

Turkey sits at a crossroads geographically and in terms of identity. Bordering Europe, Turkey is yet to be accepted by key European Union (EU) states as fully European. For many, Europe is a cultural and religious construct rather than a matter of physical geography. Indeed, 'European' countries such as Cyprus, Armenia and Georgia are more distant from Brussels than are Ankara or Istanbul, and many of the greatest sites of classical Greece are situated on the Turkish mainland.

Almost a century ago, Kemal Atatürk decided that Turkey was to be a modern and western state. Out went the fez (originally from Venice), the veil, Arabic script, and what remained of the multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire. In came an avowedly secular nation-state, Latin script, Homburg hats and flats caps, and (few years after Atatürk's death in 1938) a multi-party parliamentary democracy - a democracy interrupted periodically from the 1960s onwards by military coups intended to restore the army's version of constitutional order.

Today's Turkey has features of both the new and the old order. The secularism of the urban elite competes with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's open wish to transform Turkey into a more religiously observant society, in tune with the conservative, pious majority of its citizens (sometimes described somewhat dismissively as 'Black Turks'). Religion is also seen in Erdoğan's foreign policy. As one of only two parliamentary democracies (the other being Israel) in the region, Turkey has historically sat rather uneasily in - rather than of - the Middle East. The past several years have seen Erdoğan accused of pursuing an increasingly 'Sunni' and Muslim Brotherhood friendly foreign policy. As we shall see below, this is an accusation with some force.

In 2010, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu described Turkey's foreign policy as one of 'zero problems with neighbours'. Unfortunately, this has turned progressively into a reality of 'nothing but problems with neighbours' for Turkey. Turbulence in external relations is not just regional, as the current crisis with the United States (US) Administration over the S-400 missiles illustrates.

Turkey's regional relationships are diverse and complex:

Iran

Iran might be described as a 'frenemy' to Turkey. The relationship has substance and is complex. Some 20 percent of Iranians speak Azeri or another Turkic language. Erdoğan has publicly sided with Tehran against Washington over US sanctions. Until this year, energy-poor Turkey imported 50 percent of its oil from Iran; recently, Turkey has reduced its dependency on Iran and instead turned towards Iraq for its oil imports. Another major factor is that Iran is a Shia state. Iranian ambitions to be the dominant influence in the Middle East cause considerable, if unspoken, unease in Ankara. Turkey and Iran have historically been enemies far more often than allies. Turkey has since 2011 been an implacable opponent of the regime in Damascus, whereas Tehran is Assad's biggest supporter. Turkey would certainly not want Iran to become a nuclear weapon state.

Syria

The Erdoğan and Assad families used to be on cosy terms (despite the fact that the Assads are Alawites): they even holidayed together in the Turkish resort of Bodrum in 2008. However, the brutal repression and unrest in Syria from 2011 onwards led to a serious falling out.

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Regime change has been the main policy objective of Ankara in Syria until very recently. Turkish intelligence was accused of fanning the flames of civil war in the early stages by supplying weapons and training to jihadi groups, and Turkey still supports the armed opposition. Erdoğan may share the view of Gulf monarchies that if Iraq must have a Shia dominated government because Shias form the majority population then Syria, which is 90 percent Sunni, should have Sunnis in power (rather than Alawites).

More recently, Ankara seems to have come to a grudging acceptance that Assad has 'won' and that regime change is not going to happen. Relations remain cold, but there is informal contact.

The focus for Turkey has switched to:

- resisting the efforts of Syrian Kurds, with their close links with the US and the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), to create an autonomous zone in North East Syria (much of which abuts the border of Turkey); and
- averting a Syrian assault on the Idlib area southwest of Aleppo in North West Syria controlled by jihadi groups. Such an assault would very likely drive a further 500,000 plus refugees across the border and into Turkey.

It should be noted that Turkey has already absorbed more than three million Syrian refugees - a heroic effort that puts to shame governments like the United Kingdom (UK) that balk at receiving numbers that pale in comparison.

To some extent, current Turkish policy places Erdoğan at the mercy of Putin's Russia. Russia holds the key in Idlib as to whether the Syrian army will be allowed to mount a serious attack. The Russian military also controls the airspace in much of North West Syria, and their tacit consent would be required for the Turks to mount a major invasion of territory held by the Syrian Kurds. Russian President Vladimir Putin is engaged in a strategy of seeking to detach Turkey from the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Western alliance. It is not clear how strategically receptive Erdoğan is to Putin's blandishments. However, he has undoubtedly stoked anti-American sentiment in Turkey, which is a dangerous game to play given the parlous state of the Turkish economy.

Iraq/Kurdish Regional Government (KRG)

Turkish relations with Baghdad are difficult, partly because the Government is Shia dominated and Iraq's Sunnis feel marginalised, but also because Ankara is preoccupied with protecting the position of the Iraqi Turkmen community, especially in the oil-rich province of Kirkuk. For its part, Baghdad objects to regular land and air violations of Iraqi sovereignty by the Turkish military in attacks against the PKK bases in Northern Iraq and also oppose the military bases that Turkey has established on Iraqi soil.

Such complaints appear somewhat pro forma. Baghdad appears to realise that Turkish behaviour will not change so long as the PKK retain bases on Iraqi territory. On the other hand, the oil pipeline from Kirkuk to Ceyhan on the Turkish coast is a major export route for Iraqi oil, and Turkey has become increasingly reliant on Iraqi oil.

