Turkish Foreign Policy Trends: An In-Depth Conversation

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Articles & Testimony

The director of The Washington Institute's Turkish Research Program speaks with French students about what Erdogan's recent policy thrust means for Europe and the United States.

On October 22, graduate students at Sciences Po Paris, Theo Bruyere-Isnard and Claire Mabille, interviewed Soner Cagaptay, The Washington Institute's Beyer Family Fellow, regarding the latest trends in Turkish foreign policy and the legacy of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Dr. Cagaptay elaborated on what recent developments in Ankara's political landscape mean for the United States and France, underscoring that the French people and government should not give up on democracy in Turkey. The conversation puts into perspective key dynamics of Turkish politics today, including Erdogan's decreasing popularity, his growing embrace of autocratic measures to stay in power, and his developing relationship with Russian president Vladimir Putin. The interview was originally published in *Sciences Po Defense et Strategie* in **English (https://spds.fr/2021/01/25/entretien-avec-soner-cagaptay/)** and **French (https://spds.fr/2021/01/25/entretien-avec-soner-cagaptay-2/)** .

Could you briefly summarize your career, your work and why you started working on Turkey?

Soner Cagaptay: I wrote my doctoral thesis at Yale University, focusing on Turkish nationalism. In a sense, my career has overlapped with that of Erdogan's. Indeed, I was hired at the Washington Institute two months after his Justice and Development Party's (AKP) first election victory in November 2002. I have therefore tracked his national career from its beginning and recently finished a trilogy of books on Erdogan and modern Turkey.

In the first book of this trilogy, *The Rise of Turkey* (2014), I study how Turkey progressed from an economically disadvantaged secular state to both an economic force and a potential Muslim power under Erdogan. My next book, *The New Sultan* (2017) focuses on Turkey's democratic downturn, Erdogan's rise as a leading nativist-populist politician, and the crisis this has thrown Turkey into. My final book, *Erdogan's Empire* (2019), explains how he's

trying to “make Turkey great again,” his foreign policy successes and failures. Turkey is a fascinating country to study; it is almost never black or white but rather all nuances of grey. By digging deeper, you always find a different aspect which casts a new light on current events.

In the introduction of your book, you define Erdogan as an anti-Ataturk Ataturk, what does this imply for foreign policy?

Cagaptay: Revolutions usually invoke images of a bright and wonderful future, but to achieve that they need to present the regime they have replaced as completely backward and useless. The Kemalist revolution led by Ataturk did precisely that regarding the Ottoman legacy of Turkey which Kemalism framed it as backward and obsessed with religion. Of course, the late nineteenth century Ottoman empire was very different from this characterization. Turkey’s westernizing reforms indeed started with the late Ottoman sultans, and, in fact, Ataturk is a product of the Ottoman modernization: his ideas were shaped by Ottoman public schools and the military. Nevertheless, the Kemalist republic depicts itself as appearing from the ether to bring the “light of modernity” to Turkey without taking into account these past attempts and the very rich legacy of modernization. Many contemporary citizens of Turkey have internalized this idea, including Erdogan. Erdogan’s vision of the Ottoman empire is not as a secularizing empire that sees itself as part of Europe, but as an empire almost obsessed with Islam and opposing Europe and “the West.” Therefore, he is not trying to recreate an Ottoman empire, but a caricature of the Ottoman empire that was taught to him by Ataturk’s schools.

Moreover, Erdogan is also using some of Ataturk’s methods. The latter was a Jacobin leader who created a society in his own image—similar to Peter the Great in Russia—employing the resources of state, education policy, and the military to promote a secular, modern, and European Turkey. Erdogan now has access to similar resources, but he doesn’t share Ataturk values. He wants a society facing the Middle East and is politically Islamist and socially conservative. But, as I argue in *The New Sultan*, this is not quite working. Ataturk was not a democratically elected leader, and he was presiding over a society with a low literacy rate. On the other hand, modern Turkey is much more educated with near-universal literacy, and Erdogan technically has a democratic mandate which limits his possibilities. What is more, most educated Turks oppose Erdogan. The idea that a Jacobin leader can shape a society in his own image has simply passed, and such a project is just not feasible in the 21st century—at least not in Turkey —which has a deep democratic memory extending back to 1950.

Is Erdogan’s collaboration with the Muslim Brotherhood an act of genuine faith or a pragmatic approach to Islam?

