

ERDOĞAN'S FAILURE ON THE NILE

*How Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan went from being
a regional Islamist leader in the Arab Spring to being
the Middle East's odd man out*

By Soner Cagaptay

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is one of the most consequential leaders in the history of the Turkish republic. Over the past two decades, he has gradually parted ways with Kamal Atatürk's West-centric and inward-looking foreign policy model, instead embracing an activist and neo-imperialist foreign policy. He has accordingly pivoted Turkey to the Middle East to build influence over the politics of the region. Often dubbed as "neo-Ottomanist," Erdoğan's foreign policy toward the region is informed by his belief that Turkey can rise as a great power if it becomes the leader in the Middle East first.

At home, Erdoğan has consolidated power while defanging the secularist Turkish military, and through that, undermining Atatürk's secularist legacy in the country. In a set of trials between 2008 and 2011, collectively dubbed Ergenekon, Erdoğan locked up nearly a quarter of Turkey's generals with the help of prosecutors and police aligned with the movement of political Islamist Fethullah Gülen, his ally at the time. In the summer of 2011, the Turkish military's top brass resigned en masse, recognizing that Erdoğan (and Gülen) had won. Around that time in 2010, Erdoğan passed a referendum with help from his allies in the Gülen movement, which gave him the prerogative to appoint a majority of judges to the country's high courts without a confirmation process.

Although a raw power struggle between Erdoğan and Gülen would unfold later—culminating in the Gulenist-led July 2016 coup attempt against Erdoğan—in the early 2010s, Erdoğan increasingly grew confident in his power at home. During the coinciding Arab uprisings, he looked to the Middle East to project Ankara's influence in the region.

At the onset of the Arab uprisings, Ankara's fortunes indeed seemed to be rising across the Arab-majority world. After the fall of the Hosni Mubarak regime in Egypt, Erdoğan (then the country's prime minister) quickly moved in to build influence in Cairo, followed by other regional capitals. At this time, he



placed all of his bets on Mohammed Morsi, a fellow political Islamist linked to the Muslim Brotherhood and a candidate for president in Egypt. Erdoğan subsequently won great influence in Cairo after Morsi came to power in Egypt in June 2012. However, following the ouster of Morsi by General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi in the summer of 2013, Erdoğan completely lost his Egyptian gains—almost overnight.

△ Turkey's leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Egypt's former president Mohamed Morsi at a congress for the Justice and Development Party in Ankara, Sept. 30, 2012. *Murad Sezer/Reuters*

Oddly, the events of the Arab Spring, specifically Morsi's ouster through a popular protest movement backed by the military, strongly resonated in Turkish domestic politics by shaping Erdoğan's thinking toward his opposition. In May 2013, a popular uprising in Istanbul against the destruction of a historic park by Erdoğan's government, dubbed the Gezi Park movement, rapidly became a source of mass mobilization against the Turkish leader. Erdoğan still feared that he too could be ousted by a military-led coup, even though he had neutered Turkey's Armed Forces. This is because Erdoğan lives with a constant fear that the once-mighty Turkish military could return to politics. His worst nightmare appeared to be coming true—as he saw it—in the summer of 2013, just as Morsi was losing power through the machinations of a popular unrest movement backed by the

Egyptian military. Erdoğan feared that what happened to Morsi was about to happen to him, and therefore violently cracked down on pro-Gezi Park rallies.

The violence of that crackdown has poisoned Turkish politics, creating a rift between two halves of the country: the first, which adores the Turkish leader and thinks he can do no wrong, and the second, which loathes him and thinks he can do no right. The ensuing crisis has resulted in deep domestic tensions, consuming Turkey's energy and undermining Ankara's ability to fully project its political power in the Middle East.

