

RECEP TAYYIP ERDOGAN AND THE RISE OF NEO-OTTOMANISM IN TURKEY

A Brief Exploration

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INTRODUCTION

In 2011, The Turkish Government unveiled the Vision 2023 which outlines a set of goals that Turkey wishes to achieve by the year 2023 when Turkey would celebrate 100 years since the establishment of the Turkish Republic. The document underlines Turkish ambitions of playing a major role in the international community and being an influential player in the regional order.¹ Turkey's expansionist ambitions are fairly new to the Republic as the Secular Republic established by Atatürk from the remains of the former Ottoman Empire follows the principle of non-interference in other countries.²

For the past two decades, every conversation about Turkey's foreign policy has been incomplete without the mention of the term neo-Ottomanism. The term reminds us of Turkey's Ottoman past, which the Secular lobby in the country has been so desperately trying to forget. Major alterations in Turkish governance and foreign policy could be attributed to the rise of one man. Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The controversial President has altered Turkey's governance system and is attempting to go back to its Ottoman past. With no regard to secularism or democracy, it could be argued that Erdogan's ambitions might be to become Turkey's modern-day Sultan. The following sections of the paper look into the rise of Erdogan and the crackdown on democracy and secularism by the AKP administration and the rise of the neo-Ottoman discourse in Turkish policies.

OTTOMANISM TO KEMALISM

The final days of the Ottoman Empire were characterized by an attempt to modernize the empire to sustain it. These reforms primarily aimed to achieve self-defense. The central authority was waning and several regions in the empire revolted against the empire. Furthermore, the Ottoman Empire was subject to external threats as well. The Empire lost several major wars after 1768 and lost conquests against Russia threatened their interests in the

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¹ Fradkin, Hillel, and Lewis Libby. "ERDOGAN'S GRAND VISION: Rise and Decline." *World Affairs* 175, no. 6 (2013): 41–50.

² Sullivan, Amelia. "Unconditional Surrender: The Rise of President Erdogan and the end of Kemalist Turkey." (2018).

region.³ The Ottoman Empire then began introducing reforms which included the modernization of the military and the strengthening of the central authority.⁴ New institutions were established as part of these reforms however many old ones were retained, creating a state of dualism in the Ottoman society. However, these attempts failed to bear fruit for a multitude of reasons. Firstly, it was evident how the Ottoman Empire was reforming because the situations called for it and the reformers were not fully committed to it. Further modernizing a vast empire with a multi-cultural population was a mammoth task. Eventually, the Ottoman Empire collapsed in 1918 following their defeat in the first world war, but the reformation period set the tone for further modernization of the Turkish society.⁵

The Nationalist Revolution

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk began a nationalist revolution in 1919, resisting the peace settlement imposed on Turkey in the aftermath of the Second World War. In 1923, the Ottoman Sultanate was officially abolished and Atatürk became the President of the Secular Republic of Turkey. Atatürk led Turkey into a Modernization drive which set the vision for contemporary Turkish society.⁶

This new nation gave up Ottoman imperial ambitions and was focused on the retention of the Turkish homeland. The modernization of Turkish society revolved around the ideologies of Kemalism which was based on the principles of Atatürk. Kemalist reforms aimed to form a modern Turkey which was even above contemporary civilization.⁷

Principles of Kemalism

The Kemalist ideology could be understood using 6 fundamental principles. The first of these is Republicanism. This principle transfers the power into the hands of the people. Republicanism signifies the Kemalist belief that the republican regime represents the idea of national sovereignty in the best way. The republican regime best represents the wishes of the people and the principle enjoys widespread acceptance and constitutional protection.⁸

The second principle is that of populism. Kemalist republicanism involves an underlying populist component which is implied in Atatürk's speeches and statements. Kemalist populism

³ Zurcher, Erik Jan. "The Reform of the Ottoman Army as an Example of Defensive Modernization." *Academia.edu*, (2018)

⁴ Burçak, Berrak. "Modernization, Science and Engineering in the Early Nineteenth Century Ottoman Empire." *Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 1 (2008): 69–83.

⁵ Kili, Suna. "Kemalism in Contemporary Turkey." *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique* 1, no. 3 (1980): 381–404.

⁶ BBC, s.v. Internet "History - Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938)." (2020)

⁷ Kili, Suna. "Kemalism in Contemporary Turkey." *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique* 1, no. 3 (1980): 381–404.

