

# Conceptualizing Turkey's Foreign Policy Ambitions

A Conversation with Howard Eissenstat

September 2020

*In recent years, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's foreign policy has prompted many of Turkey's neighbors and some of its allies to view Turkey as an adventurist, aggressive, and expansionist power. While this view reflects real grievances, it cloaks the complex, multidimensional nature of Erdoğan's foreign policy. To better understand Erdoğan's interests, global ambitions, and ideological outlook, POMED's Turkey Program Coordinator Merve Tahiroğlu spoke with POMED's Nonresident Senior Fellow Howard Eissenstat about what motivates the Turkish leader's foreign policy and how it displays both significant change from and notable continuity with the pre-Erdoğan era.*

**POMED:** Turkey and Greece, two NATO allies, came to the brink of war last month, and tensions continue to rise. What explains the current dispute? What are Turkey's interests in the Eastern Mediterranean?

**Howard Eissenstat:** The race for natural gas and oil reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean ("East Med") is the catalyst for a conflict that may be the single thorniest problem between Turkey and several of its NATO allies right now. The dispute is about access to natural resources, to be sure. But more importantly, it is about Turkey's assertion of itself as a regional power and, perhaps most important, defending the validity of its position in Cyprus.

Here is some quick background: In 2011, significant natural gas reserves were discovered under the waters off the Republic of Cyprus (ROC), on the southern half of the divided island. (The ROC is an EU member and closely aligned with Greece, while the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) is aligned with Turkey, which maintains troops there and is the only country to recognize the TRNC). Since then, international companies like Total, Eni, and ExxonMobil have been exploring and drilling off the coast of Cyprus with permits from the ROC government.

Turkey sees these explorations as a threat to Turkish Cypriots and fiercely opposes the granting of such permits so long as the island remains divided. This is traditional Turkish policy: any Turkish government, regardless of political makeup, would reject exploration that ignores Turkish claims regarding Northern Cyprus. Ankara's support for the TRNC remains a hard red line in Turkish strategic thinking and is widely accepted across the political spectrum.

Turkey believes—not without reason—that the EU bungled the opportunity for a peaceful and just resolution to the Cyprus conflict in the early 2000s, despite Ankara’s full support for unification talks. And Turkey believes that no exploration permits should be issued off the coast of Cyprus that ignore the claims of Turkish Cypriots.

This energy race has also engendered a political alliance in the East Med that excludes Turkey. Initially, Turkey was part of regional calculations surrounding the transport of East Med gas to Europe. But that changed as the ROC, Israel, Egypt, and Greece grew closer together, and, along with Italy, Jordan, and Palestine, signed the “EastMed Gas Forum” agreement in January 2019—exacerbating Turkey’s feelings of exclusion.

In response, Turkey began to negotiate its own maritime border deals and send its exploration vessels to the field, triggering a host of dormant maritime border disputes with Greece. First, Turkey signed a maritime border agreement with Libya that afforded waters claimed by Greece to Turkey, and then Greece signed its own agreement with Egypt that claimed the same waters for itself. Turkey then sent a gas exploration vessel and warships to the disputed region—to which France responded by sending its navy to Greece.

There has already been one collision between a Greek and a Turkish warship.<sup>1</sup> Everybody recognizes that this crisis could spin out of control, but with the EU divided and the United States largely disengaged, no power willing and able to broker a deal has emerged so far.

**Libya is another arena where Turkey is acting assertively—some would say aggressively. What is Turkey doing there?**

Turkey’s interest in this oil-rich country is long-standing. When the regime of Muammar Gaddafi fell, Turkey had some 30,000 workers there, primarily in the construction sector, as well as \$15 billion in outstanding contracts and about \$1.5 billion worth of equipment.<sup>2</sup> Most of these workers were evacuated during the 2011 anti-Gaddafi revolution, but Turkey still views itself as having a stake in Libya; it is thought to have maintained an extensive intelligence presence there throughout the civil war.

