

Beyond the Trump-Erdoğan

Meeting:

The Rise of Eurasianists and

Turkey's Syria Policy

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Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visit to Washington did not usher the "new beginning" in US-Turkey relations that he had expected to attain. Right after Erdoğan's return to Ankara, Turkey accused the US envoy to the anti-ISIS coalition, Brett McGurk, of backing Kurdish militants and demanded his removal. Meanwhile, Senators John McCain and Dianne Feinstein called on Erdoğan to hold Turkish security personnel accountable for attacking the protesters near the Turkish ambassador's residence in the American capital, adding that the United States should throw Turkey's ambassador "the hell out." Moreover, new revelations on former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn's controversial dealings with Turkey continue to put pressure on the Trump Administration—which may otherwise be willing to be more open about discussing Erdoğan's obsessive demands for extradition of the Turkish activist preacher Fethullah Gulen as well as the release of the Iranian-Turkish businessman Reza Zarrab (accused of violating sanctions on Iran).

Beyond Trump-Erdoğan relations, however, there may be a deeper, structural divergence between Washington and Ankara in the long term. Although most critics focus on Erdoğan's authoritarianism as a threat to Turkey's future in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the rising tide of a Eurasianist civil-military elite in the country has received little attention. It is imperative to understand Eurasianism as it gains ground in various sectors in Turkish society, as it will likely shape Turkey's Syria policy and beyond, and thus,

relations with the United States in the coming years.

The Fall of Neo-Ottomanism, The Rise of Eurasianism

Since Erdoğan's removal of Ahmet Davutoğlu as prime minister in May 2016, Turkey's Syria policy has changed significantly in favor of Eurasianist elements within the Turkish state apparatus. With thousands of Turkish Army officers sacked following the botched coup attempt in July 2016, the Eurasianist generals filled the vacuum by offering support to Erdoğan against the "western-backed plot." Turkey's Syria policy evinces concrete foreign policy implications; Ankara has prioritized its fight against the Kurds over supporting the Syrian opposition—which was one of the reasons for the fall of Aleppo—and engaged consecutive deals with Moscow, including a potential contract for the S-400 Russian defense shield system. The Eurasianists played a key role in arranging back-stage talks with the Asad regime as well as restoring the crumbling Erdoğan-Putin relations.

Eurasianism forges a plethora of intellectual and social trends including Kemalism, Turkish nationalism, socialism, and radical secularism. The perspective is rooted far back in the Marxist Kadro and Yon movements in the early decades of the Turkish Republic and gained momentum during the 1990s under emboldened Kemalist generals. Although there are many factions and variants of Turkish Eurasianism, three main tenets of the Eurasianist worldview are

important to note: (1) an anti-imperialist reading of western capitalist development and a deep skepticism toward globalization; (2) a conspiratorial belief that Turkey's unity and borders are threatened by the western powers' self-interested policies in Iraq and Syria, referred to as the "Sèvres Syndrome"; and, (3) a perspective that places Turkey's future as part of the Eastern bloc, primarily Russia, the Central Asian Turkic republics, and China, as western organizations gradually lose their significance around the globe.

Following the "post-modern coup" against Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan's Islamist Welfare Party in 1997, the Kemalist generals with a Eurasianist vision rose to the upper echelons of the state apparatus and suggested that Turkey should establish a new alliance with Russia. With the rise of Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the ensuing pro-European reform packages, however, the Eurasianists lost their influence. In fact, the leading figures of the movement were imprisoned due to their alleged roles in extrajudicial killings of Kurds during the 1990s and the later coup attempts against the AKP government—famously known as the Ergenekon and Balyoz trials.

In early 2014, the trial cases were ended abruptly after corruption allegations surfaced against Erdoğan's inner circle. After the attempted coup in July 2016, Erdoğan declared that Turkey had entered "a new war of liberation"—using the Kemalist lexicon—against the "western plot" aiming to overthrow

his government and decided to mend fences with the generals. Since then, the Eurasianists have strongly supported Erdoğan's war against "western-backed" enemies—Gülen, liberals, and Kurds—and gradually formed a marriage of convenience with the AKP government.

