

---

# Making Turkey Great Again<sup>1</sup>

SONER CAGAPTAY

---

## ABSTRACT

*Since coming to power in 2003, Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has attempted to make Turkey great again—in the mold of the Ottoman Empire that ruled over three continents before declining in the eighteenth century. In many ways, Erdoğan has simply followed in the footsteps of previous Turkish leaders who attempted to reassert Turkey's grandeur in the wake of the Ottoman Empire's collapse at the end of World War I. His methods, however, have diverged from past leaders', aligning less with the tradition of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and late Ottoman sultans. In his attempt to re-establish Turkey as an Ottoman-style great power, Erdoğan has made a radical break with the Western foreign policy consensus—which had been the foundation of Turkey's international relations strategy since Ottoman decline. While Erdoğan has attempted to cast Ankara as a stand-alone great power, however, he has left Turkey encircled by enemies, isolated from allies, and far from greatness.*

In September 2018, I saw the recently built Çamlıca Mosque, with its 236-foot dome, towering over Istanbul's majestic skyline. I left Istanbul convinced of the imperial vision of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan—the patron-politician of the Islamic edifice.

---

**Soner Cagaptay** is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute for Near Eastern Policy. He has written extensively on U.S.-Turkish relations, Turkish domestic politics, and Turkish nationalism, publishing in scholarly journals and major international print media, including The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, The New York Times, Foreign Affairs, and The Atlantic. He appears regularly on CNN, NPR, BBC, and CNN-Turk. A historian by training, Dr. Cagaptay wrote his doctoral dissertation at Yale University (2003) on Turkish nationalism. Dr. Cagaptay has taught courses at Yale University, Princeton University, Georgetown University, and Smith College on the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and Eastern Europe. He has also served on contract as chair of the Turkey Advanced Area Studies Program at the State Department's Foreign Service Institute. His most recent book is *The New Sultan: Erdoğan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey*.<sup>2</sup>

---

The cavernous Çamlıca Mosque is the first Muslim house of worship formally sponsored by a Turkish president in Istanbul since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire a century ago. Soon after World War I, Ottoman general Mustafa Kemal Atatürk liberated Turkey from Allied occupation, establishing modern Turkey from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire. Atatürk put into place a secular system of government and then moved his country's capital from Istanbul to Ankara—geographically and politi-

.....  
*President Erdoğan's patronage of the Çamlıca Mosque in the former Ottoman royal capital, already dubbed the "Erdoğan" Mosque, indicates his embrace of an imperial drive to make Turks great again—as Muslims.*  
 .....

cally signaling Turkey's turn away from Islam and its Ottoman past. President Erdoğan's patronage of the Çamlıca Mosque in the former Ottoman royal capital, already dubbed the "Erdoğan" Mosque, indicates his embrace of an imperial drive to make Turks great again—as Muslims.

Erdoğan is a prototype of populist and nativist leaders globally. Since coming to power in 2003, he has demonized, brutalized, and cracked down on demographics that are unlikely to vote for him. Altogether, the groups

targeted by Erdoğan constitute nearly half of the Turkish population, ranging from leftists to secularists. And they despise the Turkish leader. By the same token, the other mostly conservative half of the country—comprised of many people that Erdoğan has lifted out of poverty—adores him. As a nativist leader, Erdoğan also boosts his base by affirming to his supporters that he has a mission to complete: to make Turkey great again in the mold of the former Ottoman Empire. Crowning the former royal Ottoman capital, the Çamlıca mosque exemplifies Erdoğan's pro-Ottoman pivot.

The mosque is symbolic for a number of other reasons. Following the tradition of Ottoman sultans, who built imperial houses of worship to adorn old Istanbul's historic seven hills, Erdoğan has built his mosque on modern Istanbul's highest point—the Çamlıca Hill, which stands 879 feet high, creating a visual eighth hill for Turkey's largest city. Sitting at the geographic center of greater Istanbul, the "Erdoğan" Mosque provides an urban anchor point while serving the Turkish leader's desire to imprint his pious Muslim image upon the city of his birth and political ascent.