As to why Turkey has taken on such a prominent military role now, Libya represents the epicenter of several regional interests. Turkey hopes to play a leading role in the rebuilding of the Libyan economy once the civil war ends.<sup>3</sup> Turkey also wants to prevail in its rivalry with Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), who back the opposite side in the war and whom

“EVERYBODY RECOGNIZES THAT THIS CRISIS COULD SPIN OUT OF CONTROL, BUT WITH THE EU DIVIDED AND THE UNITED STATES LARGELY DISENGAGED, NO POWER WILLING AND ABLE TO BROKER A DEAL HAS EMERGED SO FAR.”

1. Michael Kambas and Tuvan Gumrukcu, “Greek, Turkish warships in a ‘mini-collision’ Ankara calls provocative,” Reuters, August 14, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-greece-turkey-warships/greek-turkish-warships-in-mini-collision-ankara-calls-provocative-idUSKCN25A161>

2. Philip Robins, “Turkey’s ‘Double Gravity’ Predicament: The Foreign Policy of a Newly Activist Power,” *International Affairs*, vol. 89, no. 2 (March 2013), 391.

3. Ugur Aslanhan, “Turkey eyes \$120B investment potential in Libya,” Anadolu Agency, March 5, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/turkey-eyes-120b-investment-potential-in-libya/1755932>

Turkey views as regional adversaries. And in the East Med gas competition, Ankara leveraged its military support for the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) in return for the recent maritime deal that I mentioned.

Turkey's military interventions in northern Syria, which successfully combined the use of militia forces and drone warfare, bolstered Turkish willingness to utilize hard power in support of broader national interests. Its intervention in Libya is noteworthy for the use of foreign (largely Syrian) militias, supported by drones, and for the fact that it is taking place more than 1,000 miles from its home territory. This is an enormous and historic shift in Ankara's military policy, which historically has focused on Turkey's "near abroad."

Many observers consider Turkish moves in Libya and the East Med part of a new Turkish expansionism under Erdoğan, one that some have dubbed "neo-Ottomanism," given that it involves parts of the Ottoman Empire. Do you agree with this characterization of Erdoğan's Turkey as imperialist?

No. Turkey is a middle power which aims at broader global influence, not an imperialist power. This was equally true before Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002. To be certain, Turkey is ambitious, and Erdoğan's foreign policy has become increasingly reliant on hardball tactics, including military action. But terming this "imperialist" strikes me as more of a moral judgement than an analytical one. Similarly, I am leery of characterizations of Turkish foreign policy as "neo-Ottoman," which misunderstands both Turkey's foreign policy motivations and its Ottoman past. There are ways in which we can think seriously about how historical memory colors policy-making, but too often, "neo-Ottoman" is just pasted in without signifying very much. Certainly, Turkish political thinking is shaped by memories—or, more often, fantasies—about its Ottoman past, but the core of Turkish foreign policy is shaped by a national vision, not an imperial one. You will certainly see irredentist maps with aggrandized borders on Turkish Twitter. But these are daydreams, not policy. Turkey wants to expand its influence and create markets for its industries; it does not want new borders.

CERTAINLY, TURKISH POLITICAL THINKING IS SHAPED BY MEMORIES—OR, MORE OFTEN, FANTASIES—ABOUT ITS OTTOMAN PAST, BUT THE CORE OF TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY IS SHAPED BY A NATIONAL VISION, NOT AN IMPERIAL ONE.

Across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), how does Turkey's influence in different countries and contexts vary? Are Turkey's interests and investments in the MENA region different from its involvement in Europe, East Africa, or Central Asia?

That is a really interesting question. I would argue that there are four basic spheres in which Turkish foreign policy functions.

The first sphere relates to long-standing core issues in Turkey's near abroad. It involves support for Muslim populations whom Turkey has traditionally viewed as culturally or ethnically related, for instance in Northern Cyprus, the Balkans, and the Caucasus. To a lesser degree, it involves support for the Turkmen populations in Iraq and Syria. This sphere also includes efforts to block the emergence of any Kurdish political structures. Erdoğan's responses to the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria or the Kurdistan Regional Government

(KRG)’s independence referendum in Iraq in 2017 are both completely in keeping with Turkey’s traditional aversion to a potential Kurdish state on its borders. In this sphere, Erdoğan is largely following fundamentals of traditional Turkish foreign policy.

