

RESEARCH ARTICLES

The Foreign Policy Implications of Erdoğanism

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Abstract

The longevity of Erdoğan's political dominance that allowed him to change the structure of the Turkish Republic in 2017-2018 cannot be explained only in political or economic terms, but also in terms of cultural identity and ideology. Erdoğan is the anti-Kemal. Erdoğan as the head of his Turkish Islamist revolution succeeded -almost bloodlessly and within a period of about 16 years- in overturning the Kemalist structure of power that had been built precisely to prevent the rise of an Islamist party to power. The fact that the dismantling of Kemalism took 16 years and was not achieved through a popular revolution, as was the case of Iran in 1978-1980, or an armed uprising, as was attempted in Egypt or Algeria between 1992-1997, does not mean that Erdoğan's revolution was less Islamic or less revolutionary in scope and ambition.

Emphatically after 2016, Erdoğan completely dismantled the Kemalist 'levers of power' by replacing Kemalism with an Islamist-Ultrnationalist

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ideology that is now embraced by the great majority of the Turkish political forces and inspired by the work of Necmettin Erbakan and, primarily, Necip Fazıl Kısakürek. Erdoğanism follows the same ideological imperatives and is fundamentally revisionist from a geostrategic point of view. The dissolution of Kemalism at home is also accompanied by the dynamic revision of the Treaty of Lausanne abroad, as all Turkish Islamists have historically desired and as it is already being applied on land and sea against Iraq, Syria, Cyprus, and Greece, with an increasing rate of audacity and aggression that is set to continue in the coming years.

Keywords

Turkish Islamism, Erdoğan, Erdoğanism, Necmettin Erbakan, Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, Mavi Vatan

1. Erdoğan as an Islamic Revolutionary and the Dismantling of Kemalism

Comprehending the political ideology of any government provides significant insights into the perceptions shaping its foreign policy decisions. Even if structural factors -such as the regional and international balance of power, the country's domestic political system, or the country's memberships in international organisations- intervene to mitigate or curtail the ability of any given government to translate its ideological predilections to specific diplomatic initiatives, as was, i.e., the case of the SYRIZA-ANEL government of 2015 which decided to sustain

and even expand the pro-Israeli rapprochement of its predecessors,¹ ideology remains an important guiding factor in the formulation and explanation of foreign policy choices.

Even within mature democracies, where there is a clear division of powers and a strong system of checks and balances, as is the case of the USA, the ideological formation of the chief executive, his party, and his immediate entourage, may result in radically different foreign policy approaches over even crucial international security issues such as the stability of the Middle East. In this respect, the liberal approach of Barack Obama, who experimented with the acceptance of the rise of Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated parties in the Middle East after 2011 and advocated a rapprochement with Iran -symbolized by the 5+1 agreement of July 2015 over its nuclear program- is diametrically contrasted with the Realpolitik approach of Donald Trump, who toned down the democratisation rhetoric of his predecessor in favour of the region's political stability that would be centred on the reaffirmation of the US-Saudi strategic alliance and the anti-Iranian rapprochement of Israel with several Arab Gulf governments that were exemplified in the Abraham Accords of 2020.²

¹ Aristotle Tziampiris, *The Emergence of the Greek-Israeli Cooperation*, (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2015), p.137 and Mark Regev, 'The Evolution of Israel-Greece Ties, from Enemies to Allies', *Jerusalem Post*, 28 July 2022, available at <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-713376> (last accessed 3 February 2024).

² As Gilles Kepel notes, 'whereas Barack Obama saw in the empowerment of the Muslim Brotherhood, supported by Qatar and Turkey, and the return of Iran at the international scene, the fixed components of a new world that resulted from the Arab Spring, a world where he pursued a policy of engagement, Donald Trump did not trust these novel partnerships. He returned to the basis of American policy by increasing favorite gestures towards his traditional allies and expressing his disbelief towards his yesterday enemies towards whom his predecessor had extended his hand', Gilles Kepel, *Sortir du Chaos*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2018), 399.

There are, of course, cases where the ideological character of a regime dictates all aspects of its functioning, both internal and external, as is particularly the case with revolutionary states. It is impossible to understand Soviet foreign policy without understanding Leninism, as much as it is impossible to interpret Iranian diplomacy without studying Khomeinism and Turkish foreign policy without understanding Kemalism. The more autocratic the state is, the more important it becomes to understand the leader's philosophical worldview or *Weltanschauung*. Mao's Red Book or Qaddafi's Green Book are two clear examples in this regard. When it comes to understanding Turkish foreign policy under Erdoğan, it is necessary to analyse the Turkish leader's ideological identify for three simple reasons:

(a) Erdoğan has been the undisputed chief executive directing the fate of his country for more than 20 consecutive years since his first premiership in 2003, winning all regional and national elections since 2002. He is no longer in charge of a government, but of a regime. He has been in a position not only to govern but also to reshape Turkish society through the systematic islamisation of its public and educational administrations that allowed him, through the emaciation of the Kemalist Military and Judiciary bureaucracies, to undertake a program of social re-engineering from the top, exactly as Kemal had done after the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, but in the reverse direction. Kemal established secularism. Erdoğan dismantled it.

(b) Erdoğan and his Islamist AKP party are -and should be- viewed as Islamist Revolutionaries who managed to overturn the Kemalist structure of power that gradually weakened and eventually eliminated, *after the 2016 post-coup purges*, the political autonomy of Kemalism's institutional custodians, namely the

Military and the Judiciary, by replacing Kemalism with a unique Turkish-Islamic ideological synthesis that currently represents the mainstream ideology of the Turkish political elite, not just of Erdoğan himself. This ideological synthesis, which, for lack of a better term, I call Erdoğanism, is quintessentially anti-Western and anti-Semitic in its very origins, going beyond, as we will examine in part 3, the typical anti-Western and anti-secular origins of all former Turkish Islamist parties. As was noted by Cengiz Aktar, ‘the Political Islam which emerged during the Turkish Republic never accepted Westernization. It refused to keep up with the Western example and always considered the West as a rival’.³ Erdoğanism, though, goes beyond this in its antipathy for secular democracies and their ‘virulent’ ideologies that are responsible for the collapse of the late Ottoman Empire.

(c) Erdoğan has drastically altered the structure of power in the Turkish political system towards a unipolar direction through the new constitution which went into effect in 2018 and allows him to concentrate all executive (and, to a certain extent, legislative and judiciary) authority in his hands. He has been therefore -especially since 2016- in a much better position to express his core ideological beliefs and operationalise them in terms of his country’s foreign policy priorities vis-à-vis Turkey’s immediate neighborhood, by claiming a vast geographical *lebensraum* both in land and at sea through the partially successful pursuit of the practical revision of the Lausanne Treaty. The so-called *Mavi Vatan* doctrine that discovered a common Exclusive Economic Zone between Turkey and western Libya, as well as Turkey’s occupation of parts of Northern Syria and

³ Cengiz Aktar, ‘Why did Westernization bankrupt in Turkey?’, in Hercules Millas (ed.), *H Nέα Τουρκία εκ των Έσω* (The New Turkey from Within), (Athens: I. Sideris Publications: 2019), 43.

its successful military intervention in Libya, are the three clearest manifestations of Erdoğan's revisionist strategies following 2016.

President Erdoğan is not known for his ability to hold his tongue. He is actually famous for his vitriolic personal attacks against other world leaders. When responding to international criticism for his third invasion of Syria in 2019, he said, when addressing Egypt's reaction, 'Egypt, you can't talk at all. You are a country with a democracy killer'⁴ while commenting on the EU's opposition by saying 'Hey, European Union, pull yourself together. If you try to label this operation as an occupation ... we will open the gates and send 3.6 million refugees your way'.⁵

When French President Emmanuel Macron noted, in his funeral address of the three Christians killed by a Jihadist radical inside a church, in Nice in October 2019, that 'Islam is in crisis all over the world today', Erdoğan's retort was swift and personal, saying that Macron needed to 'get his mental health checked'. Then the Turkish President accused France of being constitutionally Islamophobic, calling for a global Muslim boycott against French products.⁶ In March 2019, following comments by then Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that 'Israel is a nation state, not of all its citizens but only of the Jewish people',

⁴ Nevzat Devranoglu and Tuvan Gumrukcu, 'Turkey's Erdoğan Lambasts Critics of Syrian Assault in Fiery Speech', *Reuters*, 10 October 2019, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-syria-security-turkey-Erdoğan-idUKKBN1WP1EK> (last accessed 21 March 2024).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Nicole Triantafyllidis, 'Amid the Verbal Barbs, Macron and Turkey's Erdoğan may be Ideal Foes', *France 24*, 06 December 2020, available at <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20201206-amid-the-verbal-barbs-macron-and-turkey-s-Erdoğan-may-be-ideal-foes> (last accessed 22 March 2024).

Erdoğan replied by calling Netanyahu ‘a thief’ and ‘a tyrant massacring Palestinian children’.⁷

In July 2018, following the voting of a law in the *Knesset* characterising Israel a principally Jewish state, Erdoğan commented, in an address to AKP cadres, that:

This measure has shown without leaving the slightest room for doubt that Israel is the world’s most Zionist, fascist and racist state. There is no difference between Hitler’s obsession with the Aryan race and Israel’s understanding that these ancient lands are meant only for Jews. The spirit of Hitler, which led the world to a great catastrophe, has found its resurgence among some of Israel’s leaders.⁸

Unfortunately for Turkey and the stability of its immediate neighborhood, as well as the future of Turkish-Western relations, these rantings are not the expressions of a borderline personality. They constitute the lucid manifestations of the core beliefs of the ruling ideology of the AKP, which are also shared by the wider ultranationalist political spectrum to the right of the AKP currently expressed by the co-governing MHP and the opposition İyi parties. Erdoğan is truly an Islamic Revolutionary who is doing to Turkish society, *ceteris paribus*, what Khomeini did to Iran after 1979, *although there are many structural differences between the two revolutionary processes*.