The conservative-minded Turkish leader's personal and political journeys both started in Istanbul. Erdoğan broke into Turkish national politics

in 1994 when he was elected Istanbul's mayor—a position from which he moved on to become Turkey's prime minister in 2003 and president in 2014.<sup>3</sup> In April 2017, Erdoğan won a referendum that significantly increased his powers, delivering him an executive-style presidency. He is now simultaneously head of state, head of government, head of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), and head of the Turkish police and military. He has become the most powerful elected Turkish leader since the country's first multi-party elections in 1950. The "Erdoğan" Mosque represents his embrace of the city for its significance in his personal and political journeys: he adorns Istanbul with his permanent and personalized stamp of faith.

The "Erdoğan" Mosque establishes a profound amount of symbolism. Seen from most parts of Istanbul, the mosque is built in Turkey's largest city and main commercial hub, home to 15 million people. Erdoğan, therefore, shines the spotlight back to Istanbul and its great legacy, as a homage to his consolidation of power. He removes the spotlight from Atatürk's Ankara, which has represented an inward-looking Turkish foreign policy since the Ottoman Empire's collapse. The "Erdoğan" Mosque is the brick-and-mortar symbol of Turkey's quest to rise as an imperial power under Erdoğan.

Erdoğan, whose AKP first won Turkish elections in 2002, is one of the most consequential leaders in Turkish history. He has won thirteen national polls and accumulated enough domestic political power to earn the epitaph of the "New Sultan."<sup>4</sup> In foreign policy, too, Erdoğan has proven a consequential leader. Since 2003, he has sought to make Turkey a great power, as earlier Turkish leaders attempted. However, in the context of recent Turkish history, Erdoğan has picked an unorthodox model for attaining greatness: he has attempted to cast his country as a stand-alone Middle East and regional power. Erdoğan does not see Turkey's role in international politics simply as an adherent to the West's agenda. As former U.S. Ambassador to Turkey Jim Jeffrey told me, Erdoğan sees foreign affairs through a transactional, balance of power lens.

This attitude is apparent in Erdoğan's foreign policy approach and his efforts to build influence over Turkey's neighbors. For instance, Erdoğan breaks ranks with Ankara's traditional Western allies, when he believes that U.S. policies run counter to Turkey's national security interests, or that they conflict with his vision to make Turkey great again. Erdoğan's rejection of Turkey's role as a docile player in the Western-led state system is a break with recent Turkish history. In the early nineteenth century, the "Eastern Question"—a debate that focused on the weak Ottoman Empire's

future in international politics—led Ottoman leaders to align their country's foreign policy with that of global powers and international blocs to safeguard its interests. Accordingly, throughout the 1800s, Istanbul aligned itself with London, and to a lesser extent Paris, to fend off Russia—the biggest historic menace to the Ottoman Empire. In fact, Great Britain and France, together with Piedmont—an Italian principality seeking to unite Italy—fought alongside the Ottomans in the Crimean War from 1853 to 1856 to counter the Russian threat to Istanbul.

With its nineteenth-century rise to power, Germany reached out to cultivate ties with the Ottoman Empire's Sublime Porte. At the same time, Ottoman relations with France and particularly with Great Britain began to erode. As London saw it, Germany was not only building the world's largest navy, but also winning over the Ottomans in an effort to spread its influence across the Middle East—from which it would threaten London's access via the Mediterranean Sea to its crown jewel of India.

German efforts to break Istanbul away from London succeeded, but with Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II playing both sides, it took Berlin time to wean Istanbul off of Great Britain completely. The informal Ottoman-British alliance finally ended at the beginning of World War I, when the Young Turks, having deposed Abdülhamid II in 1908, decided to throw Istanbul's lot in with Berlin in the Great War against the Allies.

This endeavor did not work out well for the Ottomans. Defeated, the empire collapsed in 1918 and faced partition by the Western victors. The Allies occupied Istanbul in 1920, but Atatürk soon freed Turkey from their grips through his storied military campaign. In 1923, Atatürk established the modern Turkish republic with its capital in Ankara, erected upon secular foundations.

Atatürk continued the practice of making alliances with global powers to keep Turkey safe. Following a policy of non-intervention in neighbors' internal affairs, he sided with France and Great Britain during the interwar period. Ankara joined regional alliances, including the Paris-backed Balkan Pact, in an effort to counter mounting revisionism in Southeastern Europe. This stance ensured security against threats from expansionist neighbors such as Bulgaria and Italy—the latter of which became a menacing maritime neighbor in the interwar period by virtue of its ownership of the Dodecanese Islands in the Aegean Sea.