How Do Eurasianists Influence Turkey's Syria Policy?

Exploiting Erdoğan's weakness in the domestic and international arenas, the Eurasianists, remarkably, have reinterpreted the AKP's neo-Ottomanism as part of Turkish chauvinist nationalism. The shift in Turkey's Kurdish policy was the best example. While the architect of the neo-Ottomanist vision, Ahmet Davutoğlu, was advocating for a Muslim brotherhood between Turks and Kurds, the Eurasianists perceived the Kurdish issue as a national security threat. The Eurasianists' position has strongly been against Turkey's support of the Syrian opposition and the Muslim Brotherhood. As they helped to break down Turkey's peace process during 2013-15, they paved the way for military operations in southeast Turkey and eventually changed the course of Turkey's policy in Syria—drawing principal attention to the Kurdish threat and hindering the government's ability to support the Syrian opposition.

Although neo-Ottomanism and Eurasianism are clashing perspectives, it is important to highlight how anti-American/anti-western discourse becomes the overlapping feature of the two, often feeding into each other.

Animosity toward the United States is on the rise and the anti-western rhetoric in the Turkish media cuts across party lines: the pro-government media blames “traitors” for having alleged ties to a western-backed coup against Erdoğan, while the opposition aims to prove its authentic patriotism by blaming Erdoğan’s concessions to the United States. Thus, given the fact that the Eurasianist vision and Euro-skepticism have reached major political parties, such as the Turkish Nationalist Action Party (MHP) and Republican People’s Party (CHP), some marginal Eurasianist groups such as Doğu Perincek’s Patriotic Party (VP) enjoy disproportionate influence in shaping Ankara’s policies – reminiscent of the rising clout of anti-globalist, isolationist groups around the world.

Beyond the ideological realm, Perincek’s group has cultivated deep connections to many key positions in the state’s intelligence and judicial apparatuses in the wake of a massive purge following the coup attempt in July 2016. As some 130,000 civil servants were sacked, the government aimed to fill the vacancies with a pro-AKP constituency; however, a quirky vetting process under the state of emergency often invited controversy in conservative circles. Some fear that purges in the bureaucracy are getting out of Erdoğan’s control. Many are concerned about the purges since they reach deep into the bureaucracy, the judiciary, the armed forces, and the universities. Even many conservative intellectuals are now afraid of providing constructive criticism – including the circles of Abdullah Gul, Bulent Arinc, and Ahmet Davutoğlu, who were effectively

silenced – that the Eurasianist bureaucrats are finding a fertile environment to shape state policies.

The Eurasianists, for example, strongly support Erdoğan’s proposal of reinstating the death penalty – which is declared as the “reddest of the red lines” by European officials – hoping to see further deterioration of Turkish-EU relations. They also support Turkey’s further engagement with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as an alternative path.

A Detachment from the Arab Gulf?

The major fault line between neo-Ottomanism and Eurasianism is the vision of Turkey’s role in the Middle East. Davutoğlu has been an ardent critic of Kemalist foreign policy, which long discarded cultural and religious affinities between Turks and Arabs. The Eurasianists, on the other hand, view Turkey’s strong relations with the Arab Gulf states and the Muslim Brotherhood at best as a liability, and at worst as a dangerous association. Turkey’s active policy in Syria was especially criticized by the Eurasianists who have Alevi backgrounds, and they accused the Turkish government of pursuing sectarian politics. Although Turkey’s Alevis and Syria’s Alawis are historically and culturally different, both groups are fearful of the Sunni identity that is associated with the neo-Ottoman perspective.

In this regard, the Eurasianist perspective of Iran has evolved over the years. For long, Iran as an “Islamic Republic” was perceived as a

threat to Turkey's secular order, and thus, the Eurasianists were most skeptical about close relations between Ankara and Tehran under Erdoğan's AKP. After the Syrian civil war, Iran's support of the Assad regime and the increasingly sectarian nature of the Turkey-Iran competition have transformed Eurasianist thinking. The Eurasianists are against Turkey's alliance with Saudi Arabia to protect the Sunni population in Iraq; for them, Ankara's Iran policy should focus solely on cutting links between Tehran and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Moreover, as an anti-Western power, Iran is considered a potential partner on certain issues.