⁸ *Ibid.*

is very distinct from the interpretation of populism that could be found in the contemporary world. The populist program announced by Atatürk in 1920 is one of the important documents which explains the principle of populism. Kemalist populism emphasized national identity rather than religious identity. This was a watershed moment as the Ottoman Empire was a caliphate governed by Islamic rules.⁹ Kemalism implied not only establishing popular sovereignty but also bringing about a socio-economic transformation. The Kemalist interpretation of populism repudiated class differences and class conflicts and reserved no special rights for any individual, family, class, or organization. Kemalism was also revolutionary in terms of the status of women. Atatürk's Turkey adopted western codes of law that gave women an increased status. Further, women received the right to vote in 1934.¹⁰

The third fundamental Kemalist principle saw Turkey depart from a religion-based system to a secular system. Atatürk's secular policies began with the elimination of clergy from political activism. This move was made based on the notion that the clergy would act as an anti-reformist force and would prove to be a barrier to the modernization of the country. Secularism in Kemalism means the separation of state and society and also includes state control of religious establishments. The foundations of a secular Turkey were laid in the nineteenth century as part of the Ottoman modernization attempts.¹¹ The empire decided to import modern laws and institutions from Europe and the Tanzimat reforms played an important role in the process. Following the formation of the Republic of Turkey, Atatürk deviated hugely from Ottoman history and separated Islam from the state. The Ministry of Sharia was disbanded, and madrasas were banned, hence destroying all traces of organized religion in the state. Further, all mosques were placed under the control of the government. Turkish interpretation of secularism was similar to its French counterpart, *laïcité*, and the principle of *laiklik* was established in the constitution of Turkey.¹² However, Turkish secularism hasn't been accepted totally by the society, with most of the majority Muslim population calling for a more religion-friendly form of secularism. These apprehensions against secularism were key factors in the rise of Recep Erdogan which will be elaborated upon in the subsequent sections of this paper.¹³

Another important principle of the Kemalist ideology is that of nationalism. Kemalist nationalism differs from the modern-day interpretation of the same. Kemalist nationalism was not racist and was meant to preserve the independence of the Republic of Turkey.¹⁴ Kemalist nationalism was secular which was a clear deviation from its Ottoman past and the nationalism

⁹ Ayetmur, Nuran. *The Populism of the Village Institutes: A Contradictory Expression of Kemalist Populism*. (2007)

¹⁰ Sansal, Burak. "Kemalism." *Kemalism / All About Turkey* (2020)

¹¹ Yavuz, Hakan, and Ahmed Erdi Ozturk. "Turkish Secularism and Islam under the Reign of Erdoğan." *Taylor & Francis* (2019)

¹² Kili, Suna. "Kemalism in Contemporary Turkey." *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique* 1, no. 3 (1980): 381–404.

¹³ Akyol, Mustafa. "Turkey's Troubled Experiment with Secularism." *The Century Foundation*, (2 July 2021)

¹⁴ Kili, Suna. "Kemalism in Contemporary Turkey." *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique* 1, no. 3 (1980): 381–404.

of the middle eastern region which was intertwined with religion. The republic of Turkey gave up its imperial expansionist policies and viewed national liberation movements in oppressed countries with sympathy. It recognized and respected the right to independence of other countries.¹⁵ Nationalism played a vital role in the modern Turkish republic as it was necessary to fill the identity void following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. Atatürk adopted a more scientific version of nationalism built on reason, based on Enlightenment ideas. A cult of personality was formed revolving around Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and an institutional cult revolving around his Republican People's Party.¹⁶

Modern Turkey required a strong economic plan to lead the nation's modernization process. After several hits and trials, the Turkish republic adopted Etatism.¹⁷ Under Etatism, the state regulates the economic activity in areas where private enterprise was not willing to get involved, or in which private enterprise had proven inadequate, or if national interest required. This principle gave the state the right to interfere and control the Turkish economy.¹⁸

One of the most important Kemalist principles is that of reformism or revolutionism. This principle was mainly placed to legitimize the reforms introduced by Atatürk. However, the scope of this principle went beyond merely recognizing these reforms. This principle signifies the flexibility in Kemalism and its ability to grow with time.¹⁹

KEMALISM AFTER ATATÜRK

While Kemalism enjoyed widespread legitimacy during the autocratic reign of Atatürk, when free democratic elections started taking place in Turkey, there was resentment against the principles. Several sections of the society voiced their antipathy towards the ideology, especially its secular components. Most of these criticisms came from rural people or recently modernized populations. The Kemalist principle of Laiklik saw religion as a barrier to progress and attempted to keep it out of the public sphere. Most of the critics called for a more religion-friendly form of secularism, however, Atatürk emphasized the role of Islam in Ottoman society and politics in its failure to modernize. During the first free and fair elections in 1950, the majority of the nation voted against staunchly secular candidates. This resulted in Centre-Right

¹⁵ Hanioglu, M. Sükrü. "7. Nationalism and Kemalism: " In *Atatürk: An Intellectual Biography*, 160-198. Princeton: Princeton University Press (2017)

¹⁶ Deringil, Selim. "The Ottoman Origins of KEMALIST Nationalism: Namik Kemal to Mustafa KEMAL - Selim Deringil, 1993." SAGE Journals (1993).