⁷ ‘Erdoğan Calls Netanyahu “Thief” and “Tyrant” in Fresh Spat’, *TRTWorld*, 13 March 2019, available at <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/Erdoğan-calls-netanyahu-thief-and-tyrant-in-fresh-spat-24908> (last accessed 21 March 2024).

⁸ ‘Israel Rebukes Turkey’s Erdoğan over “Hitler” comparison’, *BBC News*, 24 July 2018, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-44938472> (last accessed 19 March 2024).

Although there are more differences rather than similarities between the two historic personalities, both Erdoğan and Khomeini are revolutionaries in the sense that they aspired to achieve the Islamic re-engineering of their respective societies from the top-down, by destroying -the former gradually, the latter almost instantly- the secular westernising institutions that were considered alien and inimical to a traditional Islamic society. They followed, of course, very different Islamic traditions and the theocratic republic Khomeini envisioned is a unique manifestation of Iranian Shia theology, that has few similarities with Ottoman Islamic tradition. I.e. nowhere in Sunni Islam, Ottoman or otherwise, is the state's senior religious leader in a position to exert the kind of direct political power that the *Leader of the Revolution* exerts over the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Both Erdoğan and Khomeini revolted against the 'moral depravity' and 'nihilistic materialism' of the West in both its capitalist and communist versions, although they followed very different paths in order to achieve their objectives, given the different levels of institutional integration their respective countries had with the West, how quickly they were able to eliminate all meaningful political opposition, and how the different geopolitical conditions encouraged or discouraged the fulfillment of their ambitions. Khomeini faced no serious internal opposition by 1982, less than four years after the Shah fled the country having survived a major international intervention, the Iraqi invasion of 1980-1981.⁹ Moreover Iran was never institutionally integrated to Western geopolitical and financial institutions, although it enjoyed a strong bilateral strategic relationship with the USA.

⁹ Mehran Kamrava, *Triumph and Despair: In Search of Iran's Islamic Republic*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 55-86.

Erdoğan only acquired near-dictatorial powers after the failed coup of 2016, in the 13th year of his role as his country's chief executive and had to impose his own version of an Islamic Revolution in a society that was anchored in western political, military and economic institutions, such as the Council of Europe, NATO and the IMF, while remaining a Candidate Member State of the EU. Erdoğan had to push through his Revolution against the active opposition of the Kemalist and Judiciary bureaucracies that, as late as 2008, almost delegitimised the entire ruling cadre of the AKP party for allegedly violating the secular character of the Turkish Constitution, with the Supreme Court eventually voting in favour of the government by a single vote.¹⁰ Moreover, even after the suppression of the independence of the Judiciary and the emaciation of the Kemalist military bureaucracy¹¹ through the *Ergenekon* and *Balyoz* trials of, respectively, 2008 and 2012, AKP lost the general parliamentary elections of June 2015 along with around 20% of its voters. Erdoğan had to wait for the 'divine opportunity' of the failed coup to fully neutralise his political opponents.

Erdoğan came to office after the Kemalist *ancien régime* had been weakened as a result of a major economic crisis that led Turkey through the Procrustean bed of an IMF bailout program, from 1999 to 2001. Erdoğan did not consolidate his power as a wartime leader having to defend his country and his revolution from a foreign invader as Khomeini had to do against Saddam Hussein from 1980 to 1988. Erdoğan launched, after 2016, three major military invasions in Northern Syria and has openly intervened in the Libyan civil war at the end of

¹⁰ Hercules Millas, 'The Dismantling of the Turkish State', in Millas (ed.), *The New Turkey from Within*, 26-27.

¹¹ Acar Kutay, 'Turkey: The Rise and Fall of the Influence of the Military in Politics', *Politics*, 27 October 2020.

2019, but before 2016 his ‘wars’ were primarily internal and were directed against his secular and by and large institutional Kemalist opponents.

As Soner Cagaptay notes:

Erdoğan has revolutionized Turkish politics since 2003, flooding the country’s political and educational systems with conservative Islam. For conservative and pious Turks, he represents the end of the subjugation of the people’s will in Turkey. The base loves him because he has restored their dignity through his embrace of Islam... Erdoğan has made his supporters proud to be Muslim again.¹²

The fact that Erdoğan followed a different path than Khomeini does not make him less of a revolutionary, since his country was and remains institutionally tied to the West through its membership in NATO and its Customs Union with the EU, and since he *had* to follow a *different doctrinal* example. This may be one of the most important differences between the two most successful Islamist revolutionaries of the last 50 years.

In order to understand how ‘flooded’ Turkey’s educational system is with conservative Islam, it is important to note that, when the AKP was first elected in 2002, a mere 65,000 students studied in imam-hatip schools. That number grew to 658,000 by 2013. In May 2015,¹³ Bilal Erdoğan, the President’s son, who is (informally) in charge of the Türgev foundation that is spearheading the expansion

¹² Soner Cagaptay, *Erdoğan’s Empire: Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East*, (London: I.B.Tauris, 2020), 39-40.

¹³ Svante Cornell, ‘The Islamization of Turkey: Erdoğan’s Education Reforms’, *The Turkey Analyst*, 02 September 2015, available at <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/437-the-islamization-of-turkey-erdo%C4%9Fan%E2%80%99s-education-reforms.html> (last accessed 2 February 2024).

of the imam-hatip schools, announced that the number of students had reached one million. The overall number of imam-hatip schools, founded to educate Islamic preachers, has risen to around 1,700, from 450 in 2002 when the AKP first came to power.¹⁴

Erdoğanism did not merely favour the expansion of imam-hatip schools. Following the failed coup d'état, Erdoğan used his dictatorial powers allowed by the condition of national emergency, in order to launch an unprecedented purge against secular academic and educational institutions. By 2019 this purge resulted in the shutting down of 15 private universities and 934 private schools,¹⁵ leading to the dismissal of 1,557 deans of private and public universities and 21,000 teachers across primary and secondary education schools.¹⁶

Erdoğan's paradigm by drawing on eons of Sunni and Ottoman traditions utilises the *Ulema* as an instrument of state power, not the other way around. Khomeinism essentially equated the state and state power with Shia's *Mullas*, who are placed at the pinnacle of executive power and in positions that control the judiciary and legislative branches while controlling who gets on the ballot of any election, including that for President of the Islamic Republic. No Sunni Sultan would ever commit such 'heresy' and no Ottoman Caliph ever did, since in Sunni Islam the Sultan or Head of State is the defender of the faith (*Caliph*), but not the most senior *Ulema*.

¹⁴ Daren Butler and Birsan Altayli, 'Role of Islam in Turkish Education Fuels Secularist Fears', *Reuters*, 14 December 2023, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/role-islam-turkish-education-fuels-secularist-fears-2023-12-14/> (last accessed 3 February 2024).

¹⁵ Millas (No 11) 30.

¹⁶ 'Turkish Post-Coup Purges Sweep through Education as Thousands of Teachers Lose their Jobs', *Euronews*, 19 July 2019, available at <https://www.euronews.com/2016/07/19/turkey-cancels-licenses-of-21000-private-teachers-removes-15000-state-teachers> (last accessed 2 February 2024).

The Sultan/Caliph appointed the most senior of the Ulema to the office of the Empire's senior jurist (*Şeyhülislām*),¹⁷ who was selected among the senior *qadis* of the great Ottoman cities, but the Sultan did not share spiritual power with him and the *Şeyhülislām* did not share political or military power with the Sultan. In Khomeinism the senior Ulema, or Mullas, *are* in practice the source of ultimate power exemplified by the practically unchecked powers of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution. Yet one common element in both Khomeinism and Erdoğanism is that all real power is concentrated at the hands of the Head of State, with the notable difference that the Turkish President is (so far) elected every five years, whereas the Iranian Supreme Leader only once and by very different constituencies.

Historically, other Turkish politicians who had Islamist inclinations, including Adnan Menderes in the 1950s and Turgut Özal in the 1980s, tried to concentrate power in their hands and their efforts were thwarted by the Turkish military. After 2011, Erdoğan has behaved as an outspoken and unapologetic Islamist. As Cengiz Çandar notes:

The Arab Spring revolutions of 2011 revealed the Islamist phase underneath the veneer of AKP and Erdoğan. As the Arab Spring brought to the forefront the Muslim Brotherhood, and, when the Muslim Brotherhood

¹⁷ In the *Ottoman Empire*, which controlled much of the Sunni Islamic world from the 14th to the 20th centuries, the Grand Mufti was given the title Sheikh ul-Islam. The Ottomans had a strict hierarchy of *ulama*, with the Sheikh ul-Islam holding the highest rank. A Sheikh ul-Islam was chosen by a royal warrant amongst the *qadis* of important cities. The Sheikh ul-Islam had the power to confirm new *sultans*; but once the sultan was affirmed, the sultan retained a higher authority than the Sheikh ul-Islam. See inter alia, Richard W. Bulliet, 'The Shaikh Al-Islām and the Evolution of Islamic Society' (1972) *Studia Islamica*, 35, 53-67; and Selim Deringil, 'Legitimacy Structures in the Ottoman State: The Reign of Abdulhamid II (1876-1909)' (1991) *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 23(3), 345-359.

took over power in Egypt (2011-2013) supported by AKP in Turkey, AKP started to prefer the (self)characterization ‘Islamist’, abandoning the identity of a ‘conservatist democratic’ party it adopted in 2002.¹⁸

What has changed in Turkey, though, after 2018, is the monopolisation of executive power at the hands of the President, whose tenure is currently limited to two consecutive terms, although article 116 (3) of the Turkish Constitution may overrule this limitation as long as the sitting President is able to secure a 3/5 majority of the Parliament (360 votes) in favour or a resolution calling for a general election before the President’s term expires.¹⁹ By 2028, Erdoğan’s regime will have ruled Turkey continually for an entire generation. 25-year-old Turkish citizens have known no other government. No other Turkish leader, including Atatürk and İnönü, could claim such an outstanding accolade. Having destroyed any tangible checks and balances on his power, Erdoğan is now less inhibited than ever before in his quest to accelerate the top to bottom re-islamisation of Turkish society by utilising the powers of an ‘imperial’ presidency that is fully aligned with Erdoğan’s often quoted perception about democracy, uttered almost 25 years ago: ‘Democracy is like a tram. You ride it until you arrive at your destination, then you step off’.²⁰

The fact that Erdoğan’s metaphor equating democracy with a tram dated back to the time of his Istanbul mayorship in 1995 and was told in reference to the rise of Necmettin Erbakan to power, is indicative of how persistent the passenger

¹⁸ Cengiz Çandar notes ‘The New Turkey, the New Nationalism, the Policies for the Middle East and the Kurds’ in Millas (no 4) 59-60.

