

Will Erdogan's Dream for a New Ottoman Empire Become a Nightmare?

by Ramtanu Maitra

Aug. 3—Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's role in the Syrian crisis has endangered stability within Turkey and threatened its integrity and sovereignty. Driven by his not-so-hidden desire to re-establish the legacy of the Ottoman Empire, Prime Minister Erdogan and President Abdullah Gul, the two Islamists at the helm, aided by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, a geopolitician, have set the stage for wide-ranging chaos in the region and potentially within Turkey.

There are media reports citing unnamed government officials in Ankara who said that Erdogan had sought "permission" to send Turkish troops to intervene in the ensuing battle in Aleppo, during his 36-minute telephone talk last week with U.S. President Barack Obama. Subsequently, on Aug. 2, U.S. State Department spokesman Patrick Ventrell said that Washington did not think that Turkey's further military buildup on the border with Syria was the right way to go.

What those who dream of a neo-Ottoman Empire in Turkey have not comprehended, is the effect of the forces that will be unleashed within Turkey and outside it, if Ankara chooses to make such a military intervention. To begin with, the support lent by Erdogan to the Muslim Brotherhood, to dethrone Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, has paved the way for a civil war in Syria, and that has made Moscow terribly uneasy. But to antagonize Russia further could bring Moscow's wrath down on Turkey.

External and Internal Threats

In a July 6 article, "Turkish Prime Minister Recep Yayıp Erdogan Never Saw It Coming," in *Asia Times*, Pepe Escobar pointed out that Erdogan simply cannot afford to antagonize Russia. "There are at least 100,000 Russians in Syria—doing everything from building dams to advising on the operation of ... defense systems. And then there's the inescapable Pipelineistan

angle. Turkey happens to be Gazprom's second-largest customer. Erdogan can't afford to antagonize Gazprom. The whole Turkish energy security architecture depends on gas from Russia—and Iran.

Crucially, one year ago, a \$10 billion Pipelineistan deal was clinched between Iran, Iraq, and Syria for a natural gas pipeline from Iran's giant South Pars field to Iraq, Syria, and further on towards Turkey, eventually connecting to Europe." In other words, a military intervention by Erdogan in Syria could prompt a serious military threat from Russia, bringing the world to the brink of thermonuclear war.

Yigal Schleifer, in his article "Turkey: Syria Crisis Causes Russian Relations To Suffer," at Eurasianet.org on July 19, noted that Ankara and Moscow have adopted dramatically divergent positions on how to deal with the Syrian crisis, with Turkish leaders publicly calling for al-Assad to step down, and Turkey serving as a staging ground for the Syrian opposition. Russia, on the other hand, has emerged as the Assad regime's most significant international backer.

Schleifer quoted Stephen Blank, a professor of National Security Studies at the U.S. Army War College in Pennsylvania, saying, "I think that the Syria crisis—in conjunction with other issues such as Cyprus, NATO missile defense and pipeline politics, all of which pit Turkey against Russia—is going to erode substantially the amity between the two countries."

Within Turkey, it is widely recognized that the majority of Turks and the political opposition to the Erdogan/Gul-led ruling Islamist Justice and Development party (AKP), strongly oppose Erdogan's support for the Muslim Brotherhood and all varieties of jihadi terrorists who have assembled and are working as the foot soldiers for the Persian Gulf's Sunni Arab states, notably Saudi Arabia and Qatar; for the old colonials, such as Britain and France; and for Turkey's most powerful protector, the United States.

Internally, the Erdogan-Gul-Davutoglu trio has

begun to feel the heat. The Kurds, an ethnic group that comprises 20% of Turkish population, are aligning with the Kurds of Syria and Iraq. At the top of the Kurdish heap sits the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the terrorist group that has been fighting for autonomy in southeast Turkey since the 1980s. Taming the PKK rebellion has already cost the lives of over 40,000 Turkish citizens, including 5,000 soldiers.