¹⁷ Okyar, Osman. "Concept of Etatism." *OUP Academic*, Oxford University Press (1965).

¹⁸ Birtek, Faruk. "The Rise and Fall of Etatism in Turkey, 1932-1950: The Uncertain Road in the Restructuring of a Semiperipheral Economy." *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 8, no. 3 (1985): 407-38.

¹⁹ Kili, Suna. "Kemalism in Contemporary Turkey." *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique* 1, no. 3 (1980): 381-404.

parties rising to power often and setting the tone for the rise of Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP).²⁰

On the contrary, the urban population welcomed the secularist principles with open hands and took it upon themselves to keep the revolution in place. The military and other elements of the judiciary became the bulwarks of the Turkish revolution.

Political Islam found a new expression in the movement led by Necmettin Erbakan who first appeared in the 1960s. His parties were repeatedly banned by the Turkish judiciary however he reinstates them with a new name. In 1996, he became the Prime Minister of Turkey leading a coalition government with a Centre-right government. This triggered a military memorandum, also dubbed as Turkey's post-modern coup. The military junta initially forced the Erbakan administration to implement several anti-Islamic policies including a ban on headscarves and the shutting down of Quran schools, eventually, the entire government was forced to resign and was replaced by a left-leaning secular government.²¹

The Coup set the tone of Turkish politics for the following couple of decades. As part of the crackdown following the 1997 coup, then-Mayor of Istanbul, Recep Tayyip Erdogan was jailed for reading a poem that was Islamic.²² Despite being banned from politics, Erdogan managed to create the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and win the 2002 Elections. They haven't lost an election since.

RECEP TAYYIP ERDOGAN: THE RISE

Born in 1954, Erdogan rose to the political main stage from a relatively humble background. He came into the limelight in the early 1990s as part of the Islamist Welfare party and was elected as the Mayor of Istanbul in 1994. As it was adumbrated upon in the preceding section, Erdogan was jailed in 1997 following the 1997 coup for reading a politically charged poem by Ziya Gökalp. Following his release from prison, Erdogan presented a fresh side of his as a politician who could successfully reconcile Islam with democracy. In 2001, he founded the Justice and Development Party (AKP). He led the AKP to victory in the general elections of 2002, although he was ineligible to stand for elections at that time. He became the Prime Minister of Turkey in 2003.²³

The rise of the AKP was welcomed with open arms by the Turkish population and there were high hopes in the west about the progress in Turkey. The early phases of his tenure as the Prime Minister were fairly successful. He directed billions of dollars towards development projects and led the Turkish economy to be the 18th largest in the world. Foreign Policy-wise, Erdogan

²⁰ Akyol, Mustafa. "Turkey's Troubled Experiment with Secularism." *The Century Foundation* (2021)

²¹ Rabasa, Angel, and F. Stephen Larrabee. *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey* 1st ed. RAND Corporation (2008)

²² Toprak, Isa, et al. "Turkey's 'Postmodern' Coup, 23 Years On." *Anadolu Ajansı* (2020)

²³ Johny, Stanly. "Who Is Recep Tayyip Erdogan and How Did He Rise to Absolute Power in Turkey." *The Hindu* (2017)

dispelled the fears of any anti-Western and advanced Turkey's bid to join the European Union. In 2003, he secured approval to dispatch Turkish soldiers to keep peace in Iraq along with the US, however Iraqi opposition to this deployment prevented it. In 2004, Erdogan voiced his intentions to resolve the Cyprus issue and supported a UN plan to reunite the island.²⁴

Although his tenure started on a promising note, the subsequent years were characterized by an attack on Democracy and Secularism. The AKP clashed with the secularist parties in 2007 when attempts to elect an AKP presidential candidate with Islamist roots were made. The opposition blocked this move in the parliament and organized a boycott.²⁵ Subsequently, in early 2008, the parliament passed an amendment lifting the ban on the wearing of headscarves on university campuses. Headscarves are an important part of Turkish secularism with Atatürk banning them during his premiership. Erbakan lifted the ban during his tenure; however, he was forced to impose the ban again by the military.²⁶ Erdogan's move signified the early signs of his crackdown on Turkish democracy and Secularism. Following this move, Erdogan's position came increasingly under scrutiny and the constitutional court began hearing a case that called for dismantling the AKP and banning Erdogan and other members. The AKP survived the case, and in 2010, amendments were made to the constitution which was approved by a referendum. The amendments made the military more accountable to civilian courts and increased the legislature's power to appoint judges.²⁷ Following his victory in the subsequent 2011 elections, his tenure was characterized by widespread protests against his policies.