Overall, the Eurasianist vision has strong reservations regarding Turkey's current policy in the Middle East. Given the deep mistrust between Erdoğan and the Eurasianists, the question revolves around the durability of the pragmatic alliance. Erdoğan recently declared that the state of emergency may be extended seemingly forever—"until the country achieves welfare and peace." Whereas the presidential ruling by decree will empower Erdoğan, the state of emergency conditions invite messy wars in the Turkish state apparatus, which eventually harm the normalization of the country. Despite their dislike of the all-powerful Erdoğan, the Eurasianists cherish Turkey's new presidential system that revolves around a strong man—an authoritarian structure with a Putinesque model where they have increased ability to exert influence in the long term.

Does Washington Grasp the Structural Shift beyond Erdoğan?

The recent spat between Turkey and Germany over the use of the Incirlik air base is the latest indicator of Ankara's fragile relations with NATO. Turkey's increasing drift away from NATO, however, is often depicted in the western media as a result of Erdoğan's stumbling policy choices in Syria. Such analyses omit consideration of the structural transformations inside the Turkish state apparatus, which are now successfully exploited by Russia.

For instance, Russian Eurasianists with ties to Alexander Dugin—dubbed as "Putin's Rasputin"—have provided ample support to the Perincek group and played a key role in repairing Putin-Erdoğan relations in favor of a Turkish Eurasianist expansion of influence. Whether Moscow has any relations with Turkey's anti-NATO officers is a mystery. What is known, however, is that the massive purge after the coup attempt targeted western educated officers including hundreds of senior military staff serving in NATO in Europe and the United States. Not surprisingly, officers with Eurasianist leanings have become the primary beneficiaries of the purge process. Of particular note, among the Eurasianist generals who received promotions after the July 2016 coup attempt was Lt. Gen. Zekai Aksakalli, commander of the Turkish Special Forces in Syria and Iraq. Aksakalli oversaw the Operation Euphrates Shield, which almost put Turkey on

a collision course with the United States in northern Syria.

Putin's goal to detach Turkey from NATO, of course, is not bound to the Syrian dynamics. The increasingly strong economic relations between Ankara and Moscow facilitate Turkish-Russian cooperation. Yet, the weakest link in the chain vulnerable to Russian manipulation between Washington and Ankara is Turkey's war against the PKK. The Trump Administration appears to be confused as to how to deal with the issue. The confusion is most clearly reflected in Washington's decision to arm the PKK's affiliate, the People's Protection Units (YPG), in Syria while simultaneously increasing pressure on the group to cut its ties to the PKK. Some officials believe that US relations with the Syrian Kurds are "temporary, transactional, and tactical" and thus, relations with Turkey are a long-term strategic priority for Washington. Others are aware of the potential consequences for arming PKK-affiliates at the conclusion of the Raqqa operation. Regarding a long-term strategic partnership, the Trump Administration appears to be giving Ankara assurances for cooperation against the PKK in Turkey and Iraq.

What is most needed, however, is Washington's serious diplomatic efforts to ensure a new round of a peace process between Turkey and the PKK. Focusing on short-term maneuvers based on armed operations in Syria and Iraq, the United States inadvertently feeds Turkish Eurasianist views. This short-term focus may be caused by the fact that Washington's perspective of Turkey is partially shaped by dominant media imagery of Erdoğan's Turkey as a "neo-Ottoman" (read "anti-NATO") state. Such a depiction is misleading not because Ankara is strongly committed to NATO; instead, Turkey's drift away from NATO is more serious, structural, and deeper, and surely, it goes well beyond Erdoğan's grip. That, perhaps, is why Washington should care more, not less, about Turkey's domestic politics in the long term. In disregarding human rights abuses and the media crackdown in Turkey, Washington risks losing its soft power among the Turkish citizenry – who no longer see the United States as "the leader of the free world" – and thus, the ideology of Eurasianism could find broad public appeal.

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