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Erdoğan's "Mini Empire" in Libya and Syria¹

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Recent clashes between Turkish and Turkish-backed Syrian forces and the Assad regime in Syria's Idlib province have brought to question the viability of Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's regional pacts with Russian leader Vladimir Putin. While the latter is focused on consolidating Assad's control across Syria, he also wants to get along with Erdoğan as Erdoğan with him.

His rapport with Putin notwithstanding, Erdoğan has significant challenges at home where the Turkish economy is slowing down, and overseas where Turkey's military is over-stretched, from Syria to Libya.

This is not what Erdoğan expected when he launched an ambitious foreign policy agenda earlier in the 2010s to make Turkey a Middle East star-power nation. Animated by economic growth that he delivered in the first decade of the twenty-first century,² after consolidating his power at home in the 2011 elections in which his Justice and Development Party (AKP) won 49.9 percent of the popular vote, Erdoğan started seeking greatness for Turkey, while also exploiting voters' interest in a more assertive role for Ankara in regional and world affairs. Erdoğan has, furthermore, been acting to secure Turkey's interests in countries such as Syria and Libya, where he has been successfully aligning his desire to get along with Russian leader Vladimir Putin along with Ankara's broader national security goals.

As prime minister of Turkey between 2003 and 2014, and president since 2014, Erdoğan is the most powerful Turkish politician since 1950 when the country held its first free and fair elections.³ However, the failed July 2016 coup attempt against Erdoğan, a nefarious plot in which he faced an assassination attempt, left the Turkish leader feeling vulnerable.

Putin called Erdoğan soon after the coup to wish him well and offer support.⁴ Turkey's traditional Western allies, including the United States, were delayed in reaching out to Erdoğan after the failed putsch, and the wide net of persecution Erdoğan cast over his opponents following the coup attempt in 2016 has made him broadly unwelcome in European capitals.

Since summer 2016, Erdoğan has sought the support of Putin in a nod to the latter's recently-found role as the protector of other threatened leaders globally, such as Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro. Whereas Russia has historically threatened Turkey, Putin, eager to drive a wedge into the NATO alliance, has sought to cultivate his relationship with Erdoğan. In short, starting in 2016, Russia transformed itself from the historic nemesis that bullied Turkey to the nemesis that courts Ankara. This started a process of deal making and détente between Turkey and Russia, first in Syria, and now in Libya, which also resulted in Erdoğan's decision to purchase the Russian-made S-400 missile defense system.

Syrian Disaster

When Erdoğan authorised the arming of the anti-Assad rebels early in the Syrian Civil War to oust the Assad regime, he almost certainly risked Turkey's newly established soft-power nation status in the Middle East. By engaging in Syria's civil war, Erdoğan also opened Pandora's box against a raft of enemies, namely Peoples Protection Forces (YPG)—an off-shoot of Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a terror-designated entity by Turkey and other NATO members. The frontlines against the Assad regime, moreover, led to conflict with Russia and Iran, two key powers that are Turkey's historic nemesis and competitive adversary in foreign policy, respectively.

In August 2011, the United States called for Assad to resign, leading Erdoğan to believe he had Washington's unconditional backing to go full force into Syria.⁵ The Turkish leader hoped that if he boosted the rebels enough, he could eventually convince the United States to establish "safe havens" in northern Syria, protected by "no-fly zones" enforced by Washington, guarding rebel-held territories, paving the way for a final assault on Damascus to oust the Assad regime.⁶

From the beginning, this ambitious policy faced hurdles. In 2011, Syrian army dissenters who fled to Turkey founded the Free Syrian Army (FSA), a loose network of brigades fighting the Assad regime. Yet, despite efforts to support the Syrian opposition, Turkey's inability to broaden the political arm of the FSA and the FSA's struggle to stand on its own two feet against Assad in the initial years of the war, meant that the Ankara-backed rebels failed to become a formidable force.