THE CRACKDOWN ON TURKISH LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Erdogan was mindful of his Islamic roots which acted as an obstacle in Turkey's secular order. He worked over a decade to gradually eliminate restrictions to Islam and undermine the judicial and military order that guarded the secular system of Turkey. He came to the forefront in 2002 as a messiah of Muslims in Turkey who felt suppressed by the Secular order, however, most of the policies he implemented in the early phases were not in the name of Islam, rather in the name of democratic reforms. It could be argued that these reforms were a bid to gain international support and more particularly, to satisfy EU requirements for membership. His attempts were successful as many believed that he had found a way to reconcile democracy with Islam and overcame the modern belief that Islamism poses as an obstacle to progress

²⁴ Sullivan, Amelia. "Unconditional Surrender: The Rise of President Erdogan and the end of Kemalist Turkey." (2018).

²⁵ *Encyclopædia Britannica* s.v Internet "Rise of the AKP in the 21st Century." Encyclopædia Britannica Inc (2021)

²⁶ Head, Jonathan. "Quiet End to Turkey's College HEADSCARF BAN." *BBC News*, BBC (2010)

²⁷ Reuters Staff. "Factbox: Turkey's Constitutional Amendments." *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters (2010)

including economic growth. Several international leaders praised him for the same and people hailed him for his democratic reforms in an Islamist country.²⁸

However, shortly things started taking a turn. In 2011, Erdogan referred to the AKP election victory as a victory for Turkey's Ottoman heritage. In the summer of 2013, the government's violent crackdown on a peaceful protest in Istanbul against an urban development plan became a huge turning point and signified the start of Erdogan's authoritarianism. The incident triggered widespread protests against the government and concerns were raised over the government's interference in citizens' lives. Further, Erdogan saw this as an opportunity to jettison several liberal AKP members. This included then-President Abdullah Gül, who was denied a possibility to return to the party ranks after his presidential term ended. Following this, Erdogan took charge as the first directly elected Presidential candidate, which was enabled by a 2007 constitutional referendum, amending the previous procedure where the President was elected by the parliament. Erdogan appointed former foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu as the Prime Minister but later dismissed him due to his reluctance to support his ambitions to end the parliamentary system. Erdogan replaced him with Binali Yildirim, who was prepared to facilitate the constitutional amendments required to transform the political system. Another pivotal event that helped Erdogan win popular support for his constitutional amendments was the attempted Military Coup of 2016. In 2017, Erdogan's attack on Turkish Democracy reached an apotheosis when the Turkish citizens voted on a constitutional amendment that officially transformed Turkey from a Parliamentary democracy to a Presidential form of democracy. Erdogan became the first of the new system in July 2018 after winning the elections.²⁹ This change of system is worrisome for a plethora of different reasons. The constitution strengthens the powers of the President by granting the powers to issue Presidential decrees to ensure the implementation of the law. Additionally, the President can also now issue a state of emergency. The President is no longer constitutionally required to remain politically neutral and can retain ties to his political party. The new constitution expands the powers and massively undermines the Grand National Assembly. The new constitution also grants the President the powers to appoint and dismiss high-level public executives including the Vice-President and ministers. This would allow the President to fill important places with members of his political party. If the President's party controls the majority of seats in the parliament, the president could control the Assembly and its agenda hence rendering the governmental checks and balances redundant.³⁰

Questions could also be raised over the general elections of 2015 and the 2017 referendum. The opposition complained about the limited access to state media and as well as government use of state resources, which essentially blurred the line between state and party. The

²⁸ Fradkin, Hillel, and Lewis Libby. "ERDOGAN'S GRAND VISION: Rise and Decline." *World Affairs* 175, no. 6 (2013): 41–50.

