime. First, he supported the peace process with the Kurdish minority in Turkey. This period featured political reforms that included, inter alia, collective reforms to the Kurdish minority, such as television broadcasts in the Kurdish language. One of the objectives of these measures was gaining the support of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), the pro-Kurdish political party in Turkey, for Erdogan's political reforms. The peace process ran into difficulties, however, in part because the Arab upheaval strengthened Kurdish nationalism, and because the pro-Kurdish party became stronger politically inside Turkey. Referring to Erdogan in the campaign preceding the June 2015 parliamentary elections, the party's co-chairman, Selahattin Demirtas, said, "We won't let you become president (with executive power)," thereby making it clear that his party would not help change the governmental system in Turkey in the direction that Erdogan wanted. In addition, the HDP's success in passing the 10 percent election threshold, which no other pro-Kurdish political party had previously done, thanks to a more moderate message aimed also at non-Kurdish groups, while the AKP lost its majority in parliament, was also a milestone. Erdogan's decision to hold elections again in November 2015 resulted in the AKP regaining its parliamentary majority. Fear of another electoral loss in the future and a resulting need for a coalition partner, however, began to affect Erdogan's policy, including his previously conciliatory attitude toward the Kurds. While talks between Turkey and the Syrian branch of the Kurdish underground took place early in the Arab upheaval, these were discontinued after 2015. This group was portrayed as a threat to Turkey, despite a Kurdish promise that there would be no Kurdish terrorist operations against Turkey from Syrian territory.

For Erdogan, the unsuccessful coup attempt in Turkey in July 2016 was a clear indication of the existing internal danger to his rule. Erdogan and his supporters also believed that the coup was organized by forces outside Turkey who regarded the strengthening of Turkey under the AKP as a threat to be contained. The belief that the United States was one of the parties behind the attempted coup further fanned the flames of the already widespread anti-American feeling in Turkish society. The long time that passed before the US administration and other Western countries congratulated Erdogan for thwarting the attempted coup merely intensified Ankara's bitterness toward these countries. One of the regional players perceived by Ankara as a backer of the failed coup was the United Arab Emirates, which can help explain the deterioration in relations between Turkey and most of the Arab Gulf states. At the same time, Russia and Iran were not only among the first to congratulate Erdogan for overcoming the attempted coup, but were also not perceived as posing the same threat to the stability of the regime in Turkey as the alleged threat from the West and the Sunni countries.

Erdogan and his supporters believed that the coup was organized by forces outside Turkey who regarded the strengthening of Turkey under the AKP as a threat to be contained.

The conflict between Erdogan and Gulen has had complex effects on relations between the government and the army. On the one hand, the Turkish army has been weakened by a period of harsh purges. On the other hand, Erdogan has become closer to military figures, including some who were convicted in the major trials early in the past decade and were subsequently released. Some have suggested that the real motive for Turkey's first military intervention in northern Syria in August 2016 and the succeeding interventions was to keep the Turkish army busy, so that it would not constitute a threat on the domestic level, and would be appeased by the room for action given it.

In the campaign for the referendum on constitutional changes in 2017, a coalition began to emerge between the AKP and the

Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) (Stein, 2020, pp. 178-179). This coalition continued in the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2018, and has lasted since. The change to a presidential system also created a situation in which Erdogan needs more than 50 percent of the votes in order to win the presidential elections on the first round. He managed to do this in both the 2014 and 2018 elections, but wants to achieve a victory in the 2023 election as well, especially in light of the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Turkish Republic. In order to maintain this coalition, Erdogan must pursue a more nationalist policy than during his first decade in office. His policy on the Middle East also reflects the coalition between the AKP and the MHP: an uncompromising attitude toward the Kurdish underground in Syria and northern Iraq, the Cyprus issue, and Greece.

Erdogan's success in consolidating his presidential regime has furthered the centralization trends in government, and has weakened elements in the public system that could have contributed to a more moderate foreign policy. Particularly prominent is the waning status of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (IISS, 2020, p. v). The centralization features not only the weakening of the older Turkish institutions, but also direct negotiations by Erdogan with leaders of other countries. The phenomenon was especially prominent during the Trump administration, when phone calls between Erdogan and Trump in effect constituted the main dialogue between their two countries. The end of Davutoglu's term as Prime Minister in 2016, after which he became an open political rival of Erdogan by founding his own political party in 2019, the Future Party, contributed to the abandonment of a policy emphasizing soft power and a return to a policy emphasizing hard power.