Through international engagement, Turkey successfully fended off the Italian threat throughout the interwar period and during World War II. After Nazi Germany occupied Greece in 1941, İsmet İnönü, Atatürk's successor and Turkey's second president, kept Ankara out of the war and

fended off a German invasion by playing Nazi Germany and the Allies against each other. Seeing the writing on the wall for Germany towards the end of the war, İnönü dropped anchor in the Western alliance, first by declaring war on Berlin in August 1944 and then by moving close to the new global superpower, the United States.

Ankara's alliance-forming process with Washington accelerated in 1946 when Stalin demanded Turkish territory. The Russian threat was enough to align Turkey completely with Washington, and İnönü sought and received U.S. security guarantees that became a bulwark of Turkish foreign policy and a crucial insurance policy against the Soviet Union. When İnönü lost Turkey's first multi-party, fully democratic elections in 1950, his successors President Celâl Bayar and Prime Minister Adnan Menderes led Ankara to NATO accession in 1952, cementing Turkey's Cold War alliance with Washington. There were occasional vicissitudes with Washington, including U.S. sanctions against Ankara in the aftermath of the 1974 Cyprus War. Still, Turkey relied on close alignment with the United States to guarantee its security throughout the Cold War.

In 1987, Ankara began to pursue European Union (EU) accession, seeking a third anchor in global politics, in addition to the United States and NATO. Following the Cold War's end, Turkey's leaders stayed firm in their commitment to NATO. Once again, this alliance benefitted Turkey's interests when NATO intervened in the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo in support of Turkey's Balkan allies, the Bosnians and Albanians.

Enter Erdoğan, the change maker. Over the past decade, the Turkish president has gradually unfolded a revolutionary foreign policy, parting ways with nearly 200 years of tradition of Turkish geopolitical alignment. Before Erdoğan came to power,

Turkey perceived itself as a weak or middle power, believing that security comes only through alliance with a superpower or a global bloc. Under Erdoğan, Turkey's economy has made great strides. Taking stock of this economic growth, Erdoğan has abandoned the country's traditional stance, instead moving to make Turkey a stand-alone power. He is not content with Turkey's middle power status.<sup>5</sup> Recalling the memory of the powerful Ottoman Empire, Erdoğan wants to make Turkey great again. To this end,

.....

*Over the past decade,  
the Turkish president  
has gradually unfolded a  
revolutionary foreign policy,  
parting ways with nearly  
200 years of tradition  
of Turkish geopolitical  
alignment.*

.....

he is not afraid to break with Turkey's recent deference to the Western-led security system.

Throughout the twentieth century, Turkish foreign policy was shaped by Atatürk's mantra, "Peace at Home, Peace in the World," a doctrine which mandated non-intervention in neighbors' internal affairs. By contrast, Erdoğan has sought influence in the affairs of Turkey's neighbors—intervening in Syria's civil war and taking an active interest in the Western Balkans.<sup>6</sup> Dubbed "Strategic Depth," this policy has aimed to restore Turkey's Ottoman-era influence in the formerly Turkish-controlled Middle East, Balkans, and beyond.

In some respects, Erdoğan's foreign policy is not so new relative to that of his predecessors'. In fact, some of his key moves are informed by Turkish history, specifically by generations of Turkish leaders, who also sought to reestablish their country as a great power. Romanticization of the collapsed Ottoman Empire continues to shape Turkish citizens' views of their place in the world. Nations that were once great empires often have a malleable, exaggerated sense of their glory days and a readiness to be inspired—or even a vulnerability to be manipulated and misled—by effective politicians espousing this narrative.

The Ottoman Empire was once a great power that spanned three continents and dominated lands now comprising nearly fifty sovereign countries—a quarter of the world's states. To this day, this memory remains fresh in Turkey. The Romans measured time by *seculae*, the number of years between an incident's occurrence and the death of every person who was alive during that incident. The Turkish republic, established in 1923, is not even one *secula* old, and the memory of Ottoman greatness resonates deeply with Turkish citizens.

After the Turks tasted great power status in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Ottoman Empire went into a long and steady decline. The eighteenth-century Ottoman effort for reform and Westernization was not an attempt at *prima facie* Europeanization, but rather a drive to become great again by copying powerful European states and forging alliances with them, until the Ottomans' inevitable return to global primacy. The central goal of Ottoman Westernization was to make the empire great again.