Thus in 2013, Turkey pivoted from being a prospective leading country of the region to being embroiled in its own domestic troubles. At the same time, the demise of Morsi and other Muslim Brotherhood-related leaders and movements in the Middle East backed by Erdoğan has left Ankara with nearly no allies or friends in the region. Essentially, Erdoğan's grand "neo-Ottoman" aspirations to shape the Middle East from Istanbul—where he often works in offices carved out of Ottoman-era palaces—have come to a halt.

Today, Ankara is nearly isolated in the Middle East. With the exception of Qatar, Turkey has no friends or allies in the region. How exactly did Ankara end up so alone? What went wrong, and what accounts for Erdoğan's "Arab fall"?

Transcending Racist Turkish Views toward Arabs

A little-known fact about Turkey: there is a high prevalence of racist views held toward Arabs ingrained in the country's popular culture. Unknowingly, many people outside of the Middle East often associate Turks with Arabs due to Islam, a religion shared by a majority of Arabs and an overwhelming majority of Turks. Their common faith notwithstanding, many of Turkey's citizens harbor racist sentiments toward Arabs, and few would wish to be associated with Arab cultures.

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Some of these opinions are embedded in recent Turkish history. In this regard, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire sheds light on the relationship between Turkey's citizens and their neighbors—in this case, the Arabs. As the empire withered away in the early twentieth century, a wave of Arab nationalism spread through its Middle Eastern provinces, especially in Syria. During this period, the Young Turks running the empire increasingly espoused Turkish nationalism. Specifically, Cemal Pasha—one of the three Young Turk leaders

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including seven in Damascus and others in Beirut. To this day, a major square in the Lebanese capital is named “Martyrs Square,” honoring Arab nationalists sent to the gallows by him. The Young Turk leader is notoriously remembered as “*Jamal Basha Al-Saffah*” in Arabic, or “Cemal Pasha the Bloodthirsty.”

During World War I—anticipating the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and making plans to reconfigure the Middle East in order to maintain control over the strategic seaways to India—Great Britain courted Arab leaders in the region in its quest to gain influence. Enter British policymakers and spies, including Lawrence of Arabia, who ingratiated himself with Arab leaders, most notably the Hashemite family in Mecca.

Convinced the British would present them with their own independent state, the Hashemites and their local followers rose against the Ottomans in a 1916 rebellion stretching from Syria to Yemen (to which Cemal Pasha and his companions responded with vengeance). Despite the persecution of Arab nationalist leaders under Ottoman rule, this legacy of “betrayal” by Arabs against the administration in Ottoman Istanbul during World War I has left a bitter taste in Turkish mouths. To this day, the best-known cultural icon by Turkey’s citizens that commemorates World War I battles is the “Yemen Türküsü” (Ballad of Yemen), a gloomy recanting of the story of an Anatolian soldier who perished in Yemen—fighting Arabs. Generations of Turks, including Erdoğan, were taught in Turkish schools during the twentieth century that the “Arabs stabbed the Turks in the back,” and at least some have internalized strongly anti-Arab nationalist tendencies.

The Ottoman Empire for centuries faced Europe, treating its Middle Eastern possessions mostly as an afterthought. An overwhelming majority of the nearly 300 grand viziers (a political rank at the level of prime minister) who served under the sultans in Istanbul hailed from the Balkans and the Caucasus. Many of them were ethnic Albanians, Armenians, Bosnians, Bulgarians, Circassians, Georgians, Greeks, and Serbs. There was even the unlikely sprinkling of Italians and Western Europeans among the list of grand viziers. Yet, excluding those whose ethnic origins still cannot be traced, the first Arab to hold the office, Mahmut Shevket Pasha, assumed power only in January 1913, barely five years before the collapse of the six-century-old empire.

The Turkish language bears linguistic signs of a longer history of Arab disenfranchisement in the Ottoman Empire as well as uneasy Turkish–Arab coexistence beyond the events of World War I. Anti-Arab expressions, many of them widely circulated in contemporary Turkish popular culture, literature, movies, and slang, include: “like Arab’s hair” (a mess from which there is no exit); “neither Damascene candy, nor the Arab’s face” (a situation when one has two bad options to choose from); and others that are even less flattering.