From an economic standpoint, the first decade of Erdogan's rule featured impressive growth, with per capita GDP more than tripling. Part of this growth was based on liberalization and privatization processes in the 1980s and 1990s, which gave rise to a new class of businessmen (Kirisci, 2009, p. 38). Erdogan actually owes part of his success to the business elite that sprang up in central Anatolia. Due to its traditional values, this elite gave Erdogan and his party enthusiastic support, both economically and politically. The expansion of the Turkish economy required access to new markets and greater integration in the global economy. For example, Turkish trade with Middle East countries soared. The growth of Turkish Airlines also served as a means of promoting Turkish foreign policy. By utilizing a liberal visa regime, the expansion of Turkish Airlines activity facilitated a substantial increase in the number of tourists visiting Turkey (Selcuk, 2013, p. 183), including from Middle East countries.

Turkish per capita GDP has declined since 2013 (Aliriza & Yekler, 2019), and additional data raise doubts about the degree to which Turkish economic growth in the first decade of AKP rule was based on sustainable growth engines, rather than cheap loans and private growth. The steep drop in the value of the Turkish lira—over 40 percent in 2018 and 30 percent since January 2020 (Yilmaz, 2020)—likewise point to fundamental problems in the Turkish economy. Acts like the appointment of Berat Albayrak, Erdogan's son-in-law, as finance minister in 2018 and the imposition of restrictions on the Turkish central bank's freedom of action are further such indications of this. Nor is it clear what measures necessary to heal the Turkish economy have been taken. Nevertheless, the governor of the central bank was replaced in November 2020 and a new minister of finance was appointed, and these measures are likely to restore some confidence in the economic policy. Shining the spotlight on foreign policy, especially military operations likely to arouse a patriotic response in Turkey, can compensate in part for the public relations damage suffered by the AKP as a result of the government's economic mismanagement. Some of the operations that Turkey has conducted beyond its borders can

also potentially benefit Turkish companies, above all construction companies, which can play a role in reconstruction efforts that will be needed in countries with civil wars, such as Syria and Libya.

Another internal issue affecting Turkish foreign policy is refugees from Syria. Turkey hosts 3.6 million refugees from Syria, who arrived after the upheaval in Syria began in 2011. Turkish public opinion was initially sympathetic to "guests" from Syria. As their stay in Turkey lengthened, however, and the economic situation in Turkey worsened, public opinion turned against the refugees (Kiniklioglu, 2020), and most of the public does not favor granting Turkish citizenship to a large number of refugees. Since the European Union is also trying to prevent more refugees from reaching its territory, Ankara is striving to return the refugees to territory under its control in northern Syria. Repatriation of refugees is hence one of the grounds cited by Turkey to justify Operation Peace Spring, which began in October 2019. It is also the basis for Turkey's opposition to the conquest of Idlib by Assad's forces, out of concern that a new wave of refugees will begin.

The Ideological Factor: Between Political Islam and Nationalistic Impulse

Turkish foreign policy has undergone an ideological process that clearly accelerated following the failed coup in 2016, with political Islam playing an important role in this process. Erdogan is not the first Turkish leader to give Islam a more central role in his country's politics. After he successfully eliminated or greatly weakened elements opposed to him, however, especially those perceived as guardians of the secular Turkish model—the military and the judiciary—he enjoyed enormous freedom of action, which he utilized in order to promote an agenda with a distinct Islamic slant.

Although the growing use of religious symbols in Turkey's public sphere is felt primarily within the country itself, a similar process occurred in Turkey's foreign policy. Erdogan uses Islamist terminology increasingly in his political speeches, including in the international theater. In recent years, he has exploited the relative passivity of other countries in the region, particularly Egypt and Saudi Arabia, to position Turkey as a defender of the interests of Muslims all over the world. Erdogan invested great efforts in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation when Turkey chaired the organization's summit. In 2016-2019—which included the United States recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital—the Turkish president organized three summits in his country (an unusually large number), and portrayed himself as the chief opponent of a measure that was regarded as injurious to Muslims.

After Erdogan successfully eliminated or greatly weakened elements opposed to him, especially those perceived as guardians of the secular Turkish model—the military and the judiciary—he enjoyed enormous freedom of action, which he utilized to promote an agenda with a distinct Islamic slant.