¹⁹ <http://www.jamesinturkey.com/can-recep-tayyip-Erdoğan-run-for-a-third-term-as-president/>

²⁰ Jenny White, ‘Democracy is like a Tram’, *Turkey Institute*, 14 July 2016, available at <https://www.turkeyinstitute.org.uk/commentary/democracy-like-tram/> (last accessed 2 February 2024).

has been during his long ‘ride’ towards an unchecked presidential authority that has effectively turned the post-1983 multiparty political system of Turkey into a unipolar dominium under his direct control. This Islamic re-empowerment has reversed decades of Kemalism which is -at best- viewed by the AKP, to use the words of none other than former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, as an ill-conceived experiment in ‘westernization that destroyed the Ottoman state, eroding its religious legitimacy and creating a society with a weakened historical consciousness and uprooted identity’.²¹

The terminal station of Erdoğan’s long tram ride towards autocracy has led him, in 2018, to a position where he is simultaneously the Head of the Country, the Armed Forces, the Government, and the ruling AKP party. Erdoğan’s power no longer directly depends on parliamentary majorities since the government is appointed by the President and is subject to him. The President can overrule Parliamentary laws by the invocation of a ‘national state of emergency’ he alone can determine and by the subsequent emergency decrees that Erdoğan has used to incarcerate and/or remove from office around 150,000 ‘dissident’ public servants, following the failed coup of July 2016, his election to the presidency in June 2018, and his triumphant re-election in May 2023. The power of the Turkish Presidency also cannot be seriously threatened by an independent Judiciary, which will find it extremely difficult –if not dangerous on an individual level- to effectively check the authority of the Presidency, even if they wanted to, partly because:

a) the independence of the Judiciary has been emaciated as a result of the travesties of justice engineered via the *Ergenekon* (2008-2016) and *Balyoz*

²¹ Cagaptay (no 13) 308.

Harekâtı (2012-2015) cases to destroy the political influence of the Kemalist military and their judicial allies,²²

b) the ranks of the Judiciary have been purged following the failed coup attempt. During the post-2016 purge, more than 4,428 out of a total of 14,000 judges were dismissed, with over 2,000 imprisoned as a result of the post-2016 coup d'état, while many more thousands were forced to choose 'early retirement', to the point that, by 2019, 'the average level of experience of the country's entire force of 14,000 judges is just two and a half years practicing law' according to Metin Feyzioğlu, the head of the Turkish Bar Association,²³ and

c) the President, as Head of State and Leader of the governing party, has the power to appoint 11 out of the 13 members of Council of Judges and Prosecutors, the country's most powerful judicial body, which appoints and removes judges, applies disciplinary measures, and elects the members of the Supreme Court.²⁴

As Dr. Bülent Keneş notes, Erdoğan, under the pretext of Gülen's alleged complicity in the 2016 coup d'état, orchestrated 'the largest purge ever attempted in the history of the country, in the military, in the Justice system and in the universities. 150,000 people accused of violating the Constitution were expelled from the Public Service without any due process with the accusation of

²² Merve Tahiroglu, 'How Turkey's Leaders Dismantled the Rule of Law' (2020) *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, Vol. 44 (1), 67-96.

²³ Carlotta Gal, 'Erdoğan's Purges Leave Turkey's Justice System Reeling', *New York Times*, 21 June 2019, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/21/world/asia/Erdoğan-turkey-courts-judiciary-justice.html> (last accessed 3 February 2024).

²⁴ Ibid.

cooperating with terrorism and the putsch’,²⁵ while concluding that the result of the purge on the courts was that ‘the already limited rule of law that existed was completely eliminated. As a result, an Islamo-fascist regime was established’.²⁶ No President of Turkey other than Kemal Atatürk concentrated so much power into his own hands since 1923 like Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Under so unipolar a system of power like the one that emerged in Turkey after 2016, analysing the political ideology of its potentate is crucial for the prediction of his future trajectory in foreign policy issues.

Understanding Erdoğan’s *Weltanschauung* will give us crucial clues for the direction of his future decision-making, for the simple reason that Erdoğan is now freer to express his core beliefs, not only because they have become the guiding principles of his regime, but because he feels he is invincible enough to pay overt homage to the two ideological progenitors of his anti-Kemalist revolution: a) Necmettin Erbakan, the father of Turkish political Islam, and, more importantly, b) Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, the father of the Islamic-ultra nationalist synthesis that combined the most virulent strains of Turkish Nationalism with Pan-Islamic ideologies which have been mainstreamed to dominate Turkey’s political domain ever since the first AKP-MHP alliance of political expediency in 2015.

This alliance of expediency that secured Erdoğan’s ‘dictatorial’ presidency via the April 2017 referendum and the presidential elections of June 2018 and May 2023 is bound together, not only by tactical political calculations, but by a common ideological worldview that is based on two interlinked pillars: a) the Islamic

²⁵ Bülent Keneş, ‘Under the Pretext of the Gulen Movement, Erdoğan Dismantles the Turkish Republic’, in Millas (no 4) 113.

²⁶ Ibid, 117.

Revolutionary Zeal of the Egyptian Hassan al Bana's Muslim Brotherhood ideology as adapted by Erbakan's *Millî Görüş* manifesto of 1969 which called for the gradual re-islamisation of Turkish society through the ballot and the expulsion of Kemalist secularism from the educational and judiciary system of the country that Erdoğan realised after 2011 as analysed in the previous pages, and b) the glorification of Turkish Ultra-Nationalism through the imposition of an Islamic Revolution promoted by Kısakürek, that would replace Kemalism and spread throughout the Middle East, reinstating, in the process, Turkey as the region's natural leader. This is exactly what Erdoğan attempted to accomplish by taking advantage of the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011. As Dr. Çandar notes:

The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood movements in the Arab World created new prospects for further empowering AKP... By capitalizing on its almost ten years governance experience, AKP took advantage of the developments in the Middle East and North Africa as an opportunity to achieve the rise of Turkey as a potent regional [great] power.²⁷

Both ideological forefathers of Erdoğanism were nationalistic and virulently antisemitic. Both saw, in their idealised version of Turkey's Ottoman past, a way to end Ankara's marginalisation in the international distribution of power and its 'subjugation' to what they perceived as the decadent political culture of Westernised constitutionalised secularism imposed on Turkey by Kemal Atatürk. The AKP-MHP alliance, which dominated Turkish politics after 2015, was not only a marriage of political or electoral convenience. It was the offspring of their common ideological roots in the Islamist anti-Zionist and anti-Western

²⁷ Çandar (no 19) 61.

revolutionary ideas of Kısakürek, who had an even more profound influence on Erdoğan than Necmettin Erbakan.

As Dr. Çandar perceptively explains:

If one knows well the historic background of the Islamist and Nationalist movements in Turkey, he can distinguish the fact that there are no unsurmountable barriers between them... In essence Turkish Islamism is basically nationalistic. Likewise, Islamism always constituted one of the founding stones of Turkish Nationalism. Islamism and Nationalism are interlinked and walk side by side in Turkey. Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, the ideological role model of T. Erdoğan, established the foundations of the anti-western movement ‘Great Orient’ and the ‘Turkish-Islamic Synthesis’ which developed during the period of the ostensibly secular military junta in the 1980s.²⁸

2. Necmettin Erbakan and the Influence of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (JIM) on Turkish Political Islamism

Oftentimes someone’s importance in life is illustrated by the attendance of his funeral service. In 2011, when Necmettin Erbakan, Turkey’s first ever Islamist Prime Minister passed away, among the tens of thousands of mourners who accompanied the coffin to Istanbul’s public cemetery, one could spot then President Abdullah Gül, who served as the deceased’s senior foreign policy adviser during 1997-1998, then Prime Minister Erdoğan, who had been elected as mayor of Istanbul under the Refah Partisi banner, dozens of ministers, hundreds of

²⁸ Ibid, 67-68.

deputies, as well as many foreign dignitaries who constituted a veritable who's who of the resurgent Muslim Brotherhood from Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Tunisia, Gaza, Qatar, and Pakistan.²⁹

Although Erbakan led the *Millî Görüş* movement since 1969, he did not publish a detailed account that essentially codified his political ideology. It is important to note that his memoir *Davam (My Cause)*, was published posthumously in 2013, so the 'author' had several margins of liberty to express his true beliefs at a time of increasing censorship in Erdoğan's Turkey. Although Erbakan's account of his ideological education and his principled opposition to the errors of Kemalism can be traced back to most Turkish Islamists, including *par excellence* Kısakürek, what is important to underline is that Erbakan's book is heavily influenced by the writings of Sayyed Qutb, an Egyptian school teacher turned Islamic revivalist who became a 'martyr' for the cause of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood after being hanged by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1966.