²⁹ Kirişci, Kemal, and Amanda Sloat. "The Rise and Fall of Liberal Democracy in Turkey: Implications for the West." *Brookings*, Brookings (2019)

³⁰ Sullivan, Amelia. "Unconditional Surrender: The Rise of President Erdogan and the end of Kemalist Turkey." (2018).

referendum of 2017 was a tight one with only 51 percent voting in favor of the new constitution and there were accusations of ballot-box stuffing. Further, the 2018 elections were held under emergency rule, limiting opposition parties' ability to campaign freely.³¹

The new system has massively undermined Turkey's governance structures, with the President enjoying almost total control over important appointments, hence nullifying checks on balances on the executive from both the legislature and the judiciary. The government has also scrutinized secondary education in the country with Erdogan bringing universities under his direct control and ending the tradition of state universities appointing their rectors, curbing academic freedom. In addition to that, the military has been severely weakened due to the post-coup crackdown by the government which would be elaborated upon in the following sections. Further, the previously improving Turkish economy has plummeted with the Turkish Lira in American Dollars depreciating from 2.15 in 2014 to a record low of 7.24 in 2018. Coupled with the US decision to double the steel and aluminum tariffs pushed inflation to a 15-year high in 2018.³²

THE 2016 COUP AND ITS AFTERMATH

July 15, 2016, a flight of Turkish fighter jets took off in the skies over Ankara and Turkish Army tanks stopped traffic on the bridges of Istanbul. Fighter jets dropped bombs on their parliament and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was kidnapped by his security detail. At 11.00 pm, the Turkish government declared the raids an act of insurrection. Shortly, Erdogan called on the public to rally against the rebels and take back the Atatürk Airport. What followed was an unprecedented spectacle. The news of the coup spread through social media and ordinary citizens gathered in the streets and squares. The insurrectionists attempted to maintain control over the captured areas but failed as resistance grew. By the end of the coup, 5 anti-coup soldiers, 62 policemen, and 173 civilians lay dead while thousands suffered injuries. This was the bloodiest coup attempt in Turkish political history.³³

What followed was a bureaucratic crackdown on the Turkish military. The government declared a state of emergency, hence increasing the scope of Presidential powers and allowing Erdogan and his officials to get an upper hand. By December 2016, the government sacked or suspended more than one hundred thousand individuals, with thirty-seven thousand arrested.³⁴ However, it was evident that Erdogan practiced extreme caution and detained only those who

³¹ Kirişci, Kemal, and Amanda Sloat. "The Rise and Fall of Liberal Democracy in Turkey: Implications for the West." Brookings (2019)

³² Farrer, Martin. "As Bad as Brexit: Turkey Faces Currency Crisis after Erdoğan Sacks Bank Chief." *The Guardian* (2021)

³³ Al Jazeera. "Turkey's Failed Coup Attempt: All You Need to Know." *Recep Tayyip Erdogan News / Al Jazeera* (2017)

³⁴ Kirişci, Kemal, and Amanda Sloat. "The Rise and Fall of Liberal Democracy in Turkey: Implications for the West." Brookings (2019)

were perceived to be a threat to the stability of the Republic. The government shifted the blame of the coup on Fethullah Gülen, an Islamic cleric. Gülen worked with Erdoğan to get rid of the Kemalist deep state in Turkey. Erdoğan and Gülen began jostling for power in 2011 and Erdoğan refused to include Gülenists on AKP lists for parliamentary elections and shut down Gülenist prep schools.³⁵

THE KURDISH TROUBLS

Turkey's attempts to solve a longstanding dispute with the Kurdish minority's demands for respect and cultural freedom have been an important domestic arena of concern. There were several separatist movements in Kurdish-dominated regions of southeast Turkey ever since the Republic of Turkey was formed. During the early years of Atatürk's reign when Turkish nationalism attempted to unite everybody under a single identity, the Kurds refused to subscribe and banked on western powers who had promised them a state of their own. Today, the Kurds remain the largest stateless people in the world. The government's treatment of the Kurds in Turkey has never been good. They were forced to relocate and their language was banned from usage in schools, government offices, and public places. The Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) was established in 1984 with the help of the Soviet Union and has waged a guerilla and terrorist war against the Turkish state ever since.³⁶ There were attempts made at peace with the PKK with a ceasefire being reached upon in 2013, however, the Turkish army bombed PKK positions in northern Iraq which led to the cease-fire being declared void.³⁷

The Kurdish contradiction became a source of trouble in US-Turkey relations as the US had rewarded the Kurds and taken their help in Syria to fight ISIS, much to the anguish of Turkey who viewed Kurdistan movements in other countries including Syria and Iraq with suspicion. Turkey fears Kurdish independence anywhere in the world and independence in other countries could escalate a decades-long conflict in Turkey. Erdoğan's crackdown on Kurds called global criticism.³⁸

Turkey had long threatened military action against the Syrian People's Protection Unit (YPG), a Syrian Kurdish fighter organization. Turkey perceived the YPG as an extension of the PKK and feared a stronger Kurdish movement in Turkey if YPG received autonomy in the North-Eastern regions of Syria. In 2019, Turkey launched an offensive into northern Syria following the US withdrawal from Syria to curb the spread of the YPG. Turkey has also been apprehensive about the Kurdish establishment in Iraq and threatened to invade if they declare

³⁵ Sullivan, Amelia. "Unconditional Surrender: The Rise of President Erdoğan and the end of Kemalist Turkey." (2018).