Indeed, Jerusalem has become the best example of the Islamic dimension in Turkish foreign policy. Erdogan misses few opportunities to mention the city, both in speeches to Turkish audiences and in statements in international forums, such as the UN General Assembly. In a narrative combining Ottoman nostalgia with safeguarding the rights of Muslims, the Turkish President uses the issue of Jerusalem to appeal to Muslims both inside and outside Turkey. In this case, the Turkish government's efforts are not confined to speeches; it invests resources in bolstering its presence in East Jerusalem through various institutions, as well as through affiliated NGOs (al-Burai, 2020).

The use of Turkish government institutions in the exercise of soft power based on Islam is underway in various spheres. The Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) has become an important player in Turkish foreign policy

involving many countries, mainly in Africa and Europe (Ozturk & Sozeri, 2018).

The Islamic theme in Turkey's foreign policy is also visible in its choice of allies. Under Erdogan's rule, Turkey forged closer relations with Qatar (Bedkit, 2020), and the Turkish government is an important supporter of the global Muslim Brotherhood movement (Tur, 2019). After el-Sisi gained power in Egypt, Istanbul became a center for the Egyptian opposition (Ayyash, 2020) and a haven for Hamas leaders (Pitel & Srivastava, 2020). Ankara also supports Islamist groups fighting against the Assad regime in Syria. Following years of suspicion about ties between Turkey and jihad organizations in Syria, including ISIS, and cooperation with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), formerly a branch of al-Qaeda, recent Turkish activity has been conducted in the framework of a formal alliance with the Syrian National Army (formerly known as the Free Syrian Army)—an association of local Islamist militias. In addition, in the Libyan conflict, Erdogan backs the Government of National Accord, which is supported by the Muslim Brotherhood. These processes—the narrative of Turkish foreign policy, how Erdogan positions himself in the regional balance of forces, and Ankara's selection of its allies—have prompted many to regard Turkey as the standard bearer of political Islam in the Middle East, or as the head of the Islamist camp in the region. However, while there is some supporting evidence for this view, it should be regarded with skepticism.

First of all, the use of the term "camp" to describe the network of players cooperating with Turkey is doubtful. There is at least some ideological agreement, accompanied by cooperation between these players, but it is questionable to what extent this cooperation is motivated by ideology, and to what extent Ankara is merely using political Islam in order to acquire regional allies, first and foremost, for the purpose of promoting Turkish national interests, and to a far lesser extent, for promoting common interests. In a number of cases, it appears that Turkey is the main decision maker in this camp, and that its decisions are aimed more at its own benefit than at furthering political Islam in the region, as in the cases in which Turkey has shifted forces from one theater to another.

Moreover, the Islamic narrative is not the only line that Erdogan uses when speaking about foreign policy. The Turkish government adopts a "classic" revisionist line when it speaks in international forums and with countries like Russia and Venezuela (Oner, 2020). Erdogan is highly critical of the existing global order, UN institutions, and especially the veto power granted to the five permanent Security Council members. This criticism has been sounded in many of Erdogan's speeches in international forums, including at the UN General Assembly in 2016, where he stated, "The world is bigger than five"—a statement that has become a slogan in Turkish foreign policy (Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, 2018). With its NATO allies, on the other hand, Ankara employs a narrative that stresses shared traditional Western values and obedience to international law. This demonstrates the ability of Turkish personalities to adapt their narrative to their audience, especially in the international theater. Political Islam is only one of the ideological frameworks displayed in Turkish speeches.

For all of these reasons, even if Turkey's foreign policy has shifted from pragmatic to ideological, describing this ideology as political Islam does not correspond well enough to the reality, especially as it has developed in the past five years. A nationalistic line, on the other hand, appears to be a rising ideological factor in shaping Turkish foreign policy (Flanagan et al., 2020).

At the same time, two processes have reduced the weight of political Islam in Turkish foreign policy. The first is the conflict between Erdogan and Gulen, which reached a peak following the attempted coup in 2016, and which has also affected the style of Turkish foreign policy. The Turkish Islamist policy relied to a large extent on Gulen's institutions, whose

reach extended throughout the Islamic world. After the two allies became enemies, the Turkish government changed its attitude toward the Gulen network, and exerted pressure aimed at either taking over or closing down its institutions (Angey, 2018). Turkey thereby lost an important diplomatic tool that operated in the name of Islam.