Erbakan was heavily influenced by the teachings of Qutb during his studies in West Germany where the *Millî Görüş* and the *Jamā'at al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn* (or simply *JIM*) cross-germinated to fertilise a vast array of anti-western anti-secular Islamic Groups that would go into action following the Arab humiliation in the Six Days War of 1967. Erbakan's family developed strong personal ties with the JIM's German apparatus, as Erbakan's niece was married to Ibrahim el-Zayat, the chief of JIM's West German branch. As Szymon Ananicz notes:

²⁹ <https://www.globalmbwatch.com/2011/03/20/global-muslim-brotherhood-leadership-gathers-at-erbak-an-funeral/> (last accessed 3 February 2024).

Millî Görüş maintained close ideological and personal relations with the Muslim Brotherhood. Like the Muslim Brotherhood, it cherished the idea of pan-Islamism and its tenet of a community of bringing together all Muslims irrespective of their adherence to the different currents of Islam... This attitude permitted the movement to take a positive view of the Islamic revolution in Shia-dominated Iran.³⁰

Erbakan's movement was far more closely associated with the radicalism of the *JIM* than with Turkey's own political Islamism that is based in the more moderate Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence and, particularly, the Maturidi school of theology that is dominant in Central Asia and the Western Balkans expressed via the Bektasi order. Contrarily, the *JIM* are more closely associated with the more literal, strict, conservative Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence and more specifically the Athari school of theology, which condemns the very notion of 'theology', barring any attempt to interpret the Qur'an or the Hadith. The theology of the *JIM* which heavily influenced Erbakan's approach is far closer to the Athari school which generated the ultra-conservative doctrines of Salafism and, more particularly, Wahhabi Islamism, than any of the more moderate branches of Ottoman Turkish Islamic theology.

This does not mean that Erbakan or AKP's ideologies are identical with ISIS or that AKP followed the violent methods of Al-Qaeda or the Egyptian Islamic Jihad in trying to bring about its own Islamic Revolution. It does mean, though, that AKP shares core common ideological affinities with extreme Islamic Revolutionary Groups that emanate from an increasingly conspiratorial conviction

³⁰ Szymon Ananicz, *Alone in Virtue: The 'New Turkish' Ideology in Turkey's Foreign Policy* (Warsaw: OSW, Center for Eastern Studies, 2015), 11.

which despises the Pax Americana imposed by the USA and Israel in the former Ottoman Middle East after 1973, while considering Kemalism as a betrayal of Turkishness that can shine its best only if dressed in its truest Ottoman green colors.

One of the core convictions of all Turkish Islamists is that Atatürk's secular revolution betrayed the best traditions of Turkey's idealised Ottoman Caliphate, forcing Turkey to follow the political diktats of the West in ways that opposed the true will of its people, while abandoning its revanchist 1920 'Oath of the Nation', or *Misak-ı Milli*³¹ program that vowed to completely overturn the borders the Treaty of Sèvres imposed on the Turkish Republic. For Turkey's Islamists, instead of reclaiming the northern Aegean islands from Greece in 1922 or stopping Greece from taking over the Dodecanese in 1947, Kemalists chose to self-isolate from the Middle East after 1923, bowed down to Britain over the issue of Mosul in 1925, and attached themselves to the USA during the Cold War era after 1946.

³¹ Misak-ı Milli (Turkish:[misa'ku mil'li:], *National Pact* or *National Oath*) is the set of six decisions made by the last term of the Ottoman Parliament. The Parliament met on 28 January 1920 and published their decisions on 12 February 1920. The Ottoman Minister of Internal Affairs, Damat Ferid Pasha, made the opening speech of parliament due to Mehmed VI's illness. A group of parliamentarians called *Felâh-ı Vatan* was established by Mustafa Kemal's friends to acknowledge the decisions taken at the Erzurum Congress and the Sivas Congress. Mustafa Kemal said 'It is the nation's iron fist that writes the Nation's Oath which is the main principle of our independence to the annals of history'. These decisions worried the occupying Allies, resulting in the Occupation of Constantinople by the British, French, and Italian troops, on 16 March 1920, and the establishment of a new Turkish nationalist parliament, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, in Ankara. This also intensified the Turkish War of Independence against the Allies. The six decisions of the Misak-ı Milli taken by the late Ottoman Parliament were later used as the basis for the claims of the Grand National Assembly in the Treaty of Kars and of the new Republic of Turkey in the Treaty of Lausanne.

When, in October 2016, Erdoğan attacked Kemal, İsmet İnönü, and the CHP, for letting Greece keep the northern Aegean islands after its defeat in Asia Minor,³² he was essentially copying a page from the *Misak-ı Millî* which constituted a core belief of the *Millî Görüş* movement. A *TRTWorld* analysis of Erdoğan's visit to Athens, in December 2017, where he publicly demanded the revision of the Lausanne Treaty, noted:

In Turkey today, Kemalists, Turkey's hardline secularists, support the treaty while the country's religiously inspired political movements perceive it differently. Erdoğan is a byproduct of *Millî Görüş*, a political movement inspired by progressive Muslim values that has strongly influenced Turkish politics since the late 1960s. For most of his political career, Erdoğan's position on the Lausanne Treaty has remained consistent. After his rise to power, his views on reviewing and updating the treaty gradually influenced the country's foreign policy agenda.³³

Islamists believe that Kemal's decision to destroy the Caliphate in 1924 created a self-serving secularist elite made up primarily by the Military and the Judiciary senior bureaucracies that bent the rules of the system and blocked upward social mobility to anyone with a traditional conservative Islamic upbringing or, even worse, an *Imam Hatip* schooling like Erdoğan.

³² 'Erdoğan Laments Loss of Aegean Islands', *Agence France-Presse*, 02 October 2016, available at <https://www.brecorder.com/news/4440207/Erdoğan-laments-loss-of-aegean-islands-2016100289789> (last accessed 5 February 2024).

³³ Murat Sofuoğlu, 'Turks still Debate whether Treaty of Lausanne was Fair to Turkey' *TRTWorld*, available at <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/turkey-still-debates-whether-treaty-of-lausanne-was-a-fair-peace-deal-14632> (last accessed 2 February 2024).

For Turkish Islamists, Kemalist ideology is essentially an impious westernisation attempt of Islamic societies via constitutionalised secularism, spread throughout the Middle East in the form of Nasser's Pan-Arabic nationalism, which was socialist, pro-Soviet and thereof even more anti-Islamist and impious than Western capitalism, a position that is also echoed in the works of Sayyed Qutb and Ali Khomeini. Sayyed Qutb's political philosophy and Hassan Al-Banna's political organisation that established the Muslim Brotherhood as a bottom-up social re-islamisation movement, represented the ideological and political counterforce to constitutionalised secularism across the entire Arab Middle East, that initially helped Nasser to overthrow the British-upheld monarchy through the revolution of 1952.

Although they followed a different –non-revolutionary- pathway to power, Erbakan, and the ideo-political offspring of the *Millî Görüş* movement, which encompasses Erdoğan, the leading cadres of the AKP and all its splinter parties, under Abdullah Gül and Ahmet Davutoğlu, are, for lack of a better term, the Turkish version or, as Gilles Kepel noted, the 'descendant' of the Muslim Brotherhood³⁴ or the Turkish JIM, in the same sense that Hamas is the Palestinian JIM. Erdoğan is the Islamist revolutionary who managed to succeed where Erbakan had failed, by brilliantly masquerading, between 2002 and 2010, his ideology as a moderate Islamic-'Democratic' synthesis³⁵ that ostensibly aspired to join the EU and remain geopolitically allied to the USA and Israel.

³⁴ Kepel (no 3) 322.

³⁵ Both Presidents Bush Jr and Barack Obama flirted with the idea of the Turkish path towards democracy as a moderate synthesis of westernised parliamentarism adapted to special needs of an Islamic audience and often mistook Erdoğanism as a stabilising force, an exportable political paradigm system, to the entire Middle East. Cagaptay (no 13) chapter 6. See also Kepel (no 3) 158.

In reality, Erdoğan utilised the gravitational pull of the EU accession allure on Turkey's pro-Western elites to slowly but steadily erode and eventually decimate the political power of the Military and the Judiciary bureaucracies as the custodians of the country's constitutional secularism, with the tacit support and subsequently the tolerance of both the USA and the EU. As Professor M. Hakan Yavuz notes, 'the AKP is an Islamist party that was forced to hide its Islamist identity fearing that it would follow the same fate as the Islamist parties that preceded it'. He added that 'Islamic ideas and an Islamic worldview are still included in the identity of its leadership and might also be included in the AKP's deep-seated philosophy, but the AKP [initially] never used the explicit language of political Islam'.³⁶

Professor Doğan Gürpınar underlines:

As a valuable asset in its showdown with the staunchly Kemalist military, the AKP had initially pursued a pro-Western foreign policy (2002-2010) in line with its penchant for democratization against the Turkish military's hold over governmental affairs. Wielding its foreign policy and pro-EU stance as leverage empowered the party vis-à-vis the national security establishment. At this stage, the employment of foreign policy as an asset in domestic politics and its desecurization were maneuvers designed to narrow the political space of the national security establishment in a war of

³⁶ M. Hakan Yavuz, *Secularism and Muslim Democracy in Turkey*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2009), 3.

attrition...While the military's role in politics was sidelined, and the AKP gained not only power but also self-confidence.³⁷

During this phase of its political development, AKP and Erdoğan appeared to be following an ideological paradigm more closely associated with what Professor Hasan Kösebalaban described, in 2011, as Islamic Liberalism in the sense that AKP's Islamic liberalism 'seeks integration within liberal Western institutions with an authentic Islamic identity and assertive diplomacy'.³⁸ Kösebalaban separates AKP from previous Islamist parties. He located Islamist parties, namely the National Salvation Party (MSP), the Welfare Party (RP), and the Felicity Party (SP), under the Islamist Nationalism followed by Erbakan who aspires to implement a policy that supported Turkey's integration with the Muslim World under Turkish leadership. Indeed during his first two terms in office, 2002-2007 and 2007-2011, Erdoğan partly under the influence of the more moderate *Bektashi* Islamists which were dominant among the Gülenist movement,³⁹ shied away from openly provoking a confrontation with the Secularist elites of the Arab national states as well as Israel,⁴⁰ which accepted him as a mediator vis-à-vis Hamas during the Gaza crises of 2006 and 2008 and vis-à-vis the Assad regime

³⁷ Doğan Gürpınar, 'Foreign Policy as a Contested Front of the Cultural Wars in Turkey: The Middle East and Turkey in the Era of the AKP' (2020) *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 17(65), 7.