Euronews

Prime Minister Erdogan's fanatical pursuit of his dream of a new Ottoman Empire puts him at odds with Turkey's military, known as the "Pashas," who are steeped in the secular tradition of Turkey's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

The Turkish military, known as the "Pashas" in Turkey, has no love lost for Erdogan's AKP and its Islamist tenor. The Pashas have been deeply concerned, since the electoral victory of the AKP in 2009, that Erdogan and his neo-Ottoman backers are trying to dismantle Kemalist secular Turkey, the state established by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923, to which they owe their allegiance. One of the primary concerns of the Turkish military is that in dealing with the PKK, Erdogan is also indirectly dealing with various jihadi terrorist group. It could be the straw that breaks the AKP-camel's back.

In a recent article, "Why Turkey Cannot Go to War with Syria," K. Gajendra Singh, former Indian Ambassador to Turkey and chairman of the Foundation for Indo-Turkic Studies, pointed out that under the AKP, Turkey's secular armed forces, a stakeholder in the nation's emergence out of the ashes of the Ottoman Empire and its modernization and secularization, have been insulted and humiliated:

"The autonomous military establishment has been fiddled with and weakened, perhaps even as a war machine, in the wake of arrest of many serving and retired senior officers, including respected generals, on not too believable charges, by special courts, the kind which Atatürk used in the 1930s against London conspiracies against the new republic, after the British forces moved into Iraqi Kurdistan oil areas of Kirkuk after the ceasefire. Turkey still has hopes of recovering that area. So, a colonels' coup cannot be ruled out sometime in the future."

Erdogan's Neo-Ottoman Yearnings

One may ask whether Erdogan and two of his main advisors—President Gul, who worked in a bank in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, for seven years before returning to Ankara to enter politics in 1992; and Foreign Minister Davutoglu—who were lured by generous donations by the House of Saud and driven by their own dream of a neo-Ottoman Empire, which would extend to the East, South, and North, reaching the Caucasus, have fallen into this dangerous trap.

Directing Turkey to adopt a neo-Ottoman Empire policy is in direct confrontation with the fundamental policies of Atatürk, which were the integrity of Turkey's borders and the abandonment of its mental association with the moribund Ottoman Empire. Sean Foley, a professor at Middle Tennessee State University, wrote an article, "Turkey's New Foreign Policy," in *Global Politician*, Oct. 7, 2010, reminding the Turks that in October 1927, Atatürk delivered an historic speech in which he explained why Turks had to abandon the Ottoman Empire and embrace his new state.

"Atatürk pointed out the high cost and futility of seeking an empire extending beyond Turkish-populated lands: 'Do you know,' he asked, 'how many sons of Anatolia have perished in the scorching sands of Yemen?' In the future, Atatürk promised, Turks would no longer die in wars in Yemen or the Arabian Peninsula, a region of the world that had become synony-

FIGURE 1

Kurdish-Inhabited Areas (2002)



CIA

The map shows the area, overlapping Syria, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq, that some would like to fashion as an independent Kurdistan.

mous with the plight of the Ottoman soldier in Turkish folklore and popular songs.

Atatürk's successors closely adhered to his warnings and put a priority on Turkey's relations with the United States and Western Europe, over its ties to Arab states during the Cold War."

However, that foreign policy is now being subverted, with the help of the Gulf Arabs. The Erdogan-Gul-Davutoglu trio is moving forward with its distorted dreams. But history shows that for the Gulf Arabs, this is merely a marriage of convenience, aimed at the ouster of Assad. For instance, during a banquet in Mecca in 1931, the King of Saudi Arabia, Ibn Saud, pointed a finger at an Ottoman prince and described how his ancestors had fought those of the prince, rather than call themselves servants of the Ottoman Caliphate. Decades later, Saudi schoolbooks hailed their kingdom as the great "torch" that had lit the "path of liberation" of the Arab world from the yoke of Ottoman rule and European imperialism.

Erdogan, following a convincing victory in Turkey's parliamentary election in June 2011, wasted no time projecting a decidedly Ottoman-sounding theme in his victory speech. According to foreign media, Er-

dogan alluded to Turkey's aspiration to be a voice in the West for the Middle Eastern region and Muslims, saying that Bosnians, Lebanese, Syrians, and Palestinians also benefitted from his victory. "Believe me," he said, "Sarajevo won today as much as Istanbul, Beirut won as much as Izmir, Damascus won as much as Ankara, Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin, the West Bank; Jerusalem won as much as Diyarbakir."