The second domestic Turkish process that reduced the influence of political Islam on Turkish foreign policy was Davutoglu's resignation in May 2016. Davutoglu was the architect of the "zero problems" policy, which contained a strong Islamic element (Ozkan, 2014). In the Turkish political system, in which authority is concentrated among a limited group of people, elements at the individual level wield great influence in the decision making process, and personnel changes can have a significant political influence. In this case, Davutoglu's resignation also signaled a new direction in Turkish diplomacy.

These internal Turkish changes, together with disappointments in Turkey caused by the Arab upheaval, had the effect of weakening political Islam and strengthening nationalistic tendencies in decision making on foreign affairs in Ankara. The Turkish military operations against the Kurdish underground in northern Iraq and northern Syria and the increased Turkish activity in the Eastern Mediterranean, in accordance with the "Blue Homeland doctrine" (Gingeras, 2020), which holds that Turkey should expand its maritime borders to the greatest possible extent and defend them accordingly, are prominent examples of the processes stemming from an nationalistic and not an Islamic policy.

A trend toward strengthening the nationalist aspects of Turkish foreign policy is therefore visible. This trend comes in part at the expense of political Islam, which has lost some of the importance it enjoyed during Davutoglu's tenure, although it has not completely disappeared. The shift from political Islam to a more nationalistic tone as a major ideological factor in foreign policy did not result in any drastic change in foreign policy (Haugom, 2019), and the processes that began in the name of political Islam have generally been recycled with a justification based on Turkish national interests. The increased emphasis on nationalistic rhetoric at the expense of political Islam, however, makes it possible to understand why the President's foreign policy wins popularity beyond his traditional base of support.

Conclusion

The geopolitical changes resulting from the Arab upheaval and the internal trends in Turkey since 2013 have led Erdogan to create an amalgam that is unique in Turkish history. From the Turkish Republic's foreign policy, he has adopted nationalism, militarization, and suspicion toward the rest of the world. From the Ottoman past, he has assimilated the religious dimension, the element of territorial expansion, and revision of the status quo. The relative weight of these various components varies, determined by context. For this reason, Turkish foreign policy also moves in less predictable directions, thereby contributing to regional instability. This in turn feeds a growing sense among the neighboring countries that Ankara poses a threat to them.

Although this article focuses on Turkish policy in the Middle East, Turkey's ability to project its substantial power in other regions distinguishes current Turkish policy from the policy that prevailed in the early decades of the Turkish Republic. The same is true of other countries in the region, but this should nevertheless alarm regional actors. Ankara has established military bases in other countries, chief among them in Qatar and Somalia. In addition, while it was correct for many years to regard Turkey as an actor whose objective was to maintain the status quo, there are growing indications that Turkey has become a revisionist country. Turkey's actions in northern Syria and northern Iraq, for example, show

that while Ankara claims to be respecting the territorial borders of those countries, in practice it is undermining their sovereignty over considerable sections of their respective territories.

The changes in Turkish foreign policy could have long term effects, especially on Turkey's relations with Western countries and pro-US countries in the Middle East. If Erdogan leaves the political scene, it is doubtful whether this will lead to a reversal of all of the changes that have occurred, but it will nevertheless create more room for public discussion, and facilitate a deeper assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of Turkey's estrangement from its traditional allies than some of the current thinking in Ankara. At the same time, even if a different political party gains power in Turkey, thereby reducing the importance of the Islamic dimension, the nationalist impulse, which is shared by many players in Turkey, is liable to continue shaping the country's policy after Erdogan leaves the scene. Some of the measures taken by Turkey in recent years may well continue in the post-Erdogan era (Erdemir & Kowalski, 2020b).

Turkey's activist policy in the Middle East in recent decades came to a great extent at the expense of its relations with Israel, which are at low tide. The crisis in Turkey's relations with Egypt, and with some of the Arab Gulf states, has contributed to closer relations between Israel and these countries, and was also among the factors that contributed to the Abraham Accords, reached in August 2020. In the current situation, beyond the existing tension in Israel's bilateral relations with Turkey, Israel is becoming part of the Sunni internal struggle. Although the danger to Israel if the Islamic dimension becomes more dominant in Turkish foreign policy is clear, the risks stemming from a nationalist line in Turkish foreign policy should also be noted, because it puts Turkey on a collision course with some of Israel's allies, such as Greece and Cyprus. Turkey's nationalist line also encourages growing Turkish self-reliance and independent production of advanced weapon systems. Even if this does not constitute an immediate direct threat to Israel, these systems could fall into the hands of parties hostile to Israel. On the other hand, if the United States under the Biden administration succeeds in strengthening Turkey's relations with NATO (a prospect that appears remote), this could help restrain Ankara and reduce its predilection for self-reliance.