The second sphere involves Turkey’s expansive outreach to Africa and Asia. This, too, represents long-standing Turkish ambitions predating the end of the Cold War that became more evident after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. While the AKP has intensified such outreach across the board, its engagement with Africa has been particularly striking and represents one of the clearest successes of the AKP era.<sup>4</sup>

In the past five years or so, Turkey has established a military presence in Sudan, with the hope of constructing a naval base on Suakin Island. Turkey has increased its military presence in Libya and Somalia and has opened negotiations to do the same in Niger.

This increasing focus on military cooperation and exports is not limited to Africa, however. Turkey has also established military bases in Northern Cyprus, Northern Iraq, Qatar, and Syria.<sup>5</sup>

Such overseas military expansion represents a fairly radical shift for Turkey and brings us to the third sphere of its foreign policy, namely its efforts to play a leading role in the Middle East and, by extension, the Muslim world. I consider this attempt as heartfelt on the part of Erdoğan, who sees the rise of the AKP as representing a new wave within the Muslim world: fully modern, populist, and devout. Western analysts may have given up on the idea of Turkey as a “model for the Muslim world,” but Erdoğan has not. This helps to explain Turkey’s forward-leaning response to the 2011 Arab Uprisings. The idea colors Turkey’s intervention in Syria and its defense of Qatar in the latter’s conflict with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Even more, it defines Turkey’s antagonism towards Abdel Fattah al-Sisi’s Egypt, its general sympathy for the Muslim Brotherhood, and its focus on Palestine and support of Hamas—all are causes for which Erdoğan remains one of the few vocal champions among Muslim leaders in the region. The recent ceremony around the reconsecration of Hagia Sophia as a mosque, and even Erdoğan’s insertion of himself into the funeral of boxing great Muhammad Ali a few years ago, are part of this as well.

“WESTERN ANALYSTS MAY HAVE GIVEN UP ON THE IDEA OF TURKEY AS A “MODEL FOR THE MUSLIM WORLD,” BUT ERDOĞAN HAS NOT.”

There is little obvious near-term material benefit to Turkey in any of this. Erdoğan has pursued these policies because he sees himself—and by extension Turkey—as leading an Islamic, populist wave within the Muslim world that will make Muslim-majority countries more democratic (within Erdoğan’s own sense of what democracy means) and more capable of asserting themselves against the “old powers” of the West.

It is also worth noting that Erdoğan’s vision of Muslim politics is generally non-sectarian. Despite some discussion of a Sunni bent in Turkey’s response to the Syrian civil war, Turkey has shown little interest in adding fuel to the fire of the Sunni-Shia divide. Indeed, Erdoğan

---

4. Julia Harte, “Turkey Shocks Africa,” *World Policy Journal*, vol. 29, no. 4 (Winter 2012/2013), 27–38.

5. Selcan Hacaoglu, “Mapping the Turkish Military’s Expanding Footprint,” Bloomberg, March 7, 2019 (updated August 28, 2020), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-03-07/mapping-the-turkish-military-s-expanding-footprint-quicktake>

seems to believe that the best way forward for the region is for Iran to be reintegrated rather than frozen out.

The final sphere of Turkey's current foreign policy involves Erdoğan's attempt to position Turkey as the leader of a wave against American, and more broadly, Western, hegemony. This goes beyond Turkey's claims to leadership in the Muslim world. Turkey's defense of the Nicolás Maduro regime in Venezuela, a regime that the United States strenuously opposes, is one example. Another is Turkey's recurring lobbying in favor of expanding the UN Security Council to dilute Western dominance of the body. At a basic level, Erdoğan views the West as fundamentally hypocritical and as declining in power. This view has shaped both the aggressive nature of Erdoğan's foreign policy and his ambitions for a new leadership role for Turkey in an emerging multipolar system.

