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Issue Brief

Erdogan's Islamist Foreign Policy at the Crossroads

Kushal Agrawal

March 17, 2021

S*ummary*

Even as he continues to work towards reviving the Ottoman glory and 'Ittihad-I Islam' ('Unity of Islam'), there are significant limitations and vulnerabilities in Erdogan pursuing his Islamist approach to statecraft abroad. The Turkish President will have to choose between a pragmatic and an Islamist foreign policy. If the Turkish economy returns to high growth rates, Erdogan's domestic position will be strengthened and he might still return to his pet Islamist adventures overseas.

In his quest to become the leader of the Muslim world, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has in the recent past vehemently opposed the European Union (EU) governments as well as West Asian and North African countries for their policy positions on Islamic issues. Erdogan, for instance, went on an offensive against French President Emmanuel Macron for the latter's perceived Islamophobic stance in the aftermath of beheading of Samuel Paty on October 16, 2020 in Paris. On October 24, 2020, Erdogan spoke against German authorities for raiding the Mevlana mosque in Berlin, closely associated with the Turkish Milli Gorus movement.

Turkey's relations with key Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt have also been fraught, given Erdogan's support for the Muslim Brotherhood. Since December 2020, however, Erdogan has been trying to reach out to the European Union and the West, in a possible effort to transform his pan-Islamist foreign policy outlook to a pro-Western Kemalist worldview. The imperative of securing Turkey's interests in a changing geopolitical scenario seems to be behind the change.

Political Islam in Turkey

While Turkey championed pan-Islamist causes after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the rise of Kemalism post-World War 1 resulted in the West viewing Turkey as a westernised, secularised democracy.¹ But the Islamist undercurrents were always part of the Turkish polity, which was also supported directly or indirectly by the Turkish ruling class.

After World War II, Turkey became a part of NATO in 1952 and thus joined the anti-communist bloc. Communism was the common enemy of the centrist, secular Kemalist political forces and the Islamists, who often enjoyed the support of the Kemalist regimes.

For instance, Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel, who came from a Kemalist nationalist background, formed governments in coalition with Islamist parties in the 1970's. It was only in the 1990's that he started acting against Islamist political forces. Even the Republican People's Party (CHP), which was founded by Kemal Ataturk, formed the 37th government in 1974 in coalition with Necmettin Erbakan's National Salvation Party (MSP).²

By the 1990s, Islamist political forces had already become part of the political mainstream. Erbakan, who is considered the father figure of the modern Islamist

¹ Alp Yenen, "[Pan-Islamism \(Ottoman Empire\)](#)", *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, April 14, 2020.

² Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, "[The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey](#)", *RAND Corporation*, 2008.

polity of Turkey, started the Milli Gorus (National Outlook), a pan-Islamist movement, in 1969.

Many of the founders of Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) find their roots in Erbakan's Milli Gorus movement.³ In fact, during his University days, Erdogan was inspired by Erbakan's ideology and joined his National Salvation party's youth wing in the 1970s as a student.⁴ Erbakan was Turkey's first Islamist prime minister, although he was in office for only a year. Erbakan used to call the European Union a 'Zionist Christian Club' and was fiercely anti-Western.⁵

The Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi Arabia have also played a big role in Turkey's path to Islamism. Institutionalised funding was provided from Riyadh while members of Turkey's political establishment had membership of the Saudi-funded Muslim World League.⁶ Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the Islamic theologian and the intellectual giant of the Muslim Brotherhood, has been very influential in Turkey.⁷ It was Qaradawi who strongly came in defence of Erdogan during the Gezi Park protests in 2013, terming them as foreign conspiracies to destabilise the Turkish government.

Erdogan in 2014, as prime minister, came down heavily on Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, after Interpol issued an arrest warrant against Qaradawi.⁸ Erdogan, during his college days in the 1970s, was part of the National Turkish Student Union (MTTB), which was an anti-communist Islamist student's organization, with links to the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Mask of Kemalism

Erdogan first rose to fame as the mayor of Istanbul from 1994 till 1998 and then climbed up the political ladder in Turkey's mainstream polity. In the post-Ottoman democratic history of Turkey, whenever the overarching Kemalist thought seemed to be sidelined by Islamist ideas by the ruling political class, the Turkish Armed forces deposed the ruling regime through a coup.

It was in the aftermath of the 1997 coup when Erdogan was jailed for hate speech, that he started toeing a line opposite to that of Erbakan's anti-Western thought to

³ Fulya Atacan, "Explaining Religious Politics at the Crossroad: AKP-SP", *Turkish Studies*, 6 (2), pp. 187-199, 2005.

⁴ "Recep Tayyip Erdogan: Short Bio of Presidential Candidate in Turkey Elections", *Hürriyet Daily News*, June 24, 2018.

⁵ "Erbakan's Legacy", *The Economist*, March 5, 2011.