Erdoğan and his foreign affairs minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, at the onset of the Arab uprisings, deserve credit for taking an emphatic and passionate interest in the Arab nations and, more importantly, transcending Turkish racist views toward Arabs. Overcoming this mentality was critical to Erdoğan's foreign policy ambitions, and also self-serving. Erdoğan believes that Turkey can emerge once again as a great power by leading Muslim countries, starting with the Arab-majority states of the Middle East. By and through Muslims, Turkey can become a great power if Turks are given a superior role in this constellation. At the beginning of the Arab uprisings, which promised to bring Muslim Brotherhood-related parties backed by Ankara to power in various Arab capitals, Erdoğan believed this goal was within his reach.

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tour for the Turkish leader, who simultaneously visited Tunisia and Libya, both of which were similarly shaken by the Arab uprisings. Erdoğan landed in Cairo in September 2011. Egyptian crowds greeted him as a hero. Large billboards featuring his face lined the expanse of highway from the Cairo airport to the downtown area. He presented Turkey as a model of modern Islamic democracy and secularism. Although Erdoğan's support for secularism surprised his Egyptian

hosts, it was actually an insightful and wise warning—which they ignored—to maintain sufficient public support to deter a military takeover.

Egyptian newspapers suggested that a new alignment with Turkey would put pressure on Israel, and Erdoğan publicized the fact that he was considering a visit to Gaza to signal Turkish support for Hamas and the broader Gaza population. In the end, the Gaza visit did not take place, reportedly due to opposition from Egypt's then-ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. Following the Cairo visit, Davutoğlu called for a Turkish–Egyptian alliance, or “the axis of democracy.”

Indeed, close bilateral ties were established with the election victories of the Muslim Brotherhood (known as *Ikhwanul Muslimin*, or simply “Ikhwan” in Arabic) and its candidate Mohamed Morsi in Egypt in June 2012.

Erdoğan visited Cairo a second time in November 2012, this time with a large delegation from his government and the private sector. He delivered a speech at Cairo University praising Morsi for the decision to withdraw Egypt's ambassador to Israel in response to Israeli airstrikes on Gaza. Erdoğan further

suggested that an “Egyptian–Turkish alliance” would ensure peace and stability in the Eastern Mediterranean, implying that such an alliance would constrain Israel’s ability to use force. Erdoğan praised Egyptian youth activists for bringing down Mubarak’s “dictatorship” and proclaimed, “Egypt and Turkey are one hand,” a play on the Egyptian military’s slogan “the army and the people are one hand.”

Yet, Erdoğan’s ambitions for a strategic partnership with Egypt ran aground as Morsi’s handle on rule began to slip. Soon after taking office, the latter set in motion a hasty power grab, granting himself judicial control above any Egyptian court and ramming through a new constitution drafted largely by political Islamists, excluding other groups in Egypt. The speed with which Morsi was able to establish himself as the sole ruler of Egypt in less than a year made Erdoğan’s own gradual accumulation of power in Turkey since 2003 appear mild by comparison.

Anti-Morsi and anti-Ikhwan demonstrations in Cairo began in November of 2012 and grew increasingly violent, while attempts at a dialogue between Morsi and the various opposition parties collapsed. By the spring of 2013, the anti-Morsi *Tamarod* movement had begun organizing mass protests scheduled for June 30, the one-year anniversary of Morsi’s rule. As reports circulated that Morsi had tried to remove General El-Sisi from his position as defense minister, Egypt’s military leadership issued warnings that the army might have to intervene to “prevent Egypt from entering a dark tunnel.”

