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From the Editors

Dear Friends,

The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies is proud to present the November 2017 issue of our monthly publication, *Turkeyscope*. In this issue, Dr. Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak discusses Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's use of grandiose building projects as a means of emulating Turkey's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and for laying the groundwork for future political alliances.

Ben Mendales contributed to this month's issue as assistant editor.

My Rival Is My Teacher: Erdoğan in the Footsteps of Atatürk

Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak

By achieving consecutive election victories since 2002, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has enjoyed unprecedented electoral success. If Erdoğan defeats his rivals once more in the scheduled 2019 elections, he would then be able to remain in office until 2024. Significantly, this victory would enable Erdoğan to surpass the tenure of the founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who ruled Turkey from 1920-1938. It would also enable him to rule Turkey during the 2023 centennial celebrations.

For many Turks, Erdoğan is no ordinary statesman. Some of his supporters have even equated him with Atatürk, a practice very apparent when they use re-formulated Kemalist slogans, such as "Adam İzindeyiz" (Mensch, we follow in your footsteps), instead of "Atam İzindeyiz" (Father, we follow in your footsteps). Erdoğan has encouraged this comparison, and has frequently contended that he is the founder of the 'New Turkey.' In the past, such statements had been criticized as hollow populism. After all, Erdoğan's Turkey was not forced to fight for its survival, as had Atatürk's.

For this reason, the 2016 failed coup attempt has played into the hands of the Turkish President. By portraying the resistance against the coup perpetrators as a veritable war of independence for 'New Turkey,' Erdoğan has seized what he views to be an opportunity for long-term political gain. To that end, he has declared June 15th as a national holiday of "Democracy and National Unity."

Not content with mere proclamations, the Turkish president has taken concrete steps to preserve July 15th within the Turkish collective national memory. These steps include the erection of monuments, the re-naming of Istanbul's famous Bosphorus bridge as the "July 15 Martyrs' Bridge," and the declaration of Sgt. Major of the Infantry Ömer Halisdemir, killed during the coup, as a national hero. Inevitably, these acts are evocative of Atatürk's tactics, which created a secular religion of sorts by proclaiming April 23, May 19, October 29, and August 30 to be Turkish national holidays. The promotion of Halisdemir, moreover, recalls the story of Lieutenant Mustafa Fehmi Kubilay, who was beheaded in 1930 by an angry Islamist mob in İzmir's Menemen district. Kubilay was later declared to be a "Martyr of the Revolution" by the Kemalist leadership, and a monument was erected in his honor.

Despite all these similarities, differences between Atatürk and Erdoğan remain. During his term of office, Atatürk personally approved the erection of his statues throughout Turkey. The first was built in 1926, in Istanbul's Sarayburnu district. That same year, another was erected in the city of Konya and the famous Victory Monument in Ankara's Ulus Square followed in 1927. During the period following

the failed coup, Erdoğan's supporters and his party's municipalities attempted to memorialize their leader by constructing monuments to him in various provinces, such as Şanlıurfa and Kocaeli. However, unlike Atatürk, Erdoğan asked his supporters to remove them. He adopted an Islamist stance which declared that such statues contradicted the norms and values of the Turkish nation. With this statement, Erdoğan also implicitly de-legitimized Atatürk's statues, while not removing them.¹

Apart from the statues, it is apparent that Erdoğan also adopted Atatürk's model of leaving landmarks as physical reminders for his nation. Unsurprisingly, given the limited money and lack of resources available to post-war Turkey, Atatürk's success in this field is not equivalent to Erdoğan's pharaonic projects. While establishing his nascent country's infrastructure, Atatürk erected numerous institutions and factories throughout the country and turned Ankara into a *bona fide* capital city by building numerous government landmarks. Seeing the results of Atatürk's grand strategy, Erdoğan grasped the importance of "touching the lives of the millions" by providing them services and at the same time by erecting pharaonic, grandiose projects which would serve to engrave his name in the history of the nation.

To understand the Turkish president's desire to micro-manage, an examination of Erdoğan's past service as mayor of Istanbul (1994-1997) may prove instructive. In a manner far exceeding any other Turkish prime minister or president, Erdoğan continuously inaugurates new landmarks, public buildings, highways, subway lines, and the like. Moreover, he is not content with the prospect of having his municipalities take credit for these changes, and seeks to maximize his interests by making his name essentially interchangeable with his Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP). The most prominent evidence for this policy was his statement made on December 11, 2013, when he inaugurated 113 different landmarks all over Turkey:

*We are a government that produces its own landmarks. We are a government that holds its own inaugurations. Wherever you go in Turkey, wherever our citizens breathe, you will surely see our power, our government's landmarks, and service... Our objective is to leave a legacy, a landmark, and a trace under this blue sky.*²

Since then, Erdoğan has not changed his strategy. The Çamlıca Hill Mosque (2016), which changed Istanbul's silhouette, and the Taksim Square Mosque, which is intended to open its gates during Ramadan 2018, are both examples of two concrete victories that Erdoğan has registered against the secular elite. Prior to the AKP's ascension to power, the construction of both houses of worship had been deeply contested during the 1990s. Erdoğan's vengeance against these elites, combined with his desire not to be overshadowed by Atatürk and the secular elite's legacy, became ever more evident when he decided to leave the Çankaya Presidential Residence for

his grandiose “White Palace” presidential compound in Ankara. By erecting this complex, Erdoğan clearly ushered in the beginning of a new era in Turkish history.