³⁸ Hasan Kösebalaban, *Turkish Foreign Policy: Islam, Nationalism, and Globalization* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 8.

³⁹ Günter Seufert, 'Is the Fethullah Gülen Movement Overstretching Itself?', *SWP Research Paper 2014/RP 02*, 13 January 2014, available at <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/turkey-the-fethullah-guelen-movement/> (last accessed 5 February 2024).

⁴⁰ By 2013 the influence of Gülen's *Cemaat* cadres had been marginalized within AKP's ranks and the judiciary/educational bureaucracy, which further helped to radicalise the tone and direction of Erdoğan's post-2011 aggressive engagement in the Middle East. Ananicz (no 31)11.

during the last attempt to resolve the intractable Golan Heights problem, which failed in 2008.

When the eviction of the USA from Iraq and the fires of the Arab Revolutions created the necessary conditions for the externalisation of his JIM-inspired ideology in 2011, Erdoğan charged ahead with his plan to reshape the political order of the Middle East to his own liking. He emerged, and continues to emerge, as the *devlet baba* or *parens patriae* of the Muslim Brotherhood parties that were coming to the fore from the political vacuum created by the 2011 revolutions in Egypt, Syria, Tunisia and Libya. Kösebalaban misinterpreted the utilisation of the EU integration dynamic by Erdoğan against his Kemalist opponents as genuine democratisation, failing to understand the true nature of Erdoğan's domestic Islamist agenda -exemplified by the post-2016 purge- while underestimating the depth and commitment of Erdoğan's alliance with the *Muslim Brotherhood* parties throughout the decade which followed the Arab Spring uprisings (2011-2021).

In Erdoğan's view point the 'Arab Street', the masses of the peoples of the former Ottoman Empire, yearn to be liberated from the yoke of Republican Secularist regimes in Libya, Syria and Egypt, that are as illegitimate and immoral as the anti-Islamic Kemalist military he rooted out from Turkey's political system over a gradual process that lasted almost 15 years (2002-2018). As Gürpınar notes:

Yasin Aktay, the chairman of pro-AKP think tank (SDE) and later the AKP's chief foreign relations officer, welcomed the Arab Spring as heralding the unification of the region under the aegis of the Muslim Brotherhood... Mohammad Morsi and Khaled Mashal (of Hamas) became regular guests in AKP party congresses, invited not only to display the new

region-wide solidarity and transnational politics, but also to demonstrate that the AKP was part of the transnational Islamic solidarity run by the Muslim Brotherhood network'.⁴¹

The tragic irony of this process is that Erdoğan achieved his goals with the praise and support of both the USA and the EU, as both merely stood by and watched him enforce the politicisation of the Police and the instrumentalisation of the Judiciary against the Kemalist Military, as exemplified by the *Ergenekon* and *Balyoz Harekâtı* trials. According to Turkish Islamists, Kemalist elites would not have been able to survive without the foreign support of either Israel and/or the USA, which is often viewed as a puppet of international Zionism and -at best- a perfidious opportunistic ally that could easily turn against Turkey by supporting its historic enemies.

In this sense, Greece and the deepening of its strategic relationship with the USA and France is often conspiratorially perceived by Ankara as the avant-garde of a secret US plan to attack Turkey or Erdoğan himself. Kemalist elites in short always kept Turkey in check and in line with Washington by forging a special relationship with the United States. For Erdoğan and the Far Right Ultrationalists, the USA supported all military interventions in Turkish politics,⁴² including the 1998 *pronunciamento* that removed Erbakan from the office of the Prime Minister while throwing the leading cadres of the *Refah Partisi*, including Erdoğan himself, to jail.

⁴¹ Gürpınar (no 38) 16.

⁴² Ananicz (no 31) 14.

The failed 2016 coup d'état only reinforced these conspiratorial beliefs, which were in turn 'validated' in the eyes of the AKP leadership by the refusal of the USA to hand over Fethullah Gülen for trial in Turkey. It is important to note that this 'validation' was used as the official interpretation of the US culpability for the July 2016 coup expressed by the sermons of Diyanet officials throughout the country in the years of the purge that followed the failed military uprising. These sermons, approved by the Turkish Presidency's Directorate for Religious Affairs, instrumentalised anti-Western conspiracy theories that are emanating from the polemical worldview of *Millî Görüş*.⁴³ For the AKP, behind all these plots one can easily trace the hidden hand of international Jewry, which is the other central ideological component of the *Millî Görüş* movement, as reflected, inter alia, in Erbakan's *Davam* and Kısakürek's *Ideolocya Örgüsü*.

According to Erbakan:

The Jews harbor a deep hatred for all other peoples, which has led to their orchestrating countless massacres and instigating countless wars. Over time their wish to control the world became a belief in its own right: world hegemony became their religion. As a result, in the past 400 years the Jews exploited the riches of America, Europe and Asia. They created world capitalism, which made them astronomically wealthy. Gradually, they came

⁴³ Ihsan Yılmaz and İslamil Albayrak, 'Instrumentalization of Religious Conspiracy Theories in Politics of Victimhood: Narrative of Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs' (2021) *Religions*, Vol. 12 (10), 841.

to control the politics of all countries by creating a ‘secret world state’ that is found in Kabbalism.⁴⁴

By its third chapter, Erbakan’s book meets some of the most common anti-Zionist conspiracy theories propagated by leading European and American anti-Semites in the previous century, including his own interpretation of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a book that was translated and prefaced in Turkish by none other than Kısakürek. The secret Jewish plan to take over the world, according to Erbakan, is known in its entirety only to three elder members of the Kabbalist priesthood of Jerusalem. These three senior rabbis are secretly elected by the 70 members of the Shanhedrin, who swear-in a secret executive of seven rabbis to implement their plan for world domination.

This group is so strong that it managed to take control of the foreign policies and economies of many states, later directing their diplomacies with the purpose of establishing several major international organisations, who have thus fallen under the influence of the Kabbalist conspirators such as the United Nations, the Bilderberg Group, the IMF and, of course, the European Union, a well-known offshoot of the Bilderberg Group according to Erbakan.⁴⁵

How do Zionists control the world economy? As Cornell notes by quoting from *Davam*, their means include driving countries into economic crises and then lending their governments money at exorbitant interest rates [which obviously did not happen to Turkey between 1999-2001], while making sure that those who

⁴⁴ Svante Cornell, ‘Erbakan, Kısakürek, and the Mainstreaming of Extremism in Turkey’, *Hudson Institute*, 4 June 2018, available at <https://www.hudson.org/research/14375-erbakan-k-sak-rek-and-the-mainstreaming-of-extremism-in-turkey> (last accessed 3 February 2024).

⁴⁵ Ibid.

control the world take 9% of the value of all flight tickets through the International Air Transport Association, insure all world shipping through Lloyds of London, and charge 1% to 5% commissions on all banking transactions.

As proof of this conspiracy, Erbakan cites the great seal of the United States on the one-dollar bill: ‘Annuit coeptis’ really declares the victory of the Zionist project, and ‘novus ordo seclorum’ announces the Zionist world order. Lest anyone think the date 1776 has anything to do with the Declaration of Independence, Erbakan knows better: it refers to the creation, that year, by Zionist leader Adam Weishaupt, of the first lodge of the Order of the Illuminati.⁴⁶ This type of conspiratorial mumbo-jumbo is common in the writings of many Islamic Revolutionaries, but none of these Revolutionaries imagined that they would become the Prime Minister of a major NATO country and an EU member candidate state with the obvious exception of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.⁴⁷

An interesting question, though, is what do Turkey’s Islamists have against International Zionism that is not only related to what they perceive as the plight of the Palestinians? Is there something that affects them directly? What does Erdoğan’s ‘subconscious’ hold against Judaism that makes it so difficult for him to genuinely renormalise his relations with Israel? What makes it impossible for him to control his wrath against the ‘terrorist’ State of Israel⁴⁸ which ‘behaves

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Alessio Calabro, ‘Islamist Views on Foreign Policy: Examples of Turkish Pan-Islamism in the Writings of Sezai Karakoç and Necmettin Erbakan’, *Turkish Insight*, 1 January 2017, available at <https://www.insightturkey.com/articles/islamist-views-on-foreign-policy-examples-of-turkish-pan-islamism-in-the-writings-of-sezai-karakoc-and-necmettin-erbakan> (accessed 5 February 2024).