Dr. Gallia Lindenstrauss is a senior research fellow at INSS, specializing in Turkish foreign policy, as well as ethnic conflicts, Azerbaijan, Cyprus, and the Kurds.

Remi Daniel is a Neubauer research associate at INSS and a doctoral candidate in international relations at Hebrew University, focusing on Turkish foreign policy

References

Ahren, R. (2020, October 1). "Jerusalem is our city," Turkey's Erdogan declares. *Times of Israel*. https://bit.ly/3aADuIv

Akyol, M. (2016, October 23). How Ataturk became a model for Erdogan. *al-Monitor*. https://bit.ly/2MFJVBT

Aliriza, B., & Yekler, Z. (2019, March 20). The Turkish economy slowdown in 2018. Center for Strategic and International Studies. https://bit.ly/2MFKhbH

Angey, G. (2018). The Gülen movement and the transfer of a political conflict from Turkey to Senegal. *Politics, Religion & Ideology, 19*(1), 53-68.

Aras, B. (2009). The Davutoglu era in Turkish foreign policy. *Insight Turkey, 11*(3), 127-142.

Arkan, Z., & Kinacioglu, M. (2016). Enabling "ambitious activism": Davutoglu's vision of a new foreign policy identity for Turkey. *Turkish Studies, 17*(3), 381-405.

Ayyash, A. (2020, August, 17). The Turkish future of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. Century Foundation. https://bit.ly/3tulJmJ

Barkey, H. J. (2020). Erdogan's foreign policy: The role of personality and identity. In G. Celik & R. H. Linden (Eds.), *Turkey in transition: The dynamics of domestic and foreign policies* (pp. 147-162). Lynne Rienner.

BBC News (2010, June 10). Turkey agrees to plans for Arab "free trade zone" *BBC News*. https://www.bbc.com/news/10290025

Bekdil, B. (2020, July 1). Turkey and Qatar: Love in bloom. *Perspectives Papers No.* 1620, Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. https://bit.ly/2YQ2Jky

Bhutto, F. (2020, September 5). How Turkey's soft power conquered Pakistan. *Foreign Policy*. https://bit.ly/3oUD2d3

Al-Burai, A. (2020, June 10). A Cold War is brewing in Jerusalem between Turkey and an Israel-Saudi alliance. *Middle East Monitor*. https://bit.ly/39RWPpg

Cagaptay, S. (2020). *Erdogan's empire: Turkey and the politics of the Middle East*. I. B. Tauris.

Danforth, N. (2014, March 27). The empire strikes back. *Foreign Policy*. https://bit.ly/3jqPwYJ

Danforth, N. (2020, May 29). The nonsense of "neo-Ottomanism." *War on the Rocks*. https://bit.ly/36PTwNu

Erdemir, A., & Kowalski, P. (2020a, August 21). China buys Turkey's silence on Uyghur oppression. *The Diplomat*. https://bit.ly/36Qb5x3

Erdemir, A., & Kowalski, P. (2020b, September 30). "Blue Homeland" and the irredentist future of Turkish foreign policy. *War on the Rocks*. https://bit.ly/2MIjs6P

Flanagan, S. J., Larrabee, F. S., Binnendijk, A., Costello, K., Efron, S., Hoobler, J., Kirchner, M., Martini, J., Nader, A., & Wilson, P. A. (2020). *Turkey's nationalist course: Implications for the U.S.-Turkish strategic partnership and the U.S. Army*. RAND Corporation.

Friedman, D. (2015, August 25). The Turkish model. Center for American Progress. https://ampr.gs/3rn4ZvQ

Gingeras, R. (2020, June 2). Blue Homeland: The heated politics behind Turkey's new maritime strategy. *War on the Rocks*. https://bit.ly/3rxy1sB

Gorvett, J. (2020, September 1). Turkey's challenge to the regional status quo begins in the Eastern Mediterranean. *WPR-World Politics Review*. https://bit.ly/2YUd2UP

Haugom, L. (2019). Turkish foreign policy under Erdogan: A change in international orientation? *Comparative Strategy, 38*(3), 206–223.