Erdoğan’s appeal to the Egyptians searching for a new political approach remained strong through this period, mainly because of Turkey’s economic success up to 2013. Unlike Erdoğan, who boasted about Turkey’s then-booming economy, Morsi faced a deepening economic crisis. Morsi’s 2012 visit to Ankara was significant because it resulted in a \$1 billion loan deal from Erdoğan, but this was not enough to improve the Egyptian economy. Western and Turkish efforts to help Morsi reach an agreement with the International Monetary Fund to bolster the Egyptian economy also collapsed, and Morsi withdrew support for reforms only hours after his office announced them. Ankara offered Egypt concessionary trade deals and promoted Turkish private investment, but Morsi’s administration appeared increasingly paralyzed.

As the June 30 protests drew closer, Erdoğan sent Turkey’s national intelligence chief, Hakan Fidan, to visit the Egyptian leader. Subsequent reports in both the Egyptian and Turkish media suggested that Fidan’s mission was to warn Morsi of an impending coup and perhaps even discuss how to avoid it. Whatever the real substance of the visit, the Egyptian military and its civilian allies perceived the visit as final proof of Erdoğan’s alignment with Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood. As scheduled, millions of Egyptians took to the streets on June

30, this time to protest the brotherhood's power grab and its failure to tackle ongoing economic and security problems. Brotherhood politicians labeled the protests "a coup attempt" designed to oust their democratically elected leader from the beginning, echoing rhetoric used by Erdoğan, who at the time faced the Gezi Park rallies in Istanbul which had begun only weeks before the protests against Morsi.

Yet, when General El-Sisi announced on July 3, 2013 that the army had removed Morsi from power to save Egypt from the specter of civil war, he received support from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia, which oppose the Ikhwan in Egypt and regionally. Erdoğan's carefully cultivated relationship with the new Egyptian leadership was over. He referred to El-Sisi as "a tyrant" and accused the interim Egyptian government of practicing "state terrorism." Erdoğan also started to allow pro-Ikhwan and anti-Sisi Egyptian media networks to operate freely from within Turkey.

El-Sisi struck back. Egyptian media accused Ankara of "supporting the terrorist campaign" against the Egyptian security services in the Sinai Peninsula following Morsi's removal from power. Hüseyin Avni Botsalı, a seasoned diplomat and Turkey's ambassador to Cairo, went from being embraced across the spectrum of Egyptian politics to facing anti-Turkish demonstrations at the gates of his residence. Ankara and Cairo canceled plans confirmed during Morsi's tenure to hold joint naval maneuvers in the Eastern Mediterranean. Finally, in November 2013, the Egyptian Foreign Ministry expelled Botsalı, severing ties with Ankara.

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Erdoğan's support for Morsi and the Brotherhood in Egypt after their ouster went on to cost Turkey dearly. To retaliate, Cairo started talks with Athens to delineate Egyptian and Greek maritime economic areas in the Mediterranean. In November 2014, El-Sisi held a three-way summit with the Cypriot president and Greek prime minister to promote a deal supplying natural gas from undersea fields off the coast of Cyprus to Egypt. In doing this, he was almost certainly seeking to challenge Erdoğan's power in the Eastern Mediterranean. El-Sisi's government drove out Turkish businesses, which were a source of Ankara's ascendancy in the Middle East. Turkish businesses that remained in Egypt have suffered since, undermining Ankara's cherished soft-power goals.

The continued tension up to the present day in the Turkish–Egyptian relationship is shaped by Erdoğan and El-Sisi's perceptions of each other. Erdoğan is the political Islamist leader who has imprisoned secular generals, while El-Sisi is the

secular general who has locked up political Islamists. As long as these two men are in charge of their respective countries, it is hard to imagine Ankara and Cairo establishing (much less maintaining) truly friendly relations.

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Erdoğan's Primal Fear

The roots of Ankara's reaction to Morsi's ouster, and ultimate break with Cairo, lie as much in Erdoğan's past—namely his traumatic and conflict-ridden relationship with Turkey's own secularist military—as they do in the events of 2013.

A looming fear of “the coup” resides in Erdoğan and his *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, or Justice and Development Party (AKP), members, even though he brought the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) under his authority in the last decade with the help of the Gulenist police and judicial apparatus via the aforementioned Ergenekon trials (2008 to 2011).