⁴⁸ ‘Erdoğan Calls Netanyahu “Terrorist”, Israel “Terrorist State”’, *Al Jazeera*, 1 April 2018, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/4/1/Erdoğan-calls-netanyahu-terrorist-israel-terrorist-state> (accessed 3 February 2024).

towards the Palestinians the same way the Nazis behaved against European Jewry?’⁴⁹ The answer is nothing short of astonishing: the rise of Kemalism and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

As Erbakan notes:

While the Turkish War of Independence reversed their [Zionist] plans, the Treaty of Lausanne was introduced in order to create a state where the Turks would be alienated from their religion and all their institutions taken over by world Zionism. Thus, from that point onwards ‘collaborationists’ in Turkey have tried to join the EU to remove Turkey from its own identity. Every force Turkey confronts -nay, every force in the world- is controlled by world Zionism and bent on the destruction of Turkey as a state, nation and community.⁵⁰

What may be even more notable is the root of cause of the sworn enmity between Turkish Islamists and international Zionism, which is traced back, according to *Davam*, to the denial of Sultan Abdulhamit II to accept the proposal of Theodore Herzl that would allow Jews to own land in what was then Ottoman Judea and Samaria. In May 1901, Phillip Newlinsky and Theodore Herzl offered to pay the Ottoman Empire’s foreign debts, in exchange for opening Palestinian lands to Jewish settlement and progressively accepting the self-governance of these territories by the Jewish people.

⁴⁹ ‘Turkey’s Erdoğan Likens Israel to Nazis’, *DW*, 19 May 2028, available at <https://www.dw.com/en/turkeys-erdogan-likens-israeli-actions-against-palestinians-to-nazis/a-43847117> (last access 2 February 2024).

⁵⁰ Cagaptay (no 13) 33.

The sultan declined this offer with the famous saying: ‘I won't sell anything, not even an inch of this territory, because this country does not belong to me but to all Ottomans. My people won these lands with their blood. We give what we have the way we got it in the first place’.⁵¹ It is a commonly held belief among Turkey’s Islamists that this denial cost the Pan-Islamist Sultan his throne. Abdulhamit II, nicknamed the ‘Red Sultan’ due to his slaughtering up to 300,000 Armenians during the *Hamidian Massacres* in 1894-1896, features prominently in the heroic anthology of Erbakan and Kısakürek as Turkey’s last true Islamic Leader who was deposed by the Zionist-created Committee for Union and Progress who exiled the Sultan in 1909, and ‘forced the empire into the First World War, bringing about its dissolution with the Treaty of Sèvres, which was fundamentally a project for Greater Israel’.⁵²

For the AKP leadership, including Erdoğan and Davutoğlu, Abdulhamit II is considered the last ‘true’ Sultan and a visionary defender of Ottoman imperial greatness through -inter alia- the instrumentalisation of Pan-Islamism.⁵³ It may not be accidental that Turkey’s fourth and most modern drilling ship, which enables Turkey to practically promote its *Mavi Vatan* doctrine, is named after the Red Sultan.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ekrem Buğra Ekinci, ‘The Palestine Issue that Cost Sultan Abdülhamid II the Ottoman Throne’, *Daily Sabah*, 10 March 2017, available at <https://www.dailysabah.com/feature/2017/03/10/the-palestine-issue-that-cost-sultan-abdulhamid-ii-the-ottoman-throne> (last accessed 6 February 2024).

⁵² Cornell (no 45).

⁵³ Michael A. Reynolds, ‘The Key to the Future Lies in the Past: The Worldview of Erdoğan and Davutoğlu’, *Hudson Institute*, 3 September 2015, available at <https://www.hudson.org/node/38824> (last accessed 27 April 2024).

⁵⁴ Dimitris Stathakopoulos, ‘Op-ed: Abdul Hamid Khan – The Sultan and the Drill’, *To Vima*, 3 August 2022, available at <https://www.tovima.gr/2022/08/03/international/op-ed-abdul-hamid-khan-the-sultan-and-the-drill/> (last accessed 5 February 2024).

3. Necip Fazıl Kısakürek: Erdoğan's 'Highest Source of Inspiration' and the Father of Turkey's Islamic-Ultra Nationalist Synthesis

This core anti-Semitic belief of Turkish Islamism, that Jews are to blame for the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, is not only shared by AKP or AKP affiliates. It is also an article of faith for Turkey's ultranationalist right as officially expressed in the codification of MHP's ideology since 1977, when its founder publicly declared, *at the behest of Necip Fazıl Kısakürek*, that his movement was committed to a 'Turkish nationalism wedded to Islam'.⁵⁵ The close personal and ideological affinity that characterised Erdoğan's relationship with Kısakürek is a well-established fact of public record.

As Soner Cagaptay, one of Erdoğan's most recognised biographers, notes, Kısakürek is, without doubt, Erdoğan's idol. In an interview published in the *Economist* in 2002, when asked which world figure had influenced and inspired him, his response was unequivocal: 'Necip Fazıl Kısakürek' [sic]. In addition, in a speech he delivered as Turkey's Prime Minister years later, Erdoğan told his audience how he 'had read [Kısakürek's] works, got to know him, and found the opportunity to walk in his footsteps'.⁵⁶ In 2014, in another public address, Erdoğan underlined that, through his participation in a poetry recital competition of Kısakürek's works in 1975, he was personally introduced to 'the Master' and they 'went to many places together'.

⁵⁵ Svante Cornell, 'Headed East: Turkey's Education System', *Transatlantic Policy Quarterly*, 21 March 2018, available at <http://turkishpolicy.com/article/895/headed-east-turkeys-education-system> (last accessed 27 April 2024).

⁵⁶ Cagaptay (no. 13) 35.

This public acknowledgement of reverence to K1sakürek is not, of course, limited to Erdoğan. Former Turkish Prime Minister and President, Abdullah Gül, identified K1sakürek as ‘the most important intellectual who had a major impact on my worldview’. In 2013, Besir Atalay, then Deputy Prime Minister, declared in an AKP conference in Konya that ‘the entire cadre that runs this country, including a large majority of the cabinet, were influenced by Master Necip Fazıl’.⁵⁷ Events organised to commemorate K1sakürek’s ideological legacy appear to trigger some of Erdoğan’s most virulent anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli declarations that directly affect Turkey’s foreign policy priorities by feeding the conspiratorial *weltanschauung* of the Arab -and obviously the Turkish- masses. As Svante Cornell notes, ‘when Erdoğan, in late 2017, warned that relocating the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem would lead to Muslims losing Mecca and Medina, the occasion was yet another event honoring the memory of the Master’.⁵⁸ K1sakürek’s writings represent a detailed codification of the principle tenets of Islamist Revolutionaries that *precede* the works of Sayyid Qutb, who had a profound influence in the ideology of the *JIM* that in turn heavily influenced the *Milli Gorus* movement.

K1sakürek rejects the concept of democracy and constitutional secularism. For him, as for all Islamists, political power and its legitimate application can only belong, as Erdoğan famously proclaimed during his 1994 run for mayor of Istanbul, to *Allah*. K1sakürek’s principal message was the revolutionary reversal of Kemalism, whose concept of *egemenlik kayıtsız şartsız milletindir*, meaning sovereignty belongs unconditionally to the people, he turned on its head. For

⁵⁷ Cornell (no. 45) 19.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Kısakürek, as for Erdoğan, Kemalism was an alien ideology forcefully imposed on the Turkish people.

Kısakürek's political philosophy shares some interesting similarities to Khomeinism in the sense that the totalitarian regime of *Başyücelik*, the ideal polity governed 'by the rule of the most exalted', was to be led for life by a single individual, the *Başyüce*. The *Başyüce*, which literally translates to 'the perfect man', would express the will of the people (*milli irade*) by concentrating, like the Ottoman Caliphs/Sultans before him, all powers into his own hands, thereby destroying another fundamental principle of democracies: the division of powers.

This centralisation of executive powers at the hands of the President and the marginalisation of the legislative and judiciary branches, is already reflected in Turkey's 2017 constitution. The *Başyüce* will not be elected by universal suffrage. Like the lifelong Leader of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, the *Başyüce* will be selected by a Council of the 'most exalted' (*Başyücelik Divanı*) among his peers, much like the twelve-member Assembly of Experts in the Iranian constitution that selects and oversees the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic. Once the 101-members of the *Başyücelik Divanı* make their choice, they will not be able to remove the *Başyüce* unless he violates the *Sharia*, which will constitute the only source of his decrees, which is also the case in the Iranian Constitution, although the Assembly of Experts has never questioned any of the Supreme Leader's decisions.⁵⁹ Kısakürek proposed that such a political system would not be able to work in religiously or ethnically diverse societies. If Turkey was ever going to return to its true Ottoman roots, it would, contrary to what the Ottoman

⁵⁹ Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, *Ideolocya Örgüsü* (Istanbul: Büyük Doğu, 2016), 285-388, cited in Cornell (no 45).

Sultans actually did, have to rid itself from the non-Sunni Turkish minorities who would be offered the opportunity to convert to Islam. If they refused, they would be expelled, their assets would be confiscated and they would be stripped of their Turkish citizenry/nationality,⁶⁰ which was exactly the fate of the Greek minorities of Istanbul, Tenedos and Imbros, that remained in Kemalist Turkey under the supposed protection of the Treaty of Lausanne after 1923.

Only two ethnic-religious minorities would *not* be offered even the opportunity to convert: the Jews and the Dönme, the Turkish Sunni Muslims of Jewish origin that followed the false messiah Sabbatai Zvi who converted to Islam in 1666.⁶¹ It is important to note that, in making such a distinction, Kısakürek strongly deviates from the fundamental practice of Islamic and Ottoman political traditions, that not only offered the possibility of conversion to Jews as one of the ‘peoples of the Book’, but also allowed for the protection of their religious freedoms provided that they remained ‘second class citizens’, or *Dhimmi*, within the Ottoman Caliphate.