For many years, Turkey pursued a policy of hostility towards the Kurdish Regional Government in Northern Iraq, seeing it as an unwelcome potential precedent for Turkey's own large population of Kurds. One of Erdoğan's undoubted successes has been to turn the equation around, understanding that Turkey's interests were better served by drawing the KRG into a close and dependent relationship. As a result, Turkey is the number one investor in the KRG and also their main trading partner. Relations with the ruling Barzani clan are close (much less so with their rivals the Talebanis). Erdoğan has publicly rejected the precedent that

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KRG might set for Syria - and by implication Turkey - but in practice, he seems to understand that who governs an entity is more important than the precise constitutional structures.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates

Turkey under Erdoğan is in an unspoken competition for leadership of the Sunni Muslim world. Turks have a romanticised idea of how Arabs view the Ottoman centuries. Historically there is little love lost between the two ethnicities. Some of Erdoğan's sycophantic advisers are even encouraging him to think of himself as the latter-day Caliph, in succession to the Ottoman caliphate ended by Atatürk in 1924.

Underlying tensions in the relationship with Saudi Arabia have been greatly exacerbated by three factors: (1) the murder of Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul; (2) Turkey's siding with Qatar in the row with Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain; and (3) Erdoğan's strong support for the Muslim Brotherhood throughout the Arab world. Erdoğan's own background lies in the Milli Gorus movement, widely seen as the Turkish branch of the Brotherhood.

Of the three, the Muslim Brotherhood factor is the most 'structural'. For one thing, a similar policy on the Brotherhood underpins the alliance between Erdoğan's Turkey and Qatar. For another, the Gulf monarchies fear the Brotherhood because the latter believe that legitimacy lies with the people rather than the ruling families.

The relationship with Saudi Arabia will remain uneasy and competitive so long as Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) remain in power in Turkey. Saudi Arabia has levers to put pressure on the fragile Turkish economy (e.g. discouraging tourism and investment by Saudi nationals) and is using them. Any future Turkish government would be likely to revert to a traditional secular foreign policy in regard to Saudi Arabia.

By the same token, similar tensions exist with the UAE, particularly around the Muslim Brotherhood and Libya. Some Turkish officials see the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (MbZ), as playing a more pernicious role in the region than Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman (MbS).

Qatar

By contrast, Turkey's relations with Qatar are conspicuously cordial. The two share similar attitudes to the Muslim Brotherhood, the Syrian civil war and the military takeover in Egypt. Both are supportive of the internationally recognised Government in Libya, to which Turkey has supplied weapons. Turkey has sided strongly with Qatar in the dispute with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. The Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, is a regular visitor to Erdoğan and has provided financial backing to Turkey throughout the country's current economic crisis.

Egypt

Turkish relations with Egypt are dire. Erdoğan was greatly offended by the military overthrow of Mohamed Morsi, a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood democratically elected as President during in the first wave of the Arab Spring of 2011, and the subsequent harsh repression of the Brotherhood within the country. After Morsi's sudden death in June, Erdoğan accused the Egyptian authorities of murdering him, if only by neglect. He views President Abdel Fattah Al Sisi as illegitimate – with the two Presidents not on speaking terms - and Egypt's role in Gaza and Libya as malign. The relationship seems broken beyond repair.

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Israel

Turkey was the first Muslim state to recognise Israel in 1949. It has managed to maintain diplomatic relations throughout. Relations have been downgraded to the level of Charge at times of regional or bilateral tension but never broken. Ties at the military, defence and intelligence level have historically been close, cemented by the fact that both countries see themselves as in but not of the Middle East.

Under Erdoğan, relations have deteriorated. Erdoğan's sympathies for political Islam and for the Palestinian cause have been on open and strident display. Turkey has been a strong supporter of the Hamas movement in Gaza, which is rooted in the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood. Relations nosedived with the three Gaza 'wars' of 2008, 2012 and 2014 - major Israeli assaults in Gaza involving much destruction of property and great loss of life. The attack by Israeli Special Forces on a Turkish vessel in the Gaza flotilla in 2010 (with several deaths and other casualties) marked another low involving the withdrawal of ambassadors. The ongoing Israeli siege of Gaza, aided and abetted by Egypt, is regarded by Erdoğan as inhuman and remains a major irritant. Relations between Israel and Turkey might stabilise but seem unlikely to improve so long as Erdoğan remains in power.

Conclusion

One of Turkey's most senior and experienced retired diplomats, who also served a term in Parliament post-retirement, described Turkey's regional policies to me as 'a disaster'. However, they are unlikely to change so long as Erdoğan remains in office. Support for political Islam runs like a thread through his Middle East policies. However, any post- Erdoğan government is likely to revert to the sort of secular, non-sectarian, rather nationalist foreign policy that had characterised Turkey ever since Atatürk. To that extent, Erdoğan's regional policy is an aberration from the norm.



Sir Kieran Prendergast KCVO CMG is a former Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations for Political Affairs (1997-2005). He was also the British Ambassador to Turkey (1995-1997), and British High Commissioner to Kenya (1992-1995) and Zimbabwe (1989-1992). He remains active in the field of conflict management and resolution. Among many other roles, he is currently a Senior Advisor to the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in Geneva and President of the British Association of Former United Nations Civil Servants.