What did all that mean? J.E. Dyer, at TheOptimistic-Conservative's Blog, pointed out that "perhaps most interesting of all is Erdogan's list itself. Sarajevo, Damascus, Beirut, Ramallah, Jerusalem. In four of these former Ottoman holdings, there is, or has been, an acknowledged modern dispute over sovereignty. But what about Damascus? Should the Assads—or Iran—be alarmed that it was on Erdogan's list? Does Damascus need the healing hand of Erdogan and the AKP? Or is Syria—but not Jordan, Egypt, or Iraq—considered by Erdogan to be properly in modern Turkey's 'sphere'?"

Erdogan has also begun to put in place policies which directly undermine Atatürk. For instance, the education reform bill introduced by Erdogan's AKP has been characterized by opposition parties as aiming to halve the length of compulsory schooling. This would promote the rise of Islamic schools, like the one in which Erdogan was educated. Even the country's confederation of industry, the TUSIAD, has joined in the chorus of protest against this. Following its third electoral victory in succession, with nearly 50% of votes cast, analysts point out that Erdogan's single-party pro-Islamist government has already abolished the minimum age requirement for attendance at religious schools, and that this encourages families to have their children give up attending secular schools, in favor of religious institutions which are now taking over some of the functions of the grammar schools.

Why did Erdogan choose to embrace this neo-Ottoman dream? It is likely that he was looking broadly at the post-Cold-War breakdown of nations. The collapse of Yugoslavia drew Turkey into a region where it had traditional interests, while the collapse of the Soviet Union and the resurrection of Russian power made Turkey look northward to the Caucasus. Finally, the chaos orchestrated by the colonial forces in the Arab world has drawn Turkey southward. Maybe Erdogan believes Turkey needs to bring order to regions where



A sentry from the terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) stands guard in a border region of Turkey and Iraq. Turkish President Erdogan's arming of the anti-Assad forces in Syria—among whom are Kurdish separatists—will boomerang: Turkey itself has been battling the PKK since the 1980s.

PKK

the United States and Europe have proven either ineffective or hostile to Turkish interests.

The 'Zero Problems' Foreign Policy

In 2003, Ahmet Davutoglu, who has served as Erdogan's chief foreign policy advisor since 2002, and is considered the most important architect of contemporary Turkish foreign policy, came up with the "zero problems" theory, which is supposed to ensure that Turkey will have zero problems with its neighbors. It was based on pragmatic diplomatic engagement with all parties, and economic integration.

Davutoglu is perhaps the most important cog in Erdogan's foreign-policy machine. He does not want to be identified as a neo-Ottoman dreamer, but his 2001 book, *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* (*Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position*), indicates otherwise, according to Joshua W. Walker, a postdoctoral fellow at the Transatlantic Academy of the German Marshall Fund. Walker wrote in an article, "A Turkish concept of strategic depth," in the Indian journal *Pragati* on July 4, 2010, that Davutoglu's book argues that a nation's value in world politics is predicated on its geostrategic location and historical depth. Following this logic, Davutoglu explains that Turkey is uniquely endowed with both, because of its

geographic location, particularly its control of the Bosphorus, as well as its historical legacy as heir to the Ottoman Empire. While traditional measures of Turkey's national power tend to overlook the cultural links fostered by a shared common history, Davutoglu emphasizes Turkey's connections to the Balkans, the Middle East, and even Central Asia. In the same vein, Davutoglu argues that Turkey is the natural heir to the Ottoman Empire, which once unified the Muslim world and therefore has the potential to become a "Muslim superpower."

Accordingly, Turkey is not an "ordinary nation-state" which emerged at a certain point due to political circumstances or the designs of the outside powers—like, for example, many new states in Central Europe in the aftermath of the World War I. Rather, Turkey is a regional power in its own right, having strong traditions of statehood and broad strategic outreach. Thus, Davutoglu concludes, "It has no chance to be peripheral, it is not a sideline country of the EU, NATO or Asia."