In this regard, Erdoğan has similarities to Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser. Obviously, there are key differences of ideology and personal background, but like Nasser, Erdoğan sees himself as a transformational figure on multiple planes and as a leader who engenders popular acclaim beyond his borders. For Nasser, this meant leadership in the Arab world and within the Non-Aligned Movement. For Erdoğan, it means coupling a new vision of Muslim cooperation with broader anti-hegemonic politics. And, as with Nasser, Erdoğan runs the risk of having his ambitions and self-image outrun his country's actual capacities.

**Many of Turkey's neighbors call it an "aggressive actor" in their region. How aggressive and disruptive of an actor is Turkey?**

Turkey is certainly becoming more aggressive and more disruptive. Some of this aggression stems from Turkey's long-standing sense that the world—especially its own Western allies—have not taken its concerns and interests seriously (the emerging crisis in the East Med is the prime example here). Some of it is more fully rooted in ideology. For example, Turkey's advocacy for Palestine or rivalry with Egypt's al-Sisi are based in Turkey's self-image as leader of a new era in Muslim politics rather than on calculations of potential gains. Sometimes, as in Syria and Libya, interests and ideology come together in complicated ways. At a very basic level, the Turkish government believes that regional and global power dynamics are shifting in fundamental ways and that Turkey has no choice but to take a more aggressive stance in order to obtain its rightful place in the developing world order.

At the same time, we should not overstate Turkey's ambition. Turkey is not seeking to reject the West so much as to renegotiate the terms of the relationship to make them more equitable. Turkey has no interest in leaving NATO. Its overtures to Russia, Iran, and China are not meant as a rejection of the West so much as the beginnings of a truly independent foreign policy.

The challenge for Turkey is two-fold. First, the value of Turkey's relations with the West dwarfs the benefits it receives from the rest of the world. Second, its alliance with the West comes with strings: NATO is an anti-Russian alliance at its core, and there are expectations of NATO members adhering to the rule of law and democracy. Turkey wants to achieve greater strategic independence from the West, but it needs to do so without irrevocably damaging its relations with the West. That is a difficult balance to maintain.

**TURKEY IS NOT SEEKING TO REJECT THE WEST SO MUCH AS TO RENEGOTIATE THE TERMS OF THE RELATIONSHIP TO MAKE THEM MORE EQUITABLE.**

### What are the domestic roots of this foreign policy? How is it different from that of the pre-Erdoğan era?

To a very large degree, I see Erdoğan's foreign policy as a natural extension of foreign policy trends that were already evident before he came to power. It is true that these trends sped up under AKP rule, but I am not sure that these can all be laid at Erdoğan's table. Turkey is not responsible for the decline in American power and prestige in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 or for the failure of the UN's "Annan Plan" for Cyprus in 2004. One can certainly imagine counterfactuals that would have resulted in a less dramatic trajectory for Turkish foreign policy. The bottom line, though, is that the most important reason that Turkish foreign policy is different is because the world is different.

I would, however, say that there are at least two ways in which structural changes within Turkey have changed its foreign policy. First, public opinion matters more—especially directly before an election—than it did in a previous era. The Turkish military no longer holds a veto over government policy; in addition, Erdoğan has honed manufactured outrage as an easy tool for mobilizing his base and burnishing his brand. Second, Turkish foreign policy has become more ideologically driven precisely because it has become more personalized under Erdoğan. There are certainly ways in which Erdoğan can be thought of as a "transactional" actor, but it is a mistake to view his sense of morality as always feigned. His disdain for perceived Western hypocrisy, his outrage over the military overthrow of former Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi, his support for Palestine. . . these are all heartfelt and have had a real effect on Turkish foreign policy. Moreover, precisely because so much decision-making is centralized around the person of Erdoğan, the state bureaucracy, including the foreign ministry, has been hollowed out; the foreign ministry's influence on major questions has been diminished. This has made it harder for the United States and others to communicate effectively through the usual official channels. Turkish foreign policy traditionally was remarkably risk averse. This is obviously no longer the case.

“PRECISELY BECAUSE SO MUCH DECISION-MAKING IS CENTRALIZED AROUND THE PERSON OF ERDOĞAN, THE STATE BUREAUCRACY, INCLUDING THE FOREIGN MINISTRY, HAS BEEN HOLLOWED OUT; THE FOREIGN MINISTRY'S INFLUENCE ON MAJOR QUESTIONS HAS BEEN DIMINISHED.”