Beginning in 2013, Ankara allowed larger numbers of foreign fighters to cross into Syria to join various rebel groups.⁷ There was no ideological test: all those willing to fight Assad were welcome to move through Turkey. By August 2015, following intense U.S. pressure, Turkey agreed to tighten its borders, but by then, thousands of Islamist militants had already reached Syria and Iraq.⁸ These better funded and better armed radicals soon became the dominant faction in the country.

The Battle of Kobane

When the YPG first took control of parts of northern Syria in 2012 with green light from the Assad regime, Turkey was initially not openly hostile to the group. At the time, Ankara was in peace talks with the PKK and was pressuring the Party for Democratic Unity (PYD), the YPG's political wing, to end its bid for autonomy in Syria and to cut their ties with the PKK and the Assad regime.⁹ This effort, however, fell apart: in mid-July 2012, Turkish-backed rebel forces began clashing with the YPG.¹⁰

In September 2014, ISIS launched a campaign to capture YPG-controlled Kobane in northern Syria. Erdoğan, who refused to help the YPG in Kobane, grossly miscalculated his decision. Following global outcry to protect the people of Kobane against ISIS, the US-led coalition launched aerial attacks on ISIS near Kobane, followed by airdrops of ammunition and arms to the YPG, against Erdoğan's wishes.¹¹

After the siege of Kobane ended in October 2014 with a successful YPG-led defence against ISIS, the YPG's utilitarian value increased in U.S. President Obama's eyes. Meanwhile, as talks between Turkey and the U.S. to form a Turkey-backed militia to fight ISIS stretched on and on, Obama lost patience, and eventually decided that he had found a reliable partner in the YPG.¹² This was Erdoğan's biggest misstep in foreign policy to date: he had just skipped an opportunity to deliver a crushing blow to the jihadist group together with the U.S., and simultaneously prevent further growth of the budding YPG-U.S. relationship.

After the Turkish-PKK peace talks broke down in July 2015, the YPG climbed up fast in Turkey's threat perception. Turkey and America ended up developing completely divergent policies and priorities in Syria. Ankara saw the YPG as its primary threat, Assad as secondary and ISIS as tertiary, while Washington considered ISIS as its primary threat in Syria, followed by Iran and, lastly, the Assad regime as a distant third.

Later events would help consolidate this alignment. In November 2015, Turkey shot down a Russian fighter jet that had violated its airspace from Syria. Following the crisis, Moscow slapped hefty sanctions on Ankara, and threatened to attack Turkish operations in Syria.¹³ Erdoğan called for NATO missile defence systems to be placed in Turkey to protect it against Moscow failed, but this failed to produce a strong show of support from Ankara's transatlantic allies—at least as Erdoğan saw it.

Enter the 2016 Coup Attempt

On a bustling Friday night in Istanbul on July 15, 2016, a cabal of Turkish military officers attempted a coup d'état, which quickly collapsed amid poor planning and public resistance, resulting in almost 300 deaths. As mentioned earlier, Putin called Erdoğan the day after the coup attempt and wished him well, days before Erdoğan received a similar message from the U.S.—and not from Obama, but his secretary of state, John Kerry. In fact, many in Erdoğan's circles believe to this day that the West's condemnation of the coup was weak, and too late, fueling theories about the involvement of Washington and NATO in the unsuccessful coup attempt.¹⁴ Boosted by Erdoğan's rhetoric, anti-Americanism in Turkey reached a new level in 2016.

Since then, Putin has softened his policy toward Ankara in Syria, expertly noting and taking advantage of growing anti-Western sentiment in Turkey. While the United States and Europe voiced concerns over rampant human rights violations committed amid Erdoğan's post-coup political purges, Moscow stood by him. The frequency of phone calls between Erdoğan and Putin spiked, surpassing the frequency of calls between Erdoğan and Trump, signalling a new era in the Erdoğan-Putin relationship.¹⁵

Erdoğan's post-2016 move has been to broker ad hoc deals with Putin. Almost every time the leaders speak, Putin takes something from Erdoğan in Syria in return for allowing him to undermine the YPG.

