



INTERVIEW WITH DR. AHMET ERDI ÖZTÜRK

TRENDS IN TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY

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Wikistrat: What do you see as the main recent changes in Turkish foreign policy?

A.Erdi: Actually, to answer this question, we need to go back to the early republican period and, maybe, we need to talk on some of the critical junctions and main pillars of classical Turkish foreign policy. In the classical period, or I would say under the hegemony of the Kemalism, Turkish foreign policy was based on four different, but connected, pillars. These were Westernization, security, secularization, and logic. Actually, these are the reflections of the Kemalist state identity. What I do want to underline is that the construction of the new state identity also provided a new arena within which to reformulate the foreign policy behaviors for the new state. Since Westernization was one of the main pillars of the state, the new foreign policy prioritized peaceful relations with the Western countries with whom the Ottoman Empire had fought over the centuries. The West was the very epitome of absolute development and power, yet the Kemalist elite had some reserves regarding it, because of the recent traumatic past, such as the Treaty of Sèvres of 1920. The still-fresh memory of the partial occupation by colonial powers and of the Independence War had inflicted wounds on the century-long efforts for modernization, as well as on the minds of ordinary people. This created concern and suspicion towards the West. Furthermore, Turkey was a medium-sized power with limited power resources during the early republican period and the regime's main aim was to consolidate a laik with secular Western understanding and a Westernized nation-state in its own borders first. In this regard, neither democracy nor liberal values were a priority in the early Republican period but being logical and modest were among the top priorities of Kemalist Turkey.

These policies started to change after the Republican People's Party's single-party period, but the transformation was not very dramatic. I

would argue that, between 1946 and 1980, the power struggles within the state structure and state identity-based tensions between different groups affected Turkey's foreign policy behaviors. The rise of political Islam, the resurrection of the Islamic movements, and the trans-nationalization of the Diyanet were important indicators, but Turkey did not deviate from its historical priorities: security and Westernization.

Maybe, under the Özal administration, the foreign policy preferences of Turkey started to change. Experts call these policies neo-Ottomanism. I am not sure whether this definition is a proper one but, if yes, I can say that Özal's neo-Ottomanism was a combination of different factors: culture, the economy, Islam, nationalism, and global changes. Therefore, Özal's neo-Ottomanism was not directly Islamist, but had ethno-religious components which facilitated its definition as an early version of neo-Ottomanism, which would be followed by the Erdogan-Davutoglu version. Indeed, it was a new attempt to re-construct Turkey's state identity.

But right now, all of these preferences have been changing under the influence of Erdogan's type of authoritarianism and instrumentalization of Islam and its combination with the Eurasianist mindsets: ethno-nationalist and adventurist policies. It was not like this around two decades ago. The AKP period has witnessed an unprecedented wave of change in Turkey. Coming to power in 2002 as a single-party government against the pressures of the Turkish Armed Forces and bureaucratic tutelage, the AKP has changed both itself and the country at critical junctures. Achieving power with an effective leadership, the support of the lower-middle class, and a pro-European Union discourse, the AKP followed non-confrontational policies to avoid the wrath of the Kemalist guardianship mechanism, that is to say the well-established bureaucratic tutelage of Turkey. In these periods, the Gülen Movement

was the strongest unconventional collation partner of the AKP. And this unconventional interest-based collation started implementing a more proactive foreign policy all around the world. Yet, the interest-based war between these two groups, the loss of momentum in the Turkish economy, rising authoritarianism in line with global developments, the Arab Spring, the AKP's harsh reaction to the Gezi protests in the summer of 2013, and a bloody coup attempt in 2016 pushed Erdogan to make a collation with Eurasianist.

Under these circumstances, authoritarianism at home, Islamisation in the discourse, and ethno-nationalist anti-Western policy implementations are the main challenges of Turkey's foreign policy. These new policy preferences have brought new pillars for Turkish foreign policy; reactive, Islamist, ethno-nationalist, and non-Western. Indeed, these are quite nascent concepts and situations, since Turkey is a very big and historical ship, and no-one can change its route very easily and quickly. Yet, even though Turkey is still a mid-power country, it has started to see itself as a big power. In this regard, it has left its security priorities. Currently, Turkey's main priority is to be one of the leading actors within the regions – namely Middle East and Mediterranean – with kind of reactive and not well-calculated policies. Beyond that, Turkey does not consider other important and big actors in these regions and all of these have been ending up with a shift from its historical allies, such as the US and other Western countries, to other countries like China and Russia. I think all of these are quite risky issues.

Wikistrat: You mentioned some recent changes in Turkish foreign policy, so how would you say that the failed coup attempt in 2016 impacted the direction of Turkey's foreign policy?