Jews, as well as Christians, who refused to convert, were of course deprived of any political rights and were subservient to the Sultan’s Muslim subjects, but were allowed to worship as long as they paid the necessary annual per capita tribute of subservience to the Caliph or *jizya*.⁶² Why does Kısakürek reserve such harsh treatment for the Jews and the Dönme? Partly because they were deemed impossible to assimilate in the ethnically-religiously homogenous *Başyücelik*, but primarily because, as does Erbakan’s *Davam*, Kısakürek holds the

⁶⁰ Ibid, p.335.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² See inter alia, Bat Ye’or, *The Dhimmi: Jews & Christians under Islam*, (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1985).

Zionists personally responsible for the destruction of the Ottoman Empire.⁶³ According to him, all of the reformist attempts of the 19th century *Tanzimāt* that introduced concepts of constitutional checks and balances on the absolute power of the Sultanate, including the establishment of a Parliament in 1876, were Zionist machinations to bring about the end of Ottoman rule.

According to Kısakürek, International Jewry was taken aback by the anti-reformist crackdown of Abdülhamit II, who destroyed the 1876 Constitution and refused, in 1901, to accept Herzl's proposal to allow for the repatriation of Jews to parts of their ancestral homeland. The Committee of Union and Progress and Kemalism 'orchestrated the "fake" liberation of Turkey from the Western powers on the condition that the nation and state be separated from Islam. Hence the revolution of Atatürk, and the Arab world's division into dozens of states that the Jews could easily control and pit against each other'.⁶⁴

Once stripped free of its ethnic-religious diversity, Kısakürek's Turkey will be able to return to its true glorious destiny as the true successor of the Ottoman Empire and spread its Islamic ideology to all its former dominions and dependencies, by in effect revising the territorial restrictions imposed on it by the Treaty of Lausanne. Before it could embark, though, on the spreading of its own Islamic Revolution, Turkey needed to be 'rebaptised' back into its Islamic roots by fully reversing and uprooting Kemalism through the utilisation of the same methods of top-to-bottom social engineering Kemal had used to establish and protect his secular revolution. Erdoğan has proven to be the vehicle for the

⁶³ Kısakürek (no 60) 335.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 473-474.

realisation of K1sakürek's Islamic Revolution that is still taking hold of Turkish society by the ballot and not by the bullet.

As Cagaptay perceptively notes:

K1sakürek suggested that not Kemalism, but political Islam should use state resources, education, and government policy to shape the country's citizens in its image. K1sakürek also advocated for a strong presidential system allowing the leader to shape the country in *their* image. That is exactly what Erdoğan did... After turning the tables on Turkey's Kemalist Armed Forces, secular courts, media, and businesses by using the Ergenekon-Sledgehammer court cases, referenda and politically charged tax fines and audits respectively to defang those actors, Erdoğan took over the Turkish state and then extended his reach over Turkish society. Following K1sakürek's recipe, he then went on to become an anti-Atatürk Atatürk. He dismantled Atatürk's system by using Atatürk's own means (state resources) and methods (top-down social engineering with education policy) to try and raise a 'pious generation' that shares his values -all on K1sakürek's advice.⁶⁵

4. The Foreign Policy Implications of Erdoğan's Turkish-Islamist Weltanschauung

K1sakürek's ideology and the ultranationalist agenda of the MHP are already expressed in many leading diplomatic initiatives of Erdoğan's tenure since 2011. The *Mavi Vatan* strategy of maritime agrandissement against Greece and Cyprus

⁶⁵ Cagaptay (no 13) 34-35.

in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean, and the challenging of the territorial status quo of the Lausanne Treaty vis-à-vis Iraq, Syria and Greece -in the latter case through the questioning of Greek sovereignty of dozens of Greek islands throughout the Aegean Archipelago- as well as Turkey's 2019 EEZ demarcation MoU with the Tripoli-based government of Libya, are some of the more pre-eminent examples of the decisive influence of the *Misak-ı Millî* 'doctrines' on Erdoğan's Foreign Policy.⁶⁶

In the same context, Erdoğan's attempt to reshape the Middle East by replacing secular regimes in Libya, Syria and Egypt with Islamist parties after 2011 -the most moderate of which would be the JIM- that would be geopolitically loyal to Ankara and beholden personally to Erdoğan, reflects clearly one of the central tenants of the *Millî Görüş* worldview of Turkey as a leader of an Islamic sphere of influence independent of the West's geopolitical confinements that are centred on the former Ottoman Middle East.

As Professor Kepel notes, 'Turkey's Erdoğan promotes its plans trying to reacquire regional hegemony, a contemporary revival of the Ottoman Caliphate'⁶⁷ whereas Dr. Çandar explains:

When Davutoğlu was talking about a policy of 'zero problems' with the neighbors, he was not referring to the Western neighbors of Turkey, namely Greece, Bulgaria or the Republic of Cyprus in its southwest, nor did he refer to Turkey's northern neighbours like Ukraine, Russia, Georgia and

⁶⁶ Zenonas Tziarras and Jalel Harchaoul, 'What Erdoğan Really Wants in the Eastern Mediterranean', *Foreign Policy*, 19 January 2021, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/19/turkey-greece-what-Erdoğan-wants-eastern-mediterranean-sovereignty-natural-gas/> (last accessed 4 February 2024).

⁶⁷ Gilles Kepel, *Le Prophète et la Pandémie*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2021), 14.

Armenia... He was mainly referring to the Arab Middle East. In that sense, for the AKP, a zero problems policy with the neighbors meant the return of Turkey in the territories of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East.⁶⁸

The emergence of such a sphere of influence in the Middle East and the imposition *-manu militari*, if need be- of the *Mavi Vatan* borderlines is a precondition for the rise of Turkey as a ‘middle power’, a ‘trans-regional player’, and its autonomisation -but not institutional detachment-from the West.⁶⁹ The fact that Erdoğan wants Turkey to remain a part of NATO or the fact that he does not end Turkey’s -frozen- EU accession process, is not a testament to his democratic sensitivities or AKP’s willingness to integrate with Western Liberal institutions. It is a realisation of the usefulness of NATO membership in Turkey’s grand bargaining with Russia and the USA, as well as the understanding that almost half of Turkey’s trade is directed towards the EU. Erdoğan is, at his core, an Islamic Nationalist, but he is also a brilliant tactician who managed to masquerade his true beliefs for more than a decade after taking over the office of Prime Minister in order to stage and win a war of attrition against the custodians of Kemalism inside Turkey.

Erdoğan has exhibited the same level of patience in his foreign policy aspirations, without losing sight of his strategic goals and without changing course in the pursuit of his ultimate revisionist objectives, even if he -occasionally- is forced to pause or hold his regional agrandissement strategy, as he did after 2021

⁶⁸ Çandar (no 19) 60.

⁶⁹ Alexandros Diakopoulos and Nikos Stournaras, ‘Turkey’s Quest for Strategic Autonomy’, *ELIAMEP Policy Paper*, no 102, June 2022, available at <https://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Policy-paper-102-Diakopoulos-final-2.pdf> (last accessed 4 February 2024).

in an attempt to end his regional isolation and secure –with the approval of the US Congress- in February 2024, one of the largest military agreements in the history of the Turkish Air Force, worth \$23 billion, that includes a) the purchasing/modernisation of 119 F-16 fighter jets to their ultimate upgraded version of Block-70 Viper, and b) the procurement of 3,558 different types of bombs, rockets and other precision guided missiles of all types.⁷⁰

The rise of Turkey as an aspiring hegemonic power in the Middle East is a core ideological belief of Erdoğanism that contrasts with the self-isolation from the region Kemalism imposed on Turkish foreign policy. As Gürpınar notes:

The AKP's affiliated intelligentsia sketched the main tenets of the alleged Kemalist foreign policy. For them, Kemalist/republican Turkish foreign policy had been tainted with subservience to the Western line and unconditional acceptance of Western stances. Thereby, it was non-national and even anti-national (*gayrimilli*); as such, it was detrimental to the very core of national existence. One of the main and original sins of this foreign policy involved the dissociation of Turkey from the Middle East (what was considered to be its natural habitus). This dissociation, however, stalled and doomed the prospects of Turkey's international eminence and standing.⁷¹

Despite the obvious failure of Erdoğan's grand neo-Ottoman design following the restoration of secular nationalists in power in Egypt by the *Tamarod*

⁷⁰ USA Department of State, Defense Security Cooperation Agency, 'Turkey: F-16 Aircraft Acquisition and Modernization', 26 January 2024, available at <https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/turkiye-f-16-aircraft-acquisition-and-modernization>, (last accessed 27 March 2024); Bryant Harris, 'Turkey F-16 Sale to Proceed after Senate Vote', *Defense News*, 1 March 2024, available at <https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2024/02/29/turkey-f-16-sale-to-proceed-after-senate-vote/> (last accessed 27 March 2024).

⁷¹ Gürpınar (no 38) 8.

movement, in July 2013, and the survival of Bashar al-Assad after the Russian intervention of September 2015, AKP's ideologically driven policy for hegemony over the Middle East, in collaboration with the *Jamā'at al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn*, remains a persistent aspiration regardless of its contemporary failure. AKP's narrative of 'precious loneliness', or *değerli yalnızlık*, introduced by none other than Erdoğan's then top foreign policy adviser and since 2023 Director of MIT, Dr. Ibrahim Kalin, is indicative of the tenacity of AKP's ambitions in the Middle East and the instrumentalisation of AKP's 'appeal' with the Arab peoples.