In 2016, when Erdoğan wanted to send Turkish troops into Syria to take the Jarablus area from ISIS and drive a wedge between YPG-held territories in northern Syria, he had to accept Moscow's (and Damascus') assault on rebel-held east Aleppo. In the end, Erdoğan got Jarablus, while Putin took east Aleppo through Turkish pressure on the rebels to abandon the city and Ankara's behind-closed-door mediation between the rebels and the Assad regime.

Similarly, Putin gave Erdoğan the green light in 2018 for Ankara to operate its air force over the YPG's Afrin enclave in northwestern Syria, and then occupy it, in exchange for Erdoğan's tacit approval for an Assad-regime assault on east Ghouta.

Here is the problem for Erdoğan: Putin is eventually going to help Damascus take over control of the Syrian territory. This means that it is not a question of if, but when, Putin will ask Turkey to vacate the Syrian territory that it occupies. However, Erdoğan will have some leverage over Moscow as well. Putin wants to bring the war in Syria to an end through his own political track, the Astana Process, and needs Ankara's participation on this platform for it to have any kind of international legitimacy.

Limited Success in Libya

When Libya descended into civil war in 2014, Erdoğan threw his support behind the mainly political Islamist factions in Tripoli's western-based "Dawn Coalition," which opposed Libya's internationally recognised "Dignity Coalition" led by General Khalifa Haftar in Tobruk in the east.¹⁶

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and his ally, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), worried about the ascent of political Islam in Libya next door to Egypt (and eager to undermine Erdoğan), were quick to assist the Tobruk government; they carried out air strikes aimed at the Tripoli factions.

Turkey signed two agreements with Tripoli in November 2019: a memorandum of understanding on providing the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli with arms, training, and military personnel; and a maritime agreement delineating Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) in the Mediterranean waters separating the two countries.¹⁷

In December 2019, Erdoğan announced that he was willing to deploy troops in Libya if the GNA requested it.¹⁸ He reiterated the offer during a December 15 meeting with GNA Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj in Ankara¹⁹—a visit that arose after Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) renewed its push to take Tripoli by force.

On January 2, Turkey's parliament authorized the deployment of troops to support the GNA.²⁰ As of January 2020, around 80 Turkish military personnel are stationed in Tripoli as part of a train-and-equip program. One unit has been deployed to operate the radio jammer systems sent to the GNA by Turkey to jam Tripoli's airspace.²¹

Libya has emerged as a focal point of Ankara's foreign policy, which seemingly regards the country as an arena for Turkish proxy competition against Egypt and the UAE, and vice versa. At the same time, Libya's GNA has become increasingly dependent on Ankara for military reasons—namely, a lack of other allies willing to provide arms capable of countering the LNA's Emirati-supplied drones, and the arrival of Russian mercenaries who added new technology and precision to Haftar's war against Tripoli.

Countering the “East Med Bloc”

Ankara’s Libya policy also stems from its isolation in the East Mediterranean, which has gradually worsened since the rupture of Turkish-Israeli ties in 2010 and Erdoğan’s regional policy miscalculations during the Arab Spring uprisings. On the latter front, his support for Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood in 2011-2012 cost him dearly after that government was ousted by mass protests and replaced with a military administration led by President Sisi, and supported by his allies in Abu Dhabi and Riyadh.

Soon after coming to power, Sisi opened talks with Greece to delineate their maritime economic areas. He then held a three-way summit in November 2014 to promote a deal for supplying natural gas to Egypt from undersea fields off the coast of Cyprus. Cairo also hosted the inaugural meeting of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum earlier this year, notably excluding Turkey. Egypt has also been conducting joint air exercises with Greece since 2015, with Cypriot forces participating in 2018. Separately, they carried out three rounds of joint exercises in Israel earlier this year.

These initiatives have pitted Ankara against an emerging coalition of old and new adversaries across the East Mediterranean, mainly Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, and Israel. Given its cool-to-hostile relations with these states, Ankara is alarmed by the rate at which they have come together in strategic cooperation.