A.Erdi: Well, the failed coup attempt has affected everything in Turkey and, of course, it has dramatically changed the domestic political dynamics and, in the AKP period, the small gap between domestic politics and foreign policy has got lost. In this regard, the coup attempt has directly affected the nature of Turkish foreign policy. Or, I would say it has ascertained the details of the Erdogan and Eurasianist unconventional collation which started to form in late 2013. But, I should remind you that neither the AKP nor Erdogan have a perfect, bright history regarding interest-based unconventional coalitions. For example, the Gülen-Erdogan or Liberals-AKP one. Indeed, in the current case various different dynamics have been playing different roles. But now, it seems that the leading figures of the Eurasianist groups spoiled the game during the hideous coup attempt and have started to influence foreign policy decisions. One of the outcomes of this influence is to become anti-Western, which is quite

compatible with Erdogan's desire to be the leader of global ummah. Is this sustainable? I do not think so, but it has been currently affecting the policies dramatically, such as in the issues of S-400.

But again, let me say that Turkey is a big ship, and it is hard to change its state identity and policy preferences. Indeed, the last term of the AKP affected Turkey's foreign policy approach a lot but could not manage to change it totally. But what did the AKP and its new unconventional coalition do to Turkey? They have made Turkey an ambivalent actor with reactive foreign policy approaches.

Wikistrat: Okay. And also, in light of the recent purchase and arrival of the S-400 missile system from Russian to Turkey, how would you characterize Turkey's view of Russia today? Should they be defined as allies or pragmatic partners? How does that relationship really work today?

A.Erdi: I think it is a highly pragmatic partnership and also a kind of an obligation and a price for Turkey to move away from the Western camp. Actually, the relation between Russia and Turkey has been balanced and pragmatic since the Ottoman period. But now, I think Turkey's hand is not very strong, since the domestic political coalitions and struggles. The economy is shrinking, Turkey's relations with the EU member states and the US are quite problematic and all of these issues are both the reasons and results of the current Turkey-Russia relations. Let me remind you, Moscow and Ankara were on the brink of military confrontation late in 2015 after Turkey shot down a Russian jet. Less than a year later, they had mended ties and decided to cooperate on Syria and a range of other issues, including defense and nuclear energy. But we very much know that their geopolitical and state identity-based norms are incompatible. In there, we have to ask that questions; what happened after late 2015-early 2016 and has Turkey started to establish close relations with Russia? I think the answer lies, again, in the 2016 coup attempt and Russian's support of the Erdogan regime in terms of intelligence. Of course, as an academic, I cannot know the details of this kind of complicated, deep state relationship, but my general assumption is that if someone wants to understand the current dynamics of Russia-Turkey relations, it an obligatory issue to scrutinize the details of the failed 2016 coup attempt which was organized mostly by the Gulenists.

But, let me conclude that even though it currently seems that the relations between Russia and Turkey are quite splendid, the historical background, the two country's different state identities, power norms, and geopolitical desires do not imply cooperation for tomorrow.

Wikistrat: So where does that leave Turkey-US relations at the moment?

A.Erdi: This is even more complicated than Turkey-Russia relations. Most of the experts argue that the United States and one of its long-time NATO allies, Turkey, are suffering a complete breakdown in their relationship — and it's unclear if it will ever recover. I totally agree with the "suffering" part of the story, but I do believe the "unclear recovery process". First of all, we should note two points. First, contrary to Turkey-Russia relations, Turkey and the US have a long and solid history of strategic partnerships, both in the region and all around the world. Beyond that, Turkey is one of the leading members of many different international organizations with the US and this has been pushing them to work together. Secondly, we have to understand that Turkey is not the only unstable and "naughty" actor behind the current circumstances of the relationship. The relations have started to burst out because of the conflict between Gulenists and the AKP, since the Gulenist networks tried to influence the American policymakers against the Erdogan administration. At the same time, some of the groups within the US state system tried to use Gulenist bureaucracy to get Erdogan off Turkish politics. After that, the recessive attitude of the US during the coup attempt pushed Turkey toward Russia under the strong impact of Eurasianist groups in the military and in Erdogan's palace.

But, as we know, security concerns have always been at the core of the Turkish-American relationship. And now, there are many issues on Turkey's plate such as Syria, North Iraq, and East Mediterranean and I am not sure Turkey can stay a long-term ally with Russia with all of these issues. At the end of the day, Turkey might turn its face to the US, but indeed, I think we will see more tensions during this process.

Wikistrat: Some of your recent research, I understand, focuses on the use of religion in Turkish foreign policy and how was it being promoted abroad. So how do you see that being used? Is that different from what Turkish foreign policy promoted in the past?