These fears can be traced to the “soft coup” of February 1997, in which the TAF orchestrated a civilian protest movement to oust the AKP's democratically elected political Islamist predecessor, the Welfare Party (RP) and the RP's leader Necmettin Erbakan (1926–2011). Erbakan was Turkey's leading political Islamist politician. Erdoğan at one time held Erbakan in such high regard that he named one of his sons after Erbakan in 1981.

After the Turkish courts shut down the RP in 1998, they sentenced Erdoğan—a member, and then-mayor of Istanbul—to a ten-month jail-term (of which he served four months) for reciting a poem that allegedly undermined Turkey's secular constitution. The outside world stood with the Turkish military's coup, yet many Turks championed Erdoğan as a heroic prisoner as well as the ideological and political successor of Erbakan, in chains.

Of course, by the events of summer 2013, political Islam in Turkey and Erdoğan himself had come a long way from the 1997–1998 “soft coup” and a prison sentence. After the RP was forcibly shut down, Erdoğan and some younger leaders broke away from Erbakan and his anti-democratic rhetoric, officially founding the AKP in 2001. The new AKP stormed into power in the November 2002 Turkish general election.

When the AKP came to power, Erdoğan and the party leadership made an alliance with the Gülen movement, a Turkish political Islamist congregation adhering to the teachings of Muslim cleric Fethullah Gülen. The Gülen movement had thousands of members across Turkey and abroad working in education, the police, media, and the judiciary, as well as private business. The

Gülenist–AKP alliance proved to be fruitful indeed for both sides as the Erdoğan administration went on to deliver a decade of phenomenal economic growth. In the 2011 parliamentary elections, 49.9 percent of the electorate supported Erdoğan and his party, up from 34 percent nine years earlier.

Subsequently, by 2013 Erdoğan had become Turkey’s most powerful leader in nearly a century. However, although he was entrenched in power, Erdoğan continued to fear a potential coup. In this regard, the events of 2013 in Turkey and Egypt represent a turning point in Erdoğan’s career.

The Turning Point: Gezi Park and Beyond

Initially, downtown Istanbul’s Gezi protests happened for no discernible reason, according to Erdoğan and his government ministers. The protesters—at first—were small groups of anti-capitalists and environmentalists with little influence in Turkey, much less in Istanbul. However, on May 30, 2013, a brutal police crackdown on these insignificant groups spearheaded mass urban protests in many Turkish cities.

In the matter of a few days, nearly 2.5 million had joined rallies in almost all of Turkey’s eighty-one provinces. The Erdoğan-led state was blindsided by the demonstrations and many posited that Erdoğan himself would be forced to call early elections, which would lead to his own and his party’s demise. Yet, Erdoğan proved resilient, and with backing from his Gülenist allies, he held onto power and hit back at the protesters. His state security forces broke up the protests across the country after a few weeks, resulting in the deaths of seven protesters and police officers by the end of the summer in 2013.

Meanwhile, the ousting of Erdoğan’s ally and fellow political Islamist Morsi—with the tremors of the Gezi Park rallies still rumbling, albeit softly in Turkey—marked a new direction for Erdoğan and Turkey in the Middle East. Despite crushing the Gezi Park protests, Erdoğan’s actions post-summer 2013 indicate that he was a man fearful of suffering Morsi’s fate.

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Gezi Park and Morsi’s ouster made Erdoğan become more authoritarian in quashing any similar protests he feared could oust him in the future. Domestically, this decision increased Turkey’s democratic backslide. Harassment of opposition members and media outlets became increasingly common, as did political interference in the judicial process. In 2015, renewed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) violence against the Turkish government in southeastern Turkey provided Erdoğan with a reason to crack down on his broader opposition beyond Gülenist and pro-PKK constituencies. Furthermore, the failed July 15, 2016 coup against Erdoğan, by segments of the TAF with anti-Erdoğan

Gülenist support, meant that Erdoğan and his government were even more emboldened to clamp down on dissidents in the country.