As Gürpınar explains, Kalin argued that 'the hostile attitudes of the Middle Eastern regimes were not detrimental to Turkey because Turkey was siding with the region's peoples, which would inevitably empower Turkey thanks to the deep sympathy of the Arab street'. As prime minister, Davutoğlu argued along the same lines:

We were committed to close the parenthesis [the artificial disengagement of Turkey and Middle East imposed with Sykes-Picot] ... via establishing good relations with the states [of the region] but the nature of our partner states didn't allow us to succeed. Now we are aiming to do the same by directly addressing the peoples [of the region]. Thus, Turkey will reap the benefits of its principled, ethical, and righteous foreign policy in the future.⁷²

Erdoğan may have shifted his focus on territorial expansion against Northern Syria and the establishment of a permanent security zone that would expel the Kurds of the YPG from the Turkish-Syrian frontline, but his continued

⁷² Ibid, 19.

involvement in several fronts is indicative of his continued claim to regional hegemony.

Had Erdoğan accepted the failure of his strategic objective to lead a JIM-controlled Middle East after 2013, he would not have expanded Turkey's military presence in Qatar nor militarily intervened to save the Tripoli-based GNA in November 2019. He would have refrained from setting up dozens of Turkish bases in Northern Iraq and would not have sought a military basis in Sudan as he did in 2018. All these actions suggest that the motivation behind his nearly simultaneous diplomatic overtures towards the UAE, the KSA, Israel and Egypt, launched in 2021 is not to seek a strategic compromise, but a tactical respite that would weaken the regional realignment between the abovementioned countries and Greece which -inter alia- cost Erdoğan the US weapons embargo of December 2019.

If Erdoğan's ideological compass affects his long-to-medium term foreign policy choices, then it is important to note that the geopolitical direction of Erdoğan's revisionism will remain focused on the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean, and not the Turkic-speaking former Soviet republics of Central Asia and Transcaucasia. These two former areas, as the more immediate geographical zones of Turkey's prospective expansion, are of a higher priority for Ankara, especially since they are also more closely associated with the geographical extensions of the Ottoman Empire.

With regards to the Caucasus and Central Asia, despite Turkey's recent indirect intervention in the 2020 Azerbaijan-Armenia war over Nagorno Karabakh, Erdoğan understands he is still no match for Russia's regional diplomatic and military preeminence, regardless of the strain the second Russian-Ukrainian War puts on Russia's regional military preponderance. A direct Turkish-

Russian conflict will not only end with Turkey's defeat. It will reverberate into the other fronts where Turkish-Russian interests are delicately balanced, particularly in Syria and Libya, where Turkey cannot count on the support of the USA to defend it against a possible Russian encroachment given the self-marginalisation of Washington's role in both Libya and Syria. With regards to the EU, there is no longer any need for Erdoğan to masquerade himself as prospective EU candidate and very little to no chance that Turkey's accession process may be effectively revived over the next years. To the contrary, a group of EU member states, increasingly led by France and Austria, are more likely to push for the termination or freezing of Turkey's accession process rather than operationalise a 'positive agenda' like the one Erdoğan and the EU Council agreed on back in 2016.

The perfidious balancing act Erdoğan adeptly performs between Moscow and Kiev after February 2022 may delay this development, but it will not reverse the backward trend of the Turkey-EU relationship. This is likely to happen regardless of whether or what type of sanctions may be imposed on Turkey for the pursuit of its *Mavi Vatan* ambitions in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea by the European Council. The EU will remain partly vulnerable to Turkey's migration card, but as long as the Greek and Bulgarian land borders remain intact, any new Turkish attempt to instigate a wave of massive migratory flows across the Aegean is, since March 2020, far more likely to be effectively contained than any time since the 2015 crisis begun.

The EU, although increasingly irrelevant in Erdoğan's foreign policy, may become far more important as a source of potential economic containment vis-à-vis Turkey, a containment that may come in the form of strict sanctions against entire sectors of the Turkish economy, especially if another Greek-Turkish

showdown, like the one that took place in August 2020, occurs in the contested waters of the Eastern Mediterranean. The EU can still inflict major damage to the Turkish economy, but the optimum way to do it would be in the form of the devaluation of Turkey's overall commercial relationship with the EU block through the suspension or cancellation of the 1995 Customs Union Treaty, an option that has been put on the table by both Greece⁷³ and France.

Losing its Customs Union Treaty status will reverberate across all sectors of the Turkish economy, increase the devaluation of the TYL against the US Dollar and the EUR and make it harder for Turkish companies to refinance their \$-denominated loans. The potential loss of Turkey's Customs Union and the psychological effects these developments will have on the perceptions of foreign exchange markets may lead Erdoğan to face his worst economic and political nightmare: an IMF bailout.

Nevertheless, Erdoğan's recent relative return to more rational economic policies after November 2020, following a rapid increase of the Central Bank's interest rates, may not suffice to stabilize the TYL or reduce double digit inflationary pressures. Erdoğan will try his best to smooth his relations with the UAE and the KSA, in the hope of securing alternative avenues of re-financing and investment that would provide short-term solution for the Turkish economy. He did exactly that in June 2020, when he expanded the TYL-Qatari Riyal credit swap

⁷³ 'Athens Calls for Suspension of EU-Turkey Customs Union', *EKathimerini*, 20 October 2020, available at <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/258267/athens-calls-for-suspension-of-eu-turkey-customs-union/> (last accessed 26 March 2024); 'EU Mulls Trade Action against Turkey', *Politico*, 27 October 2020, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-mulls-trade-action-against-turkey/> (last accessed 27 March 2024).

line that boosted Turkey's Central Bank reserves on paper -from \$5 billion to \$15 billion.⁷⁴

Erdoğan will do his outmost, even accepting an inflation rate of over 80%,⁷⁵ to avoid a bailout for two additional political reasons of a highly symbolic significance: a) the ideological identification of bankers and lenders with international Zionism in the conspiratorial worldview of the *Millî Görüş* worldview that Erdoğan himself reproduces when referring to the 'interest-rate lobby',⁷⁶ and b) the fact that the fall of the Kemalist parties was precipitated by the collapse of the Turkish economy in 1999 and the 2001 IMF austerity program. If Erdoğan is forced to call on the IMF for help, he would be perceived by his own cadre and his own electorate as bowing down to Zionist bankers and that could prove to be the beginning of the end of this political imperium.

Beyond the immediate geographical zones claimed by the *Misak-ı Millî*, Erdoğan will continue his engagement in areas such as the Balkans, the Persian Gulf and the Horn of Africa, in ways that expand his capabilities to acquire levers of coercive influence vis-à-vis his primary opponents in the core geographical areas of his claims, namely the Eastern Mediterranean, northern Syria, Cyprus, and Greece. Erdoğan will continue to consolidate his military presence in Qatar,

⁷⁴ Aykan Erdemir and John Lechner, 'Why Erdoğan won't Ask the IMF for Help', *Foundation for the Defense of Democracies*, 1 June 2020, available at <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/06/01/Erdoğan-wont-ask-imf-for-help/> (last accessed 27 March 2024).

⁷⁵ Anna Cooban and Isil Sariyuce, 'Inflation Soars to nearly 80% in Turkey as Food Prices Double', *CNN*, 4 July 2022, available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/07/04/economy/turkey-inflation-food-energy/> (last accessed 28 March 2024).

⁷⁶ Aykan Erdemir and John Lechner, 'Erdoğan's Anti-Semitism Will Sink Turkey's Economy: The Turkish President's Racist Conspiracy Theories are a Threat to Economic Stability', *Foreign Policy*, 24 December 2018, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/12/24/Erdoğan-anti-semitism-will-sink-turkeys-economy/> (last accessed 28 March 2024).

Western Libya and Somalia, and attempt to build a stronger relationship with Ethiopia, while trying to find ways to expand his naval presence in the Red Sea, as he did with the Suakin Island incident, in 2018.⁷⁷

He will pursue these policies because he thinks that, in this way, he can increase the cost of an Egyptian reaction against his interests in Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean by *inter alia* sabotaging the closer military and energy cooperation between Greece and Egypt or stopping the two countries from concluding a comprehensive EEZ demarcation agreement extending beyond the 27.59th.⁷⁸ Erdoğan's ideological affiliation with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, to which it continues to offer partial safe haven, as well as Turkey's entrenched military presence in Libya, are two very high prices Erdoğan is simply not willing to pay to irreversibly renormalize his relationship with Egypt,⁷⁹ despite a recent thaw between the two countries as exemplified by Erdoğan's trip to Cairo in March 2024.

In this context he will continue to offer refuge and protection to Hamas, despite the ongoing Israeli-Hamas War, and lead the Arab coalition of radical state and sub-state actors opposing the Abraham accords and their extension beyond the

⁷⁷ Theodore Karasik and Giorgio Cafferno, 'Turkey's Move into the Red Sea Unsettles Egypt', *Middle East Institute*, 17 January 2018, available at <https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkeys-move-red-sea-unsettles-egypt> (last accessed 7 August 2022).

⁷⁸ Motassem al Dalloul, 'There are Limits to the Rapprochement between Turkey and Egypt', *Middle East Monitor*, 14 September 2021, available at <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210914-there-are-limits-to-the-rapprochement-between-turkey-and-egypt/> (last accessed 27 April 2024); Alba Sanz, 'Egypt-Turkey Talks are Weakening', *Atayalar*, 28 July 2022, available at <https://www.atayalar.com/en/articulo/politics/egypt-turkey-talks-are-weakening/20220727144847157552.html> (last accessed 27 April 2024).

⁷⁹ Salim Çevik, 'Erdoğan's Endgame with Egypt', *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, 6 August 2021, available at <https://www.thecaireview.com/global-forum/Erdoğans-endgame-with-egypt/> (last accessed 26 March 2024).

UAE, Bahrain and Sudan,⁸⁰ because he would not abandon this JIM alliance and because he thinks that this could weaken the dynamic of the Greek-Israeli and Greek-Saudi cooperation, while winning electoral points back home with regards to his increasingly radicalised voter basis. Erdoğan does