Cagaptay: Erdogan believes that Turkey ought not be a “small European country,” but that it should instead become the leader of the Middle East. This has not happened. With the exception of the emir of Qatar, no Middle Eastern head of state attended Erdogan’s inauguration in 2018 as Turkey’s executive-style president, arguably the pinnacle of his career. This signals that Turkey today has nearly no friends or allies in the Middle East. The cause of this isolation is –mostly—his Muslim Brotherhood policy, which is among Erdogan’s key foreign policy failures. When the Arab uprisings started in 2010-2011, Erdogan wanted to influence their outcomes to gain influence in Arab capitals. His mistake was to put all of Turkey’s political capital behind the Muslim Brotherhood. Instead, he should have diversified Turkey’s support, backing various actors, similar to what Iran does, for instance, when it interferes in a country’s domestic politics. As a consequence of his missteps, Erdogan lost Egypt when he refused to recognize Sisi as its legitimate leader. Alongside Egypt, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, together with their allies, all see the Brotherhood as a key domestic and regional threat, and now oppose Erdogan.

Erdogan sees the Brotherhood in a sympathetic way, and one could even describe his AKP as “Brotherhood light” because in Turkey most things regarding Islam, from religious practice to attempts at achieving religious orthodoxy, to the politics of the religion, get filtered in this way. What is more, there are similarities between Erdogan’s past and

the current situation of the Brotherhood: in the 1990s, Erdogan's party was deemed illegal by Turkey's courts and banned from participating in elections. Later on, Erdogan's party was given a chance to run in elections, and he won. Erdogan now wants the Brotherhood to be given the same opportunity. He would like to see Brotherhood victories in the Arab world–which is the reason he supports Hamas, the Palestinian version of the Brotherhood. He sees the Brotherhood as an influence multiplier for himself and for Turkey. In this sense, the case of the Brotherhood in Egypt is poignant. Egypt does not create all the trends in Arab-majority countries, but once it adopts such trends, it makes them hegemonic due to its demographic and traditional cultural dominance among Arab-majority countries. But the Brotherhood failed in Egypt, thus isolating Turkey even further. As a result of Erdogan's Brotherhood policy, Turkey today has very few allies in the Middle East and has alienated its earlier partners, including Israel. However, I should also add that while he has failed in the Middle East, Erdogan has indeed built a "mini empire" in the Balkans, East and West Africa, and the Caucasus.

How do you explain that Turkey's only ally in the Middle East is Qatar?

Cagaptay: The Turkey-Qatar relationship is symbiotic. They make a perfect foreign policy pair. Qatar is the richest state in the Middle East if we consider per capita income. But it has the smallest population in the region (only around 250,000 citizens). It is also entangled in a competition for power against Saudi Arabia and the UAE. With 84 million citizens, Turkey has a huge, well-educated human resource pool. Its institutions, such as the military or the foreign ministry, are very capable. Ankara, too, is engaged in competition against Saudi Arabia and the UAE. However, Turkey lacks the funds that Qatar possesses. Therefore, Qatar brings money, while Turkey brings its institutions and human resources to the table.

With regards to the Muslim Brotherhood, the two countries have supported it in Egypt, Libya, and even Syria. However, while Turkey supports the Brotherhood ideologically, Qatar simply sees it as a pragmatic tool to counter the Saudis and the Emiratis. At the same time, many Qataris believe that Turkey's military support to and presence in Doha prevented a Saudi invasion during the Qatar-GCC split in 2017. In return, the alliance with Qatar gives Erdogan the financial muscle with which to implement its foreign policy endeavors in the Middle East and east Africa, such as in Somalia.

You write in your book that "the fear of Russia was for a long time the most important driver of Turkish foreign policy." Is this still true today?

Cagaptay: The relationship between Turkey and Russia has historically been asymmetrical. By my count, the Ottoman Empire and the Russian Empire fought seventeen wars from the time of Catherine the Great until the Bolshevik revolution. Guess who started them overall? Russia. Guess who lost all of them overall? The Ottoman Empire.

There is also a dialectic relationship between Turkey and Russia. The latter's moves often catalyze Turkish policies. When Turkey lost Crimea to the Russians in the late 18th century, it realized it could never compete against this great power next door unless it modernized. This modernization process started with the Ottoman military, which produced Ataturk. On the other hand, Russian claims to parts of Turkish territory after World War Two constitute the main reason why Turkey joined NATO in 1952.

Erdogan was late to appreciate this dynamic, as shown by the asymmetric power parity between Turkey and Russia when he interfered in Syria to support rebels to oust Assad. He was also short-sighted because he failed to recruit strong and long-term NATO and American support for his policies in Syria. Erdogan also missed that Obama was not going to put American boots on the ground in Syria. The latter had come to power saying he would be the opposite of Bush and would never start a war in a Muslim-majority country. Erdogan failed to appreciate this simple dynamic. And, when he started supporting rebels in Syria, he found himself alone against Russia. Then when Putin deployed

Russians troops to Syria in 2015, it was not a question of if but when there would be a new Turkish-Russian war. And it would not take a crystal ball to figure out who would have won…

Later, however, something dramatic happened which changed everything between Erdogan and Putin: the 2016 failed coup attempt against Erdogan. Turkey's Western allies failed to appreciate the nature of the coup, but Putin called Erdogan the day after the coup. Not only did the former offer the latter help, but Putin also invited Erdogan to a visit Russia. Accordingly, Erdogan's first trip overseas after the coup attempt was not to a NATO Summit in Brussels or a meeting with Obama in Washington, but to Russia to meet Putin.