Ankara’s new maritime agreement with Tripoli was forged in part to counter such cooperation. The November 28 accord established a virtual maritime axis between Dalaman on Turkey’s southwest coast and Darnah on Libya’s northeast coast (far from the GNA’s practical area of control). In Erdoğan’s view, drawing this line will allow him to cut into the emerging Cypriot-Egyptian-Greek-Israeli maritime bloc, while simultaneously pushing back against Egypt and the UAE’s pressure on the GNA.

Potential Repercussions inside Libya

Cairo and Abu Dhabi have vastly increased their support to Haftar’s latest offensives, including through Emirati drone-strike technology and operators. Turkey has sought to counter these moves by providing the GNA with drones of its own, as well as additional weapons and armored personnel carriers. As noted by a recent UN report, all of these multiparty weapons transfers have been conducted in blatant disregard of the Security Council’s arms embargo in Libya.²²

Although Europe and the United States have warned the GNA that forming closer relations with Turkey would endanger its support in the West, authorities in Tripoli felt they had no alternative after eight months of renewed fighting. GNA military losses have increased due to Emirati drone strikes and Russian snipers, while conditions in the capital have worsened as tens of thousands of internally displaced persons seek refuge in Tripoli.

Although Erdoğan and Putin currently back opposing sides in the civil war, their operational track record in Syria speaks volumes about their potential for reaching an understanding in Libya. The two leaders spoke about the Libya situation by phone on December 17, and Putin was in Ankara on January 8 for a meeting focused specifically on that issue, among others.

Recently, Moscow has been playing arsonist and firefighter in Libya: it gave critical advantage to Haftar by deploying mercenaries to boost his forces and providing his troops with technology

to shoot down drones, forcing Tripoli—and Ankara—to bargaining table. Now, Putin will likely force Haftar to agree to Russia's position as Libya's "peacemaker" by pulling some crucial support away from him. What is more, Putin seems to be using Libya to align Turkey with the Russian position in Syria. On January 13, during a Libya summit, Turkish and Syrian intelligence chiefs met in Moscow, underscoring Putin's desire to get Ankara to shake Assad's hand and wrap up the conflict in Syria on terms favorable to Russia and Damascus.²³

Conclusion: Erdoğan's "Empire"

As of 2020, Erdoğan's Middle East policy has had mixed results. He has failed to shape the outcome of events in Syria, where his opponent, the Assad regime, has overwhelmed Turkey-backed rebels, with support from Russia and Iran. He has also failed so far to shape the outcome of the conflict in Libya to Turkey's clear advantage. In both conflicts, Erdoğan's policies have also resulted in geopolitical troubles, putting Ankara at odds with Turkey's adversaries, Moscow and Tehran in Syria, and Cairo, Abu Dhabi, and Moscow in Libya. To alleviate his challenges in Libya and Syria alike, Erdoğan has decided to make deals with Putin, but also becoming ever more reliant on the Russian leader to achieve his goals in both places.

The Erdoğan-Putin relationship notwithstanding, it is fair to say that Erdoğan's policies have not made Turkey a star-power nation in the Middle East: In 2020, Ankara is also left with no Middle Eastern friends—with the exception of Qatar and non-state Hamas.

But, as an astute politician, Erdoğan deserves credit on two accounts: firstly his ability to line up Turkey's broader national security interests in Syria and Libya with his desire to get along with Putin. And secondly, his ability to leverage Ankara's ties with Moscow and Washington to score Turkey gains in northwest and northeast Syria (where the October 2019 Turkish incursion entitled "Peace Spring" gave Ankara a bridgehead against the YPG in this area, as well as dealing a blow to the U.S.-YPG relationship), respectively.

Overall, whether Erdoğan can continue to leverage the U.S. and Russia in Syria against each other, and flex Ankara's muscles in Libya depends on the health of Turkey's economy. Since 2018, the economy has shown signs of weakness, including currency crises and a 2019 recession. If Turkey suffers an economic meltdown, it will be hard for Erdoğan to maintain Ankara's current stance in Syria and Libya. He will have to turn his attention to the country's domestic troubles. Otherwise, expect Erdoğan to continue to play an interventionist role in Syria and Libya, partly due to his rapport with Putin and partly due to the construction of his mini "empire" in these two countries.

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