A.Erdi: Actually, I am working three different things at the same time. The first one is my forthcoming book for very early 2021. It scrutinizes the issue of religion's transformative impact on state identity and power norms. It is a study that focuses on Turkey's relations with the Balkans and is based on my doctoral dissertation. Secondly, Dr. Bahar Baser from Coventry University and I are working on Turkey's new diaspora strategies, or I can say that since the very beginning of 2018 we have been working on Turkey's implementation of the ways of transnational repression on its different diaspora groups such as Gulenist, members of the Academics for Peace

and others. In 2018 and sometimes in 2019 we have collected our data and conducted interviews. Hopefully our first article will come up in early 2020. But beyond all of these issues, currently I am reading and writing on "the ambivalence structure of Turkey's religious soft power". Upon Professor Peter Mandaville's and Dr. Shadi Hamid's request, I wrote a short article for Georgetown University's Berkley Center and Brookings Institute's joint project "Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power", and now I am writing my long and comprehensive article for the big meeting in DC in mid-2020. Actually, all of these three interconnected subjects are based on mostly the ambivalence of Turkey's state identity and power norms, at least from my point of view. Very basically, I am standing on Nye's soft power, Appleby's ambivalence of the sacred, and Jeffrey Haynes's famous concept of religious soft power. Now Jeffrey Haynes and I are writing another article, but it is more theoretical and more complicated than my own one. Indeed, it is a great privilege to work with him. Regarding my solo project, I would say that the novelty is actually based on the definition of the ambivalence religious soft power and its capacity to adapt to the different dimensions of the state identity and policy preferences. Most people think that I am mostly working on Diyanet, but this project has many different layers.

In 2005, Nye noted merely that religion is a double-edged sword as an American soft power resource, and that how it cuts depends on who is wielding it. In passing, he also stated that some organized religious movements have possessed soft power for centuries, noting their missionary efforts as the wielding of religious soft power. After Nye, Haynes — as one of the first scholars to talk about the relation between religion and soft power — noted that religious soft power involves encouraging actors to change their political behaviors. But how? I argue that religious soft power can be normatively seen both 'positively' and 'negatively' according to the socio-political circumstances and the aims of the actors seeking to wield religious soft power. In here, I use Appleby's ambivalence of the sacred; not religion, but the actors and circumstances are the main determinants. For instance, on the one hand Turkey's instrumentalization of Islam and the various religiously oriented state apparatuses has been very well received in countries such as Kosovo and North Macedonia because most of the elites and Muslim components have viewed Turkey's initiatives as an investment in service of the global ummah. On the other hand, in certain other countries such as in Sweden, France, Germany and the USA, where the Gülen Movement and other opposition groups are in exile, Turkey's transnational state apparatuses are perceived to export Turkish domestic conflicts and increase Islamist discourses within diaspora communities. Furthermore, these religious soft power apparatuses have started to

involve themselves in the host countries' domestic politics. This increasingly authoritarian and overtly Islam-based policy of Turkey, it seems, cannot simply be regarded as benign religious soft power or public diplomacy, so I am using the title "Turkey: An Ambivalent Religious Soft Power". Yes, I may say that this ambivalence has many different targets and aims.

Wikistrat: Who is the target audience of these efforts? Is it the diasporas, or is it mainly European countries or the United States or other, non-Muslim countries?

A.Erdi: I wouldn't say there is a hierarchy about these targets, but there are many targets. The first target is the diaspora members of Turkey. But both pro-AKP members of the diaspora and current and potential "traitors" such as Gulenist, pro-Kurdish groups and Alevi groups. And, indeed, it is hard to define the new policy preferences of Turkey in the framework of public diplomacy and/or the influential use of religion, within the boundaries of the concept of soft power. Because specific groups seem to be targeted in the host countries rather than the whole society, the consent that this new policy creates is strongly relevant to the sense of belonging, the behavior, and the beliefs of individuals. These policies cannot be defined, then, simply in the framework of religious soft power, because economic incentives and sanctions are used alongside religion. Beyond that, it is difficult to claim that Turkey is a sharp power with its authoritarian practices and failures to accomplish its targets. On the whole, Turkey is an unpredictable, uncertain, and ambiguous power, and this is reflected in its new identity in the world. In this regard, the main target is the diasporas, secondly Muslims of the world. And the country targets are accordingly to these dynamics.

Wikistrat: Very interesting. Is there anything else you'd like to add on Turkish foreign policy or any other entity issues?

A.Erdi: Well, I might say that, even though the current circumstances are quite gloomy, I am very optimistic about the future and I am in full belief of the citizens of Turkey. I am sure Turkey will find its true path soon and I think the previous local elections were the signal of that; we are at the very beginning of the establishment of "the newest Turkey". But, indeed, to build this "newest Turkey", the people of Turkey, political actors, and public figures have to understand the dynamics and critical junctions which have led to the downfall process of the Erdogan's "new Turkey".

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