³⁶ Totten, Michael J. "THE TROUBLE WITH TURKEY: Erdoğan, ISIS, and the Kurds." *World Affairs* 178, no. 3 (2015): 5–12.

³⁷ Savran, Arin. "The Peace Process between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party, 2009–2015." *Taylor & Francis*, 2020)

³⁸ Hoffman, Max. "The State of the Turkish-Kurdish Conflict." *Center for American Progress* (2019)

independence from Baghdad, which is probably the only reason why the Iraqi Kurds haven't declared independence yet.³⁹

ISLAMISATION AND CRACKDOWN ON SECULARISM

As mentioned in the earlier sections, laiklik or the Turkish version of Secularism is an important part of the Kemalist ideology which has shaped the modern Turkish republic. However, Erdogan's attempts at bolstering political Islam signifies a broader shift from Kemalism to Neo-Ottomanism. A few significant moves that made Erdogan's religious ambitions clear were the lifting of the ban on headscarves, the conversion of the Hagia Sophia as a functioning mosque, and the inauguration of the Taksim mosque.⁴⁰ The AKP rose to power due to its hidden Islamist agendas. The AKP is a product of Kemalism and its Liklik. The AKP appeals not only to the conservatives but also to those who have been marginalized by Kemalism. Initially, it was made up of liberals, center-right masses, and conservatives. However, the authoritarian advances of the government came together with the instrumentalization of Islam which has increased the distance between the party and liberals. Further, the AKP used the institutions to install their vision of society. This was done through Islamization of the bureaucracy, education system, judiciary, police force, and the military. The rule in Turkey is neither a democracy and nor a Sharia rule, however, it is something between the both of them. The AKP has used religion to build an ideological hegemony of the Turkish state and to counter the existing Kemalism. The AKP government uses Islam as a tool to consolidate the Erdogan regime.⁴¹

Turkey has also launched attempts to be the champion of the Islamic world. Turkey has financed the construction of mosques across the globe, it was strengthened ties with the Muslim Brotherhood and it also fuels an international hub of religious education through its Imam Hatip schools.⁴²

KEMALISM TO NEO-OTTOMANISM

The term Neo-Ottomanism is often used while discussing contemporary Turkey and President Erdogan and it signifies the expansionist and Islamist approach of Erdogan rather than the Secular approach of Kemalism. There have been several versions of Neo-Ottomanism in the

³⁹ Ülgen, Sinan. "Redefining the U.s.-Turkey Relationship." *Carnegie Europe* (2021)

⁴⁰ Serhan, Yasmeeen. "The End of the Secular Republic." *The Atlantic* (2020)

⁴¹ Yavuz, Hakan, and Ahmed Erdi Ozturk. "Turkish Secularism and Islam under the Reign of Erdoğan." *Taylor & Francis* (2019)

⁴² Butler, Daren. "With More Islamic Schooling, Erdogan Aims to Reshape Turkey." *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters (2018)

past and the recent one has been highly prominent.⁴³ In 2011, the Turkish government launched the 2023 Vision which outlined a set of goals for Turkey to attain by the centenary year of the Turkish Republic. These goals include the objective of playing a much bigger role in international institutions and becoming a bigger contributor in establishing global order and restructuring regional and sub-regional orders. While the western media fears a threat to western powers due to the same, neo-Ottomanism has more widespread implications for the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. Neo-Ottomanism is predominantly focused on AKP's vision to become a main actor in the Middle-Eastern region.⁴⁴

The Neo-Ottomanist system has a minor domestic component and a predominantly foreign component. Unlike the Ottomans' ideology which concentrated more on domestic matters, Neo-Ottomanism appealed more to foreign policy. It was adopted due to the belief that increasing Turkey's influence over former territories of the Ottoman Empire was necessary to maintain major support and hence was crucial to Turkey's security.⁴⁵

The domestic aspect of Neo-Ottomanism stems from the assumption that efforts to reform and modernize the Ottoman empire were not extensive enough and failed. Distancing the new state from its Ottoman past and Islamic identity created discontent among segments of the population. This identity clash was exploited greatly by AKP and Erdogan to rise to power and further buttress their Neo-Ottomanist approach.