⁶ Behlül Özkan, "The Cold War-Era Origins of Islamism in Turkey and Its Rise to Power", *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Volume 22, Hudson Institute, November 5, 2017.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Tulin Daloglu, "Erdogan defends Brotherhood's Qaradawi after arrest warrant", *Al-Monitor*, December 12, 2014.

avoid a military pushback.⁹ He along with his AKP till recent years portrayed themselves to be pro-European Kemalists, to avoid pushback from the Turkish Armed Forces.

The AKP tried to become a mainstream conservative nationalist political force that abided by Kemalist ideals.¹⁰ The mask of pro-Europeanism started to erase after continuous attempts by Turkey to be a part of the EU failed. After the 2011 Arab Spring, Erdogan asserted his support for Islamist political forces in the West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region like Mohammad Morsi in Egypt and the 'Dawn Coalition' in Libya.¹¹

Erdogan and the Arab World

The nation closest to Erdogan's idea of Islamic democracy was Egypt, where Hosni Mubarak stepped down after the protests and Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood became President after he won the 2012 Egyptian presidential election. This was viewed as a win for Islamist democracy over military dictatorship.

Erdogan supported the Muslim Brotherhood-led Morsi government so much so that when Morsi was deposed in 2013 by al-Sisi in a military coup, and the latter became the president, Erdogan refused to recognize Sisi as a legitimate ruler of Egypt.¹² When the crackdown on Muslim Brotherhood leadership began under Sisi, many of its leaders and sympathizers relocated to Turkey.¹³ Erdogan's support of the Muslim Brotherhood has been one of the main issues of contention between Turkey and its relations with the Arabs.

The UAE, Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia are also on opposing sides of Turkey in Libya. The Arab monarchies are supporting the General Khalifa Haftar-led Libyan National Army. Erdogan, who has regional ambitions in the Eastern Mediterranean, is firmly supporting the Government of National Accord, which has close relations with the Islamists and the Muslim Brotherhood. A pro-Muslim Brotherhood government in Libya will be troublesome for neighbouring Egypt and strategically and ideologically significant for Turkey. Turkey's relations with Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, have been badly affected after the killing of Jamal Khashoggi.¹⁴

⁹ Uri Friedman, "The Thinnest-Skinned President in the World", *The Atlantic*, April 26, 2016.

¹⁰ Omer Taspinar, "Turkey: The New Model?" Brookings, April 25, 2012.

¹¹ Soner Cagaptay, "Erdogan's Failure on the Nile", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, May 28, 2019; Jonathan Schanzer and Merve Tahiroglu, "Ankara's Failure", *Foreign Affairs*, January 25, 2016.

¹² Herb Keinon, "Erdogan slams Egypt's Sisi as 'tyrant' over Cairo policy toward Hamas", *The Jerusalem Post*, July 18, 2014.

¹³ "Turkey's relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood", *Alarabiya News*, October 14, 2013.

¹⁴ John R. Bradley, "Death of a Dissident", *The Spectator*, October 13, 2018.

Erdogan and the Qatari leadership also have been open about their support to the Muslim Brotherhood and have close connections with its leadership. During the Qatar diplomatic crisis, when the Gulf state was isolated by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt for its support to the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran, it was Turkey that came to the aid of Qatar.¹⁵ Qatar and Turkey share ideological convergence in not only supporting the Muslim Brotherhood but also other Islamist groups like Hamas.¹⁶ Qatar also opposed Morsi's overthrow, like Turkey.

Turkey's outreach to Iran troubles many Arabian Peninsula states, which view Iran as a threat. Turkey and Iran, apart from being majority Sunni and Shia countries, have differences of views on Syria and Lebanon. But they have tried to co-operate in many other areas and the two nations already have had six meetings of the Turkey Iran High-Level Cooperation Council.¹⁷

The Saviour of the Ummah

While addressing the Sixth Religious Council meeting of the Presidency of Religious Affairs (DİB) in Ankara in November 2019, Erdogan charged that Muslim countries "look for solutions in the Western capitals for their problems, instead of reaching out to their Muslim brothers and sisters for help."¹⁸

At the UN General Assembly in 2019, Erdogan raked up Kashmir and criticised the international community for not paying attention to the issue. This speech came just a month after the Indian government in August 2019 revoked the special status (Article 370) of Jammu and Kashmir. He also highlighted the issues of intervention in Yemen and Qatar and also the Israeli settlements in the West Bank.¹⁹

Erdogan has been trying to gather international muscle around the idea of reviving the Muslim Ummah, which other Islamic states like Pakistan and Malaysia have actively supported. Erdogan praised Pakistan PM Imran Khan for raising the voice for Muslim Ummah and the issue of Kashmir at a reception hosted for the participants of the Third Speakers Conference in Istanbul in October 2019.

Turkey, along with Pakistan, Malaysia, Iran and Qatar also tried to create an alternative to the Saudi-dominated Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) by holding an Islamic summit in Kuala Lumpur in 2019. This angered Riyadh which

¹⁵ "A brief overview of Qatar-Turkey ties", *TRT World*, November 26, 2018.

¹⁶ "Qatari and Turkish support for Muslim Brotherhood network revealed in 100-page report," *i24NEWS*, October 01, 2020.