For years, Erdoğan had been a master of reading the global *zeitgeist* and responding to it with a public relations executive's craftiness, for instance portraying his AKP as a "democracy-loving (and formerly political-Islamist) faction" soon after the September 11, 2001 attacks. However, after the summer of 2013 and the Gezi Park rallies, he lost this magic touch and ability to awe the international community. The image of Erdoğan as an authoritarian leader belatedly started to take shape in many Western capitals and in financial circles. Investment into Turkey started to dry up, and rising anti-Erdoğan sentiments in the West only fed into Erdoğan's rooted resentment toward the West from his political past.

Only Pals with Qatar

In foreign policy, too, Erdoğan faces troubles, especially in the Middle East. With the notable exception of Qatar, following the events of 2013 in Turkey and Egypt, Turkish ties with the Arab monarchies within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have suffered severely because of Erdoğan's support for the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East. These Gulf monarchies have a deep aversion to the Brotherhood, and see them as their main domestic security threat.

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Meanwhile, Erdoğan's pro-Brotherhood stance found limited success in the rest of North Africa, where Ankara fared better in Tunisia than it did in Libya. When Libya descended into civil war, Erdoğan threw his support behind the political Islamist factions in Tripoli's western-based "Dawn Coalition," which opposed Libya's "Dignity Coalition" led by General Khalifa Haftar in Tobruk in the northeast. El-Sisi and his ally the UAE worried about the ascent of political Islam in Libya next door to Egypt and, eager to undermine Erdoğan, were quick to assist the Tobruk government; they carried out air strikes aimed at the Tripoli factions. Because of its support for the "Dawn Coalition," Turkey lost many of the pre-war economic contracts and commercial ties it had painstakingly built in Libya over the previous decades. Ankara also failed to build influence on the UN-led peace process regarding Libya, because many Libyans and key international players did not view Erdoğan as neutral. This was illustrated by the ostracized Turkish delegation at the Libya conference in Palermo, Italy, on November 12–13, 2018.

Erdoğan invested heavily in Tunisia after Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's fall to help the political Islamist Ennahda party, which joined the government in November

2011. A notable initiative in this regard was the establishment of the High Level Strategic Cooperation Council (HLSCC) between Tunis and Ankara, which was signed in Ankara by Erdoğan and the then-prime minister of Tunisia, Hamadi Jebali, on December 25, 2012. The declaration created mechanisms for security, military, economic, and trade cooperation. During the first meeting of the HLSCC, the delegations made twenty-one agreements and declared twenty-four twin cities in both countries. Since then, Ankara has provided half a billion dollars' worth of credit to post-Arab Spring Tunisia, though Turkey's clout has decreased since Ennahda stepped down from government in 2014.

By 2019, Qatar was Erdoğan's only friend in the Middle East. Doha and Ankara have much in common when it comes to their foreign policies. Both countries support political Islamist groups, including the Ikhwan in Egypt and Hamas in Gaza, as well as Brotherhood-affiliated groups in Syria and Libya. The Turkish-Qatari alliance solidified after Turkey sided with Doha in a GCC dispute in 2017. On June 5, 2017, the dispute broke into the open when Bahrain, Egypt, Libya's eastern-based government, the Maldives, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Yemen severed relations with Qatar, citing Doha's support for the Muslim Brotherhood and accusing it of supporting terrorism.

Turkey's immediate reaction to the crisis was to try to remain neutral and call for dialogue. Just a few days into the blockade, however, it became clear that Ankara had decided to take a pro-Qatar stance. Erdoğan condemned the Saudi-led coalition's blockade of Qatar, saying that the isolation imposed on Qatar was inhumane and against Islamic values, even comparing the blockade to a "death sentence." As the blockade dragged on despite U.S. efforts at mediation, Turkey's role as a critical lifeline for Qatar became increasingly evident.