NEO-OTTOMANIST FOREIGN POLICY

The main line of reasoning which argues for a Neo-Ottoman Foreign Policy, states that the independent state structure created by Atatürk lacks a vision that could carry Turkey among major powers in the international system. The existing foreign policy structure detaches Turkey from the region and Turkey needed to embrace its Ottoman past and develop a multidimensional deeper relationship with countries that fell under the former Ottoman empire. On paper, Neo-Ottomanism helps the government negotiate a better position in the international system. This point of view makes Neo-Ottomanism a pragmatic tool for the Turkish government to maintain close ties with the West. The early phases of Erdogan's premiership gave the image of a balanced multidimensional foreign policy that established ties with various regions. However, worsening relations with the EU and Turkey's election as a temporary member of the UN Security Council saw Turkey take a more offensive approach especially when it comes to the Middle East and Mediterranean region. This shift in policy was

⁴³ Vuksanovic, Vuk, et al. "Turkey's Dangerous New Exports: Pan-Islamist, Neo-Ottoman Visions and Regional Instability." *Middle East Institute* (2021)

⁴⁴ Fradkin, Hillel, and Lewis Libby. "ERDOGAN'S GRAND VISION: Rise and Decline." *World Affairs* 175, no. 6 (2013): 41–50.

⁴⁵ Oruç, Merve Şebnem. "A Surreal Western View on Erdoğan and Neo-Ottomanism: Column." *Daily Sabah* (2021)

taken with the hopes that Turkey could become a major actor in the region and shape developments.⁴⁶

The US Question

Turkey has been a NATO ally and has had fairly cordial relations with the United States, however, the rise of Erdogan and Neo-Ottomanism in Foreign Policy caused slight tensions between both countries. Disdain and acerbic criticism towards the west is an important part of Erdogan's quest for supremacy and US-Turkey relations have been at an all-time low under Erdogan's presidency.⁴⁷ US support for the Kurdish YPG in Syria and Turkey's notorious friendship with Russia and Iran have heavily contributed toward this. The Obama and Trump administrations held on to Turkey as a close strategic partner however Erdogan is falling short of friends in the US. Put together with its stance against Israel and crackdown on democracy, the Biden administration will not be needing Turkey as an alliance partner and diplomatic ties between both countries are expected to fall further.⁴⁸

Turkey faced the US on two main occasions, first was the nuclear deal between Turkey and Iran, which failed to materialize due to Brazil pulling out of it following US pressure. This highlighted a limitation of Turkish Foreign Policy and exposed a major obstacle to its regional ambitions. It was visible that if the crisis attracts the attention of global powers, Turkey would be unable to use any initiative. The second case was of Libya where Turkey wished to avoid any outside interference. These cases provided Turkey with two choices, either accept Western leadership or pursue its own policies at the risk of losing allies such as the US. Erdogan chose the latter.⁴⁹

The Arab Problem

During the initial days of the Arab spring, it was welcomed with open arms in Turkey and the AKP appeared to support any changes that come about from the people level. One of the principal reasons for Turkey supporting the Arab Spring protests was because most of the strongest opposition groups in these nations were formed of Islamic groups, and their emergence would foster growth in Erdogan's popularity in the country and the region. The Arab Spring saw another massive shift in the Turkish Foreign Policy. It now went from protecting the status quo in a country to regime change throughout the region.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Turan, Kursad. "Neo-Ottomanism in Turkish Foreign Policy Through the Lenses of the Principal-Agent Theory." *Research Gate* (2016)

⁴⁷ Ülgen, Sinan. "Redefining the U.S.-Turkey Relationship." *Carnegie Europe* (2021)

⁴⁸ Aditya, Prasanna. "'Neo-Ottomanism' in Turkish Foreign Policy." *ORF* (2020)

⁴⁹ Turan, Kursad. "Neo-Ottomanism in Turkish Foreign Policy Through the Lenses of the Principal-Agent Theory." *Research Gate* (2016)

⁵⁰ Ibid.