¹⁷ Enes Kaplan, "Turkey, Iran to Hold High-Level Cooperation Meeting", *Anadolu Agency*, September 7, 2020.

¹⁸ "President Erdoğan decries divide in the Muslim world", *Daily Sabah*, November 28, 2019.

¹⁹ "Erdogan highlights global injustice, urges world to take action in UNGA speech", *Daily Sabah*, September 24, 2019.

then pressured Pakistan to opt-out of the summit. Erdogan, Mahathir Mohammad, Hassan Rouhani and Qatar's Hamad al-Thani participated in the conference. There is a feeling, especially in Turkey and Pakistan, that most of the Arab peninsula monarchs have abandoned the cause of Ummah, especially Palestine and Kashmir.

The Ummah revival, even if it is for geopolitical gains, is quite unrealistic for Turkey as it has problems with many regional Islamic states. Erdogan's quest for control of Mosul is driving a wedge between Turkey and Iran. Iran also backs the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria which has been fighting with Turkey in the north-western areas.

The AKP once used to say that 'Erdogan is Ummah's dream come true' but with all the regional rivalries that Turkey has been involved in within the Islamic world, it still seems to be a distant dream.

What Lies Ahead

There are significant limitations and vulnerabilities in Erdogan pursuing his Islamist approach to statecraft abroad. The Turkish economy has been on a freefall as the value of the Lira tumbled to a record low at 8.0 per dollar in October 2020.²⁰ Even as Turkey registered a 6.7 per cent positive growth in the period July-September 2020, the Turkish economy may be impacted in the medium-to-long term due to high inflation.²¹ Erdogan's domestic political problems may worsen if the economy underperforms.

If the high inflation rates sustain for much longer, it may affect the AKP's core voter base, which is mostly rural and conservative. Erdogan is feeling the heat domestically as the opposition CHP is cornering him on economic issues. The CHP won the crucial Istanbul mayoral election in 2019 which the AKP has held for more than a decade.

If the economy doesn't recover fully and the opposition's attack on him sustains till the 2023 presidential elections, Erdogan may face huge anti-incumbency. Sanctions imposed under the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) by the Trump administration has made matters worse and even added to the infighting within the AKP ranks.²²

²⁰ "Lira plummets amid Turkey's foreign policy adventurism", *Arab News*, October 26, 2020.

²¹ Aysu Biçer, "Turkey: Central Bank hikes interest rates", *Anadolu Agency*, November 19, 2020; "Turkish inflation edges higher to 15.61% in January", *Daily Sabah*, March 3, 2021.

²² Orhan Coskun and Ece Toksabay, "Erdogan's AK Party membership seen sliding further as dissent grows", *Reuters*, September 27, 2019.

Erdogan's Islamist foreign policy will be even more threatened if the Biden administration imposes additional sanctions.²³ The European Union is exasperated over Turkey's meddling in the Eastern Mediterranean against Greece and Cyprus.²⁴ Biden may plan on keeping US boots in Syria and Erdogan fears that the new US president may be sympathetic towards the Kurdish aspirations.²⁵ Ahead of the US 2020 elections, Biden even went to the extent of saying he would support the opposition leadership in Turkey.²⁶

With the threat of facing complete isolation from the West, especially Europe and the US, Erdogan seems to be trying to mend relations with them. While addressing his party congress on November 21, 2020, Erdogan asserted that his government envisages 'building our future together with Europe.' Recently, an Ambassador was appointed to Israel after nearly 2 years.²⁷

Post the imposition of CAATSA sanctions, Russia has stood by Turkey, despite diverging positions on Syria and Libya. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has clarified that Turkey is not a strategic ally but just a close partner with opposing views on regional conflicts.²⁸ Turkey and Greece, meanwhile, have already resumed dialogue on the Mediterranean crisis.

Even as he continues to work towards reviving the old Ottoman glory and 'Ittihad-I Islam' ('Unity of Islam'), Erdogan will have to choose between a pragmatic vis-à-vis an Islamist foreign policy. If the Turkish economy returns to high growth rates, Erdogan's domestic position will be strengthened and he might still return to his pet Islamist adventures overseas.

²³ Selcan Hacaoglu, "Incoming Biden Administration Hints at More Turkey Sanctions", *Bloomberg*, January 20, 2021.

²⁴ "EU summit: Turkish sanctions on agenda as Erdogan shrugs threats", *Aljazeera*, December 10, 2020.

²⁵ Aykan Erdemir and Philip Kowalski, "Joe Biden Will Be America's Most Pro-Kurdish President", *The National Interest*, August 16, 2020.

²⁶ "Turkey condemns Biden's criticism of 'autocrat' Erdogan", *Aljazeera*, August 16, 2020.

²⁷ Amberin Zaman, "Turkey opens secret channel to fix ties with Israel", *Al-Monitor*, November 30, 2020.

²⁸ "Russia never considered Turkey as a strategic ally, says Lavrov", *Middle East Monitor*, October 15, 2020.

About the Authors

Kushal Agrawal is Intern at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

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