The Middle East's New Power Game: "Axis" vs. "Bloc"

Regional dynamics in the Middle East have aligned Turkey and Qatar, almost molding them into a bilateral axis competing against other regional powers including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, and occasionally Jordan and Kuwait in a bloc-like formation, with Israel occasionally supporting this grouping behind the scenes.

The "axis" and the "bloc" are informal alliances, but competition between them remains fierce. For instance, throughout the Arab uprisings and their aftermath, Turkey and the UAE ended up on opposite sides of almost every conflict. Despite their initial shared hostility toward a common enemy in the form of the Al-Assad regime in Syria, the Turkey-Qatar axis and the UAE have supported rival groups within the Syrian opposition.

In Palestine, the UAE and Egypt have been trying to broker a deal between the rival Fatah and Hamas movements, while the Turkey-Qatar axis supports

Hamas. This competition now extends to East Africa, where the axis is vying for influence against the bloc along the Nile Valley and around the Horn of Africa in a new Great Game.

In the Horn of Africa, Doha and Ankara teamed up to cultivate influence in Somalia in 2011 and later in Sudan. In this alliance, Ankara provides the manpower on the ground while Doha supplies the investments, thanks to Qatar's deep pockets. The two countries have accordingly invested heavily in supporting various segments of the government and taking control of ports, as well as building military facilities. In Somalia, these investments are centered in the capital of Mogadishu, and in Sudan, Turkey has set out to build a port in Suakin on the Red Sea coastline. Here Ankara is literally trying to bring an abandoned Ottoman-era port back to life. This presence is limited but has not gone unnoticed by regional players. However, it has yet to be seen whether, following the fall of Omar Al-Bashir in Khartoum, Turkey and Qatar's influence in Sudan will remain unchanged. Egypt and its allies have already recognized the post-Bashir government in Khartoum, potentially undermining the Doha–Ankara axis there.

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Underlying this rift is the visceral reaction that the Ikhwan and its regional supporters evoke from the bloc. For Egyptian leader El-Sisi, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, and his homologue UAE Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Zayed, the term “Muslim Brotherhood” has become synonymous with Erdoğan's Turkey, Doha, and with “radical political Islamism” as they understand it. While Turkey's regional initiatives can be explained through the lens of nationalism or geopolitics, the bloc's readiness to ascribe all Turkish motives to the Muslim Brotherhood agenda and all Sunni Muslim extremism to the influence of the Ikhwan has deepened the already severe policy differences between the bloc and the axis.

Within the GCC bloc, Turkey's ties are the worst with the UAE, Erdoğan's archenemy in the Persian Gulf and perhaps the entire Middle East as of 2019. Abu Dhabi took a strong stance against Erdoğan's support for Morsi and his subsequent opposition to El-Sisi after the fall of the Brotherhood in Cairo. Erdoğan's September 24, 2014 speech at the UN, in which he implied El-Sisi was an illegitimate tyrant, was the straw that broke the proverbial camel's back regarding Ankara–Abu Dhabi ties. Following this, the UAE launched a successful campaign to block Turkey's bid to join the UN Security Council for its 2015–2016 term.

Since then, Turkish–Emirati ties have hit a historic low, with the two countries using any opportunity to undermine each other’s policies, from Syria—where Abu Dhabi supports Bashar Al-Assad and opened its embassy in December 2018—to Somalia, where Ankara backs the central government in Mogadishu and Abu Dhabi backs Somalia’s breakaway regions in the north.

Turkey and Saudi Arabia

Saudi ties with Turkey, however, deserve separate treatment from the axis and the bloc. A devout Muslim, Erdoğan has been deferential toward the Saudi kings, whom he respects as the “Guardians of Islam’s Two Holy Shrines” in Mecca and Medina. In fact, in recent years, Turkish–Saudi ties did improve a bit after Saudi Arabia’s vehemently anti-Ikhwan King Abdullah died in January 2015. However, these ties took a nosedive when Turkey sided with Qatar in the GCC dispute, only to dip further following the October 2, 2018 murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. Erdoğan used this incident for his own sake, slowly leaking evidence to the media, incriminating Crown Prince Mohammed in the murder, and embarrassing Bin Salman internationally.