After he established modern Turkey, Atatürk too sought to return greatness to his people. He fully embraced the Ottoman project of Westernization in the interwar period, taking it to its logical extreme to Europeanize Turkey fully. Acknowledging the European states as the world's dominant powers, Atatürk sought during the interwar period to mold Turkey in a fully European model, in the hopes of finally fulfilling

Turkey’s quest to become a major power again. If Brazil and Argentina had been great powers at the time, he may have followed a Latin American model of reform, statecraft, and modernization. Much like the late Ottoman sultans, Atatürk tied his country’s security to France and Great Britain, seeking their support in international affairs until the return of Turkey’s great power status. Turkish leaders who followed Atatürk have typically pursued the same model. İnönü pivoted to Washington when the United States emerged as a global superpower in the aftermath of World War II. Alongside Europe, the United States became a new model for Turkey’s return to greatness, as well as its preferred foreign policy and security partner.

While Erdoğan has also sought to reclaim great power status, he has departed from his predecessors in one significant way: Erdoğan has rejected the idea of tying Turkey to great powers while working toward his goal. He has instead moved to cast Turkey as an autarchic power wielding influence over its neighbors, occasionally rejecting traditional Western partners, and seeking new relationships with Russia, Iran, and China.

Erdoğan does not have the patience to wait for Turkey’s greatness to return gradually. Guided by newfound confidence from the impressive economic growth he has delivered, Erdoğan has decided to make Turkey great on his watch.

*Erdoğan does not have the patience to wait for Turkey’s greatness to return gradually.*

Unfortunately, Erdoğan has thus far failed in his quest to earn Turkey great power status. This is especially the case regionally in the Middle East, where Erdoğan’s foreign policy has left Turkey friendless, with the exception of Qatar. His Middle East policy has also led Ankara into geopolitical troubles, as in Syria, where the Assad regime and Turkey’s historic adversaries—Iran and Russia—have overwhelmed Turkish-backed rebels. Though the jury is still out on Turkey’s outreach efforts elsewhere—in the Balkans, the Sahel, and the Horn of Africa—Erdoğan’s policies have overall left Turkey weak and isolated. He has compromised Turkey’s position as a valued American and European ally in his quest for greatness. Western officials have regularly expressed resentment about Erdoğan as an unpredictable, “makes-his-own-rules” maverick in foreign policy.

However, Europe and the United States alike share at least part of the blame for Turkey’s current foreign policy stance, and even a few of its domestic troubles. After coming to power, Erdoğan gradually built strong electoral support by delivering robust economic growth, and his domestic

political strength has driven his foreign policy pivot. As I explain in *The New Sultan: Erdoğan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey*, taking full advantage of his second win in the 2007 parliamentary elections, Erdoğan started to amass power and to erode democratic checks and balances—by taking over the courts and the media, for example.<sup>7</sup> Erdoğan also started to crack down on his opposition, starting with supporters of Atatürk’s legacy, who wanted Turkey to maintain its Western-facing, secularist path. During the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer trials beginning in 2008, Erdoğan jailed a number of prominent secular intellectuals, journalists, and civil society activists, together with generals in the secularist military, based on unsubstantiated allegations that they were plotting a coup against him.<sup>8</sup> Still,

.....

*While Erdoğan set about jailing his secularist opponents, Turkey’s Western allies promoted Erdoğan’s Turkey as a model country for its Arab neighbors, in the midst of their social unrest and uprisings.*

.....

while Erdoğan set about jailing his secularist opponents, Turkey’s Western allies promoted Erdoğan’s Turkey as a model country for its Arab neighbors, in the midst of their social unrest and uprisings.<sup>9</sup>

Around the same time, he and his foreign policy advisor Ahmet Davutoğlu—who later became Foreign Minister and then Prime Minister—introduced the “Strategic Depth” concept, planting the seeds of an activist foreign policy approach towards

the Middle East. This increasing Turkish engagement in the internal affairs of Arab countries furthered the nascent neo-imperialist pivot in Turkish foreign policy.