### How tolerable is Turkey in its current state of authoritarianism and militarism for U.S. interests?

The United States has a long and sorry history of working closely with authoritarian regimes, and I do not expect this to change anytime soon. Turkish authoritarianism, however, poses a particular problem because it has helped make Turkish foreign policy more aggressive and more ideological. It is not merely that Turkey is taking advantage of the vacuum created by diminished U.S. power. Erdoğan has actively worked against U.S. policy repeatedly, and I think a large part of this can be directly tied to the personalization of Turkish foreign policy. I believe a more stable, more institutionalized Turkey—and indeed a more democratic one—would be an easier Turkey for the United States to deal with, in addition to being more in keeping with American values.

What would it take for Turkey to cross a line with the U.S. and NATO—to reach a point at which Washington goes from treating Turkey as an unreliable ally to treating it as an adversary?

In a word: miscalculation. I do not think that Turkey wants to be an adversary so much as it wants to maximize its independence. Turkey has shown a tremendous willingness to play hardball with its allies, but it does not want a break per se. Turkey benefits tremendously from NATO and from its relationship with the West, particularly with the EU.

But Erdoğan has consistently based his relationship with Turkey's Western partners on the assumption that the West needs Turkey more than Turkey needs the West. I am not convinced that that is a sound assumption. As I said, I do not believe that Turkey wants a break from the United States, but its purchase of the Russian-made S-400 surface to air missiles, which have already ended Turkey's participation in the F-35 program, is only one example of the ways in which Erdoğan's decision making could cause one. Turkey does not want a war over natural gas in the East Med, but in games of chicken, sometimes everyone loses. The question for the United States and the EU is how to signal to Erdoğan the nature of the risks he is taking—and where the real red lines lie—without precipitating precisely the sort of crisis that we all hope to avoid.

“ I DO NOT THINK THAT TURKEY WANTS TO BE AN ADVERSARY SO MUCH AS IT WANTS TO MAXIMIZE ITS INDEPENDENCE. ”



**HOWARD EISSENSTAT** is Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Project on Middle East Democracy and Associate Professor of Middle East history at St. Lawrence University. Eissenstat writes on twentieth-century Turkish history as well as on contemporary Turkish politics and foreign policy. He has lectured at the Foreign Service Institute of the U.S. Department of State and the Canadian Foreign Service Institute. Eissenstat received his PhD in Modern Middle East History from UCLA in 2007 and was a postdoctoral fellow at the Crown Center for Middle East Studies at Brandeis University in 2008-2009. His previous publications for POMED were *"Whoever Wins Istanbul Wins Turkey": How a Mayoral Race Has Precipitated a National Crisis* (June 2019), *The Origins and Future of the U.S.-Turkey Crisis: A Conversation with Howard Eissenstat* (August 2018), *After the June Elections: No Brakes on Turkey's Authoritarian Slide* (August 2018), *Uneasy Rests the Crown: Erdoğan and 'Revolutionary Security' in Turkey* (December 2017), *Erdoğan as Autocrat: A Very Turkish Tragedy* (April 2017), *Stunted Democracy: Erdoğan, the AKP, and Turkey's Slide into Authoritarianism* (January 2015), and *The Gezi Park Protests: Time for a New U.S. Approach to Turkey* (June 2013). He is on Twitter as [@heissenstat](#).

**THE PROJECT ON MIDDLE EAST DEMOCRACY** is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization based in Washington, DC, that is dedicated to examining how genuine democracies can develop in the Middle East and how the United States can best support that process. POMED research publications offer in-depth, original expert analysis of political developments in the Middle East as they relate to the prospects for genuine democracy in the region and to U.S. policy on democracy and human rights. Through dialogue, research and advocacy, POMED works to strengthen the constituency for U.S. policies that peacefully support reform in the Middle East. The views expressed in POMED publications are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of POMED. For more information, please contact Deputy Director for Research Amy Hawthorne at [amy.hawthorne@pomed.org](mailto:amy.hawthorne@pomed.org). She is on Twitter as [@awhawth](#).