Overall, the Khashoggi episode has left the crown prince bitter toward Erdoğan. Bin Salman has embraced the other members of the bloc, bonding with El-Sisi and Mohammed Bin Zayed even more strongly in their opposition to Erdoğan. In 2019, Erdoğan therefore faces an Arab triumvirate composed of El-Sisi, Mohammed Bin Salman, and Mohammed Bin Zayed, all of whom aim to undermine him and his regional policies. With Iran and its allies, namely the Al-Assad regime and Hezbollah, also opposing Erdoğan, this leaves the Turkish leader almost alone in the Middle East, as well as facing pushback from the Saudis and their allies on one side and the Iranians and their allies on the other.

A Failed Pivot and an Uncertain Future


Erdoğan and his AKP leadership have carefully recalculated their domestic and foreign policies since 2013 to deal with pressing issues at home and abroad. The mirroring of the Gezi Park protests and the ousting of Morsi in Egypt have left a lasting impact on Erdoğan’s leadership in Turkey. He has continued to clamp down on protests and dissent after 2013, up to the present day. In foreign policy, Erdoğan has faced off against the Gulf countries, trying to influence the outcomes of the Arab uprisings by exclusively supporting the Brotherhood. However, the horse on which Erdoğan bet came in last place. This has created a rift between Turkey and almost all other Sunni powers of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. In hindsight, perhaps no one could have guessed that the Brotherhood would rise and fall all so fast. However, as crafty statesmen, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu should have had the insight to not bet on just one horse, but rather on multiple regional competitors in foreign policy.

In addition, Turkey's Syria policy has put it at odds with the Al-Assad regime and Al-Assad's regional patron, Iran. Although Turkey's ties with Iraq have improved a bit since 2017, when Baghdad and Ankara came together to object to the Kurdistan Regional Government's unilateral independence referendum, Ankara retains less influence in Baghdad than does Tehran.

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Accordingly, today Ankara is more isolated than ever in the Middle East. Without a doubt, this all has recalibrated the Turkish government's and many of Turkish citizens' regional weltanschauung. Erdoğan's Middle Eastern engagement has resulted in sour Turkish views of Arabs and new stereotypes toward them. Ankara's poor relations with Abu Dhabi are a case in point. In Turkey's most recent significant spat with the UAE in December 2017, UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah Bin Zayed Al-Nahyan shared a post on Twitter that accused Fahreddin Pasha, an Ottoman general who fought to defend Medina during the Arab revolt of 1916 in World War I, of stealing priceless artifacts and bringing them to Istanbul at the time. "These are Erdoğan's ancestors, and their history with Arab Muslims," the tweet concluded. The taunt sprung from a deep well of bitterness. On the propaganda front, the UAE has turned to sniping at Turkey, casting it as a foreign power seeking to impose its supremacy over the Arabs.

Stung by the insult, Erdoğan fired back at the minister: "While my ancestors were busy defending Medina, you impudent man, what were your ancestors doing?" Erdoğan's spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin also chimed in, calling Bin Zayed's comments a "propaganda lie that seeks to turn Turks and Arabs against one another." Erdoğan advisor Yigit Bulut piled on criticism too, deriding the UAE as the "52nd state of the U.S." (Israel, he said, "is the 51st state"). Pro-Erdoğan Turkish press sprang into action with stories and op-eds glorifying Fahreddin Pasha and excoriating the UAE for insulting his character.

Ironically, Erdoğan's Middle East pivot, which aimed to undo Turks' racist views of Arabs, seems to have not only failed in transcending such prejudices, but also encouraged a new generation of unfortunately negative perceptions of and tensions with Arabs. 

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