However, the "zero problems" foreign policy now lies in tatters. In fact, Turkey has serious problems with *all* its neighbors, more so now than when the Erdogan-Gul-Davutoglu trio took control of Turkey. Who would Davutoglu, often referred in the media as "Mr. Zero

Problems,” blame for this failure? Is it that Turkey got caught up in its neo-Ottoman dream of embracing the Britain-France-United States-Saudi Arabia-Qatar coalition to build an anti-Iranian alliance? Does Turkey’s hostility toward Syria stem from going along with that coalition, ostensibly to achieve that end? There are reasons to believe such was the case.

Regan Doherty and Amena Bakr of Reuters wrote in their July 27, 2012 article, “Exclusive: Secret Turkish nerve center leads aid to Syria rebels,” that Turkey has set up a secret base, with its allies Saudi Arabia and Qatar, to direct vital military and communications aid to Syria’s rebels from a city near the border. There is enough evidence that shows that Turkey, at least since last Summer, has become a nest of anti-Assad Islamist terrorists and Muslim Brotherhood members. “It’s the Turks who are militarily controlling it. Turkey is the main co-ordinator/facilitator. Think of a triangle, with Turkey at the top and Saudi Arabia and Qatar at the bottom,” a Doha-based source told Reuters.

Adana, a city in southern Turkey about 100 km from the Syrian border, was set up as the main arms-conduit center after Saudi Deputy Foreign Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Abdullah al-Saud visited Turkey and requested it, a source in the Gulf told Doherty and Bakr. The Turks liked the idea of having the base there so that they could supervise its operations, Reuters’ source added. Adana is home to Incirlik, a large Turkish/U.S. air force base, which Washington has used in the past for reconnaissance and military-logistical operations.

In addition to Turkey’s role on behalf of the Britain-France-United States-Saudi Arabia-Qatar coalition to dethrone Bashar al-Assad, and, in essence, throw the region into tumult by ushering in terrorists and jihadis of all sorts, Davutoglu’s “zero problems” foreign policy has got stuck in the sand in Iraq as well.

In April, Erdogan went on the defensive, rejecting Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki’s claim that Turkey is inflaming the sectarian Shi’a-Sunni divide, a dangerous policy pursued by the colonials and the Wahhabi and Salafi (Sunni) doctrinaires of the Gulf countries, that has brought untold violence in Iraq. Al-Maliki called Turkey a “hostile state” and said that Erdogan is involved in “flagrant interference in Iraq’s internal affairs.” The bitter exchange between Maliki and Erdogan came after the Turkish leader met Masoud Barzani, president of Iraq’s Kurdish region,

who has cultivated close relations with Turkey’s government.

The Treacherous Kurdish Minefield

The arming of anti-Assad terrorists and the weakening of the Assad regime has aggravated the Kurdish problem massively, hitting Ankara square in the face. It is evident that the Turkish actions against Syria have reignited the Kurdish desire to seek autonomous regions inside Syria and Turkey as well. It is likely that these two autonomous regions, if formed, will make efforts, violent if necessary, to create an independent Kurdistan. What is evident to Erdogan is that this is no longer a distant possibility, but a problem at hand. How the Pashas will react if the Kurdish problems set fire to certain parts of Turkey is not difficult to imagine.

Writing in the Israeli news daily *Haaretz* on Aug. 3, Prof. Ofra Bengio, head of the Kurdish Studies Program at the Moshe Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University, in an article titled “Kurdistan reaches toward the sea,” claimed that the landlocked Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq, the official ruling body of the predominantly Kurdish-populated Kurdistan Region in Northern Iraq, formed in 1992 with American help after the 1991 Gulf War, is now “in a position to create a corridor reaching the Mediterranean Sea. Clearly, if the KRG manages to secure such an outlet, its aspirations for independence will have received a significant boost.”