Erdogan's Russia visit notably occurred to the imperial capital, not Moscow. Putin gave Erdogan a "tsar's welcome" at the Konstantinovsky Palace, built by Catherine the Great, who was among the first Russian leaders to establish a policy of brutalizing the Ottoman Turks. Putin's message to Erdogan was clear—Russia, the Turks' longtime nemesis, was ready for a new chapter of cooperation under Putin the Great. That was the beginning of power sharing agreements between Erdogan and Putin, starting in Syria.

Does this mean that Turkey and Russia are now allies?

Cagaptay: This does not, however, mean Turkey and Russia are allies. They disagree over Ukraine and Russia's annexation of Crimea. They also support opposing sides in Libya. Moreover, Russia will always back Greek Cypriots. But despite these differences, Putin and Erdogan have learned to get along.

However, Turkey is not like Russia. In 2019, Erdogan's party lost local elections in Istanbul and Ankara. That could never happen to Putin in Moscow or St. Petersburg. Once again, I see Turkey as the analytical onion: Turkey is neither a dictatorship, nor a democracy. It is a democracy run by an autocrat. In this regard, Turkey is more similar to Hungary or Poland than to Russia. Turkey has a vibrant civil society and a long tradition of democracy.

The tensions between Greece and Turkey have often made the headlines in the past few weeks. It is hard to imagine, as you describe in your book, that the Greeks celebrated the victory of Erdogan at the presidential elections!

Cagaptay: There was almost euphoria in Athens and Nicosia when Erdogan was elected. Many Greeks saw Erdogan as a non-Kemalist and therefore better for Greek policies. And initially he proved them right. He supported the unification of Cyprus and implemented EU accession reforms. But Erdogan has a nativist populist side. His broader goal was not to make Turkey an EU member, but to give Turkey back its greatness.

What is more, when Cyprus became an EU member in 2004, it helped virtually end the talks on Turkey's accession to the EU. Cyprus asked, and France and Germany helped, to freeze a large number of chapters of accession talks with Turkey. I do not think that was very smart for the Greeks. Had the accession process moved forward, it would have been possible for Greece and Cyprus to ask Turkey to make concessions on the many issues that divide these countries and Ankara. But since Cyprus insisted on freezing talks, there were no carrots, only sticks. Given that Erdogan had no longer any incentive to please the EU, Ankara drifted away from the Union. That is overall not a good outcome for the Greeks. A Turkey that is not in Europe is a nationalist maximalist one.

According to you, what is going to be Erdogan's legacy in Turkey?

Cagaptay: The key change in Turkish politics under Erdogan is the revival of the memory of the country's imperial past, and this is not likely to go away. Countries that were once great powers, like Turkey, China, Iran, or the UK, have a strong sense of their heyday, and this comes with a propensity to be inspired by leaders who embody this past. Erdogan has done exactly that. The Romans used to measure time by "*seculae,*" which refers to the time it takes for all the people who were alive at the time of an event to pass away. The republic of Turkey is not even one *seculae* old. Therefore, the memory of the Ottoman empire is still very fresh, and Erdogan has reminded Turkey's citizens of this

memory. This has been embraced even by parts of his opposition, which is why he finds support for Ankara's foreign interventions among the broader electorate.

What could possibly weaken Erdogan's power in the years to come?

Cagaptay: It all depends on the economy. Erdogan gained popular support initially because he delivered quick and strong economic growth. This helped him consolidate power and take over the courts by passing an amendment to Turkey's constitution in 2010. But now the Turkish economy is in recession. This could humble the "Muslim De Gaulle." What is more, Turkey is currently fighting wars in at least three countries: Libya, Syria, and Iraq (against the PKK). Some of these are through proxies, but they still require heavy engagement by Ankara. If the economy tanks — which would be a very unfortunate development for Turkey's citizens — Ankara will not have the ability to fight several wars on so many fronts, further eroding support for Erdogan.

There have been some alarming tensions between France and Turkey recently. Do you have a specific message to deliver to our French audience?

Cagaptay: It is important to not forget that Turkey is, has been, and always will be bigger than Erdogan. Paris and the French should not give up on democracy in Turkey. The country has been a democracy for seventy years, longer than Spain has been. Increasingly, elections are not fair, but they will remain free thanks to this seventy-year legacy, and that is what matters. There are many reasons to invest in and have hope for Turkey's future. Until the 2019 elections, nearly half of the population supported Erdogan. But the generation that was raised under Erdogan, constituting over 40 percent of the Turkish population, is a very different political group. Only one out of three members of this group supports Erdogan. Turkey's future rests with this demographic cohort, and I believe that it is very important for civil societies in Europe to maintain ties with Turkish civil society. ❖

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