However, this caused a vital dilemma for the AKP. Turkey lacked the economic, political, and diplomatic resources to pursue an independent foreign policy and was knocking at the doors of regional allies such as Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf States. However, the Gulf monarchies were head-to-head vs Turkey on several issues. The Gulf Monarchies did not subscribe to the brand of Political Islam compatible with democracy touted by Erdogan. Further, Turkey's deepening of ties with Iran and Qatar also led to widening the rift between Turkey and the Gulf Nations.⁵¹

The Mediterranean Dispute

The eastern Mediterranean region has been a strategic point for Erdogan. He deployed Turkish troops in Libya to support the Government of National Accord (GNA) and found itself facing UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt which were supporting the rival Libyan National Army (LNA). Turkey's support for the GNA was more strategic and economic as the GNA granted Turkey rights to drill for oil and natural gas in the Libyan shores, which was opposed by the EU. Erdogan also refused to recognize the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of Cyprus and Greece and sent drilling equipment into Cyprus marine territory in 2018 and conducted operations.

As part of balancing out Turkey, several countries came together to form an axis of anti-Turkish states determined to secure their rights to minerals.⁵²

The Turkey-Russia-Iran Triad

Turkey left out of friends in the west and the region, started looking towards the east for newer relationships. Turkey shocked the whole world and certainly shocked its NATO allies when it announced the purchase of S-400 Air Defence Missiles from Russia.⁵³ Turkey's proximity towards Russia works in favor of Russian President Putin who can now showcase the flaws and disagreements within NATO. Turkey's increasing friendship with Russia could also be attributed to the attempted military coup in 2016 which triggered anti-Western sentiments. Erdogan grew ever more suspicious of the United States and began defying them on several occasions. Further, US support for the Kurds in Syria also contributed to this massive shift in dynamics in the Turkish Foreign Policy. Russia could be seeking a fair quid pro quo with Turkey, in which Russia would offer support in curbing the Kurds in Northern Syria, in exchange for Turkey staying as a non-participatory member in the NATO hence rendering the organization inefficient.⁵⁴

Another new dynamic that has emerged in the Turkish foreign policy has been the detente between Turkey and Iran. The alliance is internally flawed and ironic as Erdogan, who wishes

⁵¹ Aditya, Prasanna. "Neo-Ottomanism' in Turkish Foreign Policy." *ORF* (2020)

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ülgen, Sinan. "Redefining the U.S.-Turkey Relationship." *Carnegie Europe* (2021)

⁵⁴ Chaulia, Sreeram "Turkey: Spurned Ally to Potential Alternative ." *Trumped: Emerging Powers in a Post-American World*, Bloomsbury (2019)

to project Turkey at the helm of Political Sunni Islam is joining hands with the protectors of Shia Islam. The relationship between both countries has been bolstered by the mutual hatred towards Kurdish-Dominated forces in Syria and the friendly relationship towards Qatar.

The Russia-Iran-Turkey triad first came to light in 2016 during the Moscow declaration. The triad would have seemed a far-fetched dream merely 5 years ago in 2011 when Iran and Russia were caught fighting for the Government of Assad in Syria and Turkey fighting to overthrow the Assad regime. The Moscow Declaration in 2016 put an end to Turkey's military campaign against 2016 and brought the notorious triad to the forefront. However, question marks could be put against the stability of the triad. Turkey formed an alliance with both Russia and Iran for realpolitik and pragmatic reasons, however, this alliance is nothing more than a marriage of convenience. The relationship with Iran might fade away shortly due to the Biden administration in the US which is in talks with Iran regarding a return to the initial JCPOA agreement. Normalization of ties with the US would mean that Iran no longer requires Turkey to balance out the US in the Middle East.⁵⁵

CONCLUSION

Turkey acts as an important case study for democratic countries to show that their system is not flawless. Recep Tayyip Erdogan has managed to dismantle Turkey's Liberal Democracy and is setting the course towards an Ottomanesque Sultanate. Turkey's relationships with major countries and institutions like the US, EU, and the GCC are further deteriorating. Despite Erdogan being able to consolidate his power in Turkey, the developments spell danger for the country. The earlier sections of the paper have looked into how US sanctions on Turkey have caused a plunge in the Turkish economy. Turkish Foreign Policy has been defying US interests in the region and this is causing further strains in the bilateral ties between both countries. Both countries have to look into the long-term potential of the relationship. The United States needs to look into Turkey's geostrategic location and its NATO membership. These factors make Turkey very central to US objectives in the region. Both countries need to keep these factors in mind and take pragmatic steps to not further worsen these ties. Turkey's disengagement with NATO would prove to be disastrous for the US and the organization. Further Turkey needs to adopt a practical approach when it comes to the EU. Gaining EU membership would provide to be very beneficial for the country and could help Turkey find their way out of the economic ruins.

⁵⁵ Aditya, Prasanna. "Neo-Ottomanism' in Turkish Foreign Policy." *ORF* (2020)