IISS. (2020). Turkey's increasingly assertive foreign policy. *Strategic Comments, 26*(6), iv-vi.

Kiniklioglu S. (2020). Syrian refugees in Turkey: Changing attitudes and fortunes. *SWP Comment*. https://bit.ly/3aI2VI0

Kirisci, K. (2009). The transformation of Turkish foreign policy: The rise of the trading state. *New Perspectives on Turkey, 40*, 29-57.

Kirisci, K. (2017). Turkey and the West: Fault lines in a troubled alliance. Brookings Institution.

Murinson, A. (2006). The strategic depth doctrine of Turkish foreign policy. *Middle East Studies, 42*(6), 945-964.

Oner, I. (2020). Turkey and Venezuela: An alliance of convenience. Wilson Center. https://bit.ly/3ryTt0w

Ozkan, B. (2014). Turkey, Davutoglu and the idea of pan-Islamism. *Survival, 56*(4), 119–140.

Ozturk, A. E., & Sozeri, S. (2018). Diyanet as a Turkish foreign policy tool: Evidence from the Netherlands and Bulgaria. *Politics and Religion, 11*(3), 624–648.

Park, B. (2012). Modern Turkey: People, state and foreign policy in a globalized world. Routledge.

Park, B. (2020). Turkey in the Middle East. In G. Celik & R. H. Linden (Eds.), *Turkey in transition: The dynamics of domestic and foreign policies* (pp. 185-199). Lynne Rienner.

Presidency of the Republic of Turkey. (2018, January 10). Our motto, "the world is bigger than five," is the biggest-ever rise against global injustice. https://bit.ly/2LtP9QD

Rivlin, P. (2020, January 29). Turkey, Libya and the Mediterranean carve up. *Iqtisadi*, Moshe Dayan Center. https://dayan.org/content/turkey-libya-and-mediterranean-carve

Schmid, D. (2015, April 23). Turkey: The Sèvres Syndrome, or the endless war. Franco-Turkish Paper, No. 13, IFRI. https://bit.ly/3tFfi0j

Selcuk, O. (2013). Turkish Airlines: Turkey's soft power tool in the Middle East. *Akademik Ortadogu, 7*(2), 175-199.

Shadid, A. (2011, September 18). Turkey predicts alliance with Egypt as regional anchors. *New York Times*. https://nyti.ms/2Mtqrk9

Srivastava, M., & Pitel, L. (2020, September 9). Erdogan and Hamas: "He's presenting himself as leader of Muslim world." *Financial Times*. https://on.ft.com/3oZxFJQ

Stein, A. (2020). The crisis in US-Turkish relations. In G. Celik & R. H. Linden (Eds.), *Turkey in transition: The dynamics of domestic and foreign policies* (pp. 163-183). Lynne Rienner.

Tanchum, M. (2020). The logic beyond Lausanne: A geopolitical perspective on the congruence between Turkey's new hard power and its strategic reorientation. *Insight Turkey, 22*(3), 41–45.

Taspinar, O. (2010, April 12). Turkish Gaullism. Brookings Institution. https://brook.gs/36Vcd2h

Tharoor, I. (2020, August 10). A century-old treaty haunts the Mediterranean. *Washington Post*. https://wapo.st/3rArAVY

Tur, O. (2019). Turkey's role in Middle East and Gulf security. *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, 13*(4), 592–603.

Van Bladel, J. (2020). Russian-Turkish relations at a volatile time. In G. Celik & R. H. Linden (Eds.), *Turkey in transition: The dynamics of domestic and foreign policies* (pp. 201-214). Lynne Rienner.

Wastnidge, E. (2019). Imperial grandeur and selective memory: Re-assessing neo-Ottomanism in Turkish foreign and domestic politics. *Middle East Critique, 28*(1), 7–28.

Weise, Z. (2020, January 2). Turkish parliament approves troop deployment to Libya. *Politico*. https://politi.co/3d4GoYX

Yavuz, M. H. (2016). Social and intellectual origins of neo-Ottomanism: Searching for a post-national vision. *Die Welt des Islams, 56*(3-4), 438–465.

Yilmaz, U. (2020, November 2). Lira eclipses rial as biggest emerging-markets loser of 2020. *Bloomberg*. https://bloom.bg/39X7b7g