Taken alone, however, this was insufficient. Besides building monuments and symbols of sovereignty, as had Atatürk, Erdoğan also attempted to “touch the people’s lives” in order to increase his own popularity. As a proud “Ottoman descendant,” he began to seek to actualize the grandiose projects of the Ottoman Sultans’ themselves. For example, the Marmara Sea underground metro tunnel project, the “Marmaray,” which connects the Asian neighborhoods of the city with the historic Old City peninsula, was first mentioned by Sultan Abdülmecit and was later designed by Abdülhamit II. Under Erdoğan, the system was implemented and became operational in 2013. The success of this project also led the way for the “Eurasia Motor Vehicles Tunnel” in 2016; this was another project designed by Abdülhamit II and brought to fruition by Erdoğan.

Besides these “invisible” but effective transportation solutions, Erdoğan’s neo-Ottoman construction policy reached its peak with the completion of the Yavuz Sultan Selim and Osman Gazi suspension bridges, which were built in 2016 on the Bosphorus and the Gulf of Istanbul, respectively. The Erdoğan administration went even further and announced the beginning of the “Çanakkale 1915” [Gallipoli 1915] bridge to connect Asia and Europe, also on the Dardanelles. While these bridges did not belong to the Ottoman Sultans, their names are nevertheless very meaningful in the context of Turkish foreign policy. The first Ottoman Caliph, who sought to dominate the Muslim world, was Yavuz Sultan Selim, and Osman Gazi was the founder of the Ottoman Empire. Meanwhile, Gallipoli was the site of a 1915 victory against the Christian West. Taken together, the choice of names are indicative of the neo-Ottoman public discourse.³

While these pharaonic projects sought to find a solution to Istanbul’s chronic traffic problems, Erdoğan’s crown jewel may yet be the “Canal Istanbul” project, first devised by Suleiman the Magnificent, which seeks to open a new waterway between the Black Sea and the Marmara Sea, and a new city to be founded near the heart of the new canal.⁴ Meanwhile, a large new airport is being constructed between the site of the proposed canal and Istanbul. While all are, as yet, unnamed, it is likely that their future names will follow the neo-Ottoman pattern, while Istanbul’s current Atatürk International Airport will be shut down.⁵

Despite the rise of the anti-Kemalist, neo-Ottoman trend, Erdoğan’s recent November 6 statement on the re-construction of the “Atatürk Cultural Center” (Atatürk Kültür Merkezi – AKM) surprised the masses. The AKM is located at Istanbul’s most important public site, Taksim Square. With his latest statement, Erdoğan made it clear that he had decided not to change the name of the cultural center, contrary to what had been believed. Going even further, Erdoğan claimed to end the monopoly on Atatürk, while complaining of his legacy’s abusers.⁶ Since the day it was shut down in 2008,

the building became the subject of ideological tension between Kemalists and Erdoğan supporters, due to the rumors that it would be renamed after reconstruction. The friction between the two sides reached its peak in 2013 during the Gezi Park riots, when AKM became the center of the protests. The protestors put their large flags and posters on the AKM's front façade,⁷ as the Erdoğan administration sought to erase the traces of the Kemalist legacy in the Gezi Park area of Taksim Square, by rebuilding the Ottoman Gunners Fort.

Bearing all this in mind, it seems that Erdoğan is using his grandiose projects not only to be remembered by the Turkish people but also to help him create post-election alliances. 2019 will be the first time that Turkish citizens will cast their votes in municipal, parliamentary, and presidential elections in the same year. A surprise result in the parliamentary elections may well paralyze the whole system. Therefore, it seems that as a savvy political player the Turkish president is taking all necessary precautions, by forming future political pacts to strengthen his position in Ankara. He does so by using landmarks and monuments as an important trump card, eliminating fundamental objections to the formation of potential partnerships, because the ends justify the means.

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¹ Erdoğan, heykellerinden rahatsız: Değerlerimize ters, bir daha olmasın, Diken, September 13, 2017, <http://www.diken.com.tr/erdogan-heykellerinden-rahatsiz-degerlerimize-ters-bir-daha-olmasin/>

² "Başbakan Erdoğan. 113 Eserin Toplu Açılış Töreni Konuşması", YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKJG9-7SUu0>

³ Üç padişahın hayali gerçek oldu, Türkiye, July 30, 2014, <http://www.turkiyegazetesi.com.tr/gundem/174803.aspx>

⁴ Kanuni düşünmüştü... İşte Kanal İstanbul'dan görüntüler, Hürriyet, April 27, 2011, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/kanuni-dusunmustu-iste-kanal-istanbuldan-goruntuler-17649190>

⁵ "Atatürk Havalimanı 2018'de yolculara kapatılacak", CNN Türk, April 23, 2016, <https://www.cnnturk.com/ekonomi/turkiye/ataturk-havalimani-2018de-yolculara-kapatilacak>

⁶ Erdoğan: Yeni Atatürk Kültür Merkezi 2019'un ilk çeyreğinde bitecek, BBC Türkçe, November 6, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-41885880>

⁷ Taksim Atatürk K lt r Merkezi  n nde Gezi Parkı i in buluřtuk, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TvBVtvXb3l4>