As is often the case, Turkey’s foreign policy was reflective of its domestic politics. Ankara’s involvement in the Arab uprisings shook Turkey from the introverted tradition Atatürk set in the early twentieth century. As Turkey became more Ottomanist in its foreign policy, Erdoğan’s style of governance became more sultan-esque to match. At the height of Turkey’s involvement in the Syrian civil war in 2017, Erdoğan pushed through a referendum to secure an executive-style presidency. In addition, he abandoned the modest presidential mansion of his predecessors in 2015, in favor of a grand 1,100-room residence—popularly dubbed “The Palace.”

Amidst these changes, half of Turkey’s population—mostly leftists, liberals, and others disillusioned by Erdoğan—has remained unwilling to kneel to the country’s new conservative sultan. This intense polarization has resulted in a political crisis.

Alongside its domestic difficulties, Turkey today faces a hostile foreign policy environment. Erdoğan's efforts to make Turkey great again have had the opposite effect: Ankara has almost no friends in the Middle East and it faces threats from resurgent adversaries, Russia and Iran. Erdoğan is now forced to make ad hoc deals in Syria with these very adversaries. Moscow is certainly not watching out for Ankara's best interests and uses these deals to drive a wedge deeper between Turkey and its Western allies. Ankara is now squeezed between the West, its northern neighbor Russia, and its southeastern neighbors in the Middle East, from Iran to Saudi Arabia—especially in the wake of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi's murder.

*Ankara is now squeezed between the West, its northern neighbor Russia, and its southeastern neighbors in the Middle East, from Iran to Saudi Arabia—especially in the wake of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi's murder.*

Accordingly, Turkey finds that its room to maneuver in foreign policy is becoming even smaller. Moscow and Tehran have together undermined

Turkish policies in Syria, and Russia has all but encircled Turkey militarily with its 2014 invasion of Crimea. By 2019, Moscow will have secured military bases and Anti Access/Air Denial (A2D2) capabilities to Turkey's north in Crimea, its east in Armenia, and its south in Syria. To make things worse, while Turkey faces encirclement by a traditional adversary, Ankara can no longer rely on the support of its traditional Western allies—most notably Washington, which had kept Ankara under its global security umbrella since the end of the Cold War. Fully restoring ties with Washington will be among Erdoğan's greatest foreign policy challenges going forward.

Turkey is increasingly on its own in the global arena—a first since the early days of the nineteenth century. With the numerous risks that lie ahead for Turkey, it remains to be seen if Erdoğan can deliver his country back to safety—let alone to greatness. *f*

## ENDNOTES

- 1 This article is based in parts on my forthcoming book, with the working title: *Erdoğan's Empire* (I.B Tauris, 2019). I would like to acknowledge my assistant Egecan Alan Fay for his invaluable assistance on this article.
- 2 See *The New Sultan: Erdoğan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey* website, <<https://www.newsultan.info/>>.
- 3 Although Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) won the November 2002 elections, Erdoğan had to wait five months to become prime minister after the AKP

victory. A criminal conviction in his past—which resulted from reading an allegedly incendiary poem while he had been mayor of Istanbul prevented him from running for parliament. It was not until March of 2003 when the country's election board allowed Erdoğan to run in by-elections for the parliament that he could take the office of prime minister.

- 4 John Waterbury, "The New Sultan: Erdoğan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey," *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2017).
- 5 Soner Cagaptay and Oya Rose Aktas, "Transactional or Transcendent? Turkey's Ties to the European Union," *Heinrich Boll Stiftung*, May 8, 2017, <<https://eu.boell.org/en/2017/05/08/transactional-or-transcendent-turkeys-ties-european-union>> (accessed September 20, 2018).
- 6 Zia Wiese, "Turkey's Balkan Comeback," *Politico*, May 15, 2018, <<https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-western-balkans-comeback-european-union-recep-tayyip-erdogan/>> (accessed September 20, 2018).
- 7 Soner Cagaptay, *The New Sultan: Erdogan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017).
- 8 Emma Sinclair-Webb, "The Turkish Trial That Fell Far Short," *The New York Times*, August 06, 2013, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/07/opinion/global/the-turkish-trial-that-fell-far-short.html>> (accessed September 20, 2018).
- 9 Alexander Christie-Miller, "Erdogan Pitches Turkey's Democratic Model on 'Arab Spring' Tour," *The Christian Science Monitor*, September 16, 2011, <<https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2011/0916/Erdogan-pitches-Turkey-s-democratic-model-on-Arab-Spring-tour>> (accessed September 20, 2018).