What caused this development? According to Adam Michalski (“Turkey’s Blindfold Paves a Path to the Old PKK Dilemma,” *Journal of Turkish Weekly*, Aug. 2, 2012), the Kurdish-populated regions on the Syrian/Turkish border, mainly in the northern Syrian province of Al-Hasakah and, to a lesser extent, Northern Aleppo, is now in the control of the Syrian Kurds. Michalski ponders whether al-Assad’s decision to allow the Kurds to seize some of the northern border areas from the Syrian troops was intended “to shift away Turkey’s attention from the revolution by bringing back the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) dilemma? Up till now Turkey has been a strong supporter of the revolution, but the prospect of an autonomous Kurdish zone in Northern Syria raises fears in the eyes of Ankara, which already has been fighting a 30-year-old separatist insurgency with its vast Kurdish population in South-Eastern Turkey,” Michalski noted.

Whatever the case, the Kurds of Syria have managed to kill several birds with one stone: to attain a better bargaining position with Damascus; to improve

their hand vis-à-vis the Syrian opposition, which has so far been unwilling to accommodate its national demands; to send a message to Turkey regarding its own Kurds; and finally, to move closer to the KRG. “We have established Kurdistan and we will not give it to anyone,” is a typical line reported recently from Syria in the Turkish press.

This development has no doubt has sent a chill along the spines of Turkey’s leaders. Foreign Minister Davutoglu, who had earlier refused to have any dialogue with Iraqi Kurdish leader Barzani, labeling him a “tribal chieftain,” is now in close consultation with the same Barzani ostensibly seeking some relief. Davutoglu was recently in Erbil, the KRG headquarters in Iraq, trying desperately to prevent the inevitable.

Professor Bengio points out that “reaction in the Turkish media to the move has reflected an anxiety bordering on hysteria, the essence of which is that, whereas formerly Turkey had 800 km of border with Kurdistan, they now share 1,200 km. Others warned of a ‘mega’ or ‘second’ Kurdistan, that would threaten to embrace the Kurds of Turkey and Syria as well.” Meanwhile, Osman Baydemir, mayor of Turkey’s Kurdish-dominated city, Diyarbakir, has announced that the Kurds are going to establish an autonomous Kurdistan, with a common currency and four capitals: his city in Turkey, Erbil in Iraq, Qamishli in Syria, and Mahabad in Iran.

“Turkey’s concerns are threefold,” Bengio wrote. “It fears that the Democratic Union Party, Syria’s main Kurdish organization, which took control of that country’s Kurdish region and which has close connections with the PKK, the armed Kurdish revolutionary group in Turkey, will turn the region into a springboard for attacks against Turkey; that its own Kurds will attempt to imitate the move of their brethren in Syria; and that the KRG will try to exploit the opportunity to draw closer to the sea, via the adjacent Kurdish regions in Turkey and Syria. Faced with this multiple threat, Turkish officials and analysts suggested two solutions: forming a buffer zone along the border with Syrian Kurdistan and accommodating Turkey’s own Kurds.”

Whether a Kurdistan will come into existence only the future will tell, and that too depends largely on the roles the local players play. But what is evident is that the collapse of Turkey’s “zero problems” foreign policy, and the neo-Ottoman Empire dream of its current leaders, are bound to pose major security problems within Turkey in the coming days. That could lead to the rearrangement of Turkey’s political system once again.

Bengio says that the Kurdish national movement is now crystallized in almost all parts of “Kurdistan.” However, this is not due to the new initiatives by the Kurds alone, but more because of the follies of the United States and Turkey. The establishment of the KRG in Iraq was the first salvo. That, perhaps, may not have crystallized the Kurdish aspiration by itself. But, Turkey, under Erdogan, playing the Britain-France-United States-Saudi Arabia-Qatar card of dismantling the al-Assad regime and, perhaps, tackling Iran, committed the ultimate folly, endangering Turkey’s integrity. “Forged by the Great Powers after World War I, the borders separating the Kurds of Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Iran no longer appear as sacred or secure as they once did. It is therefore no longer inconceivable that the Kurds, who number more than 30 million, will take the opportunity of the fluid situation to erase the colonial borders of the 20th century and improve their political situation in the 21st century, including reaching out to the sea,” Bengio wrote.

As of this writing, full-scale battles are going on between the Turkish Army and the Kurds, involving as many as 10,000 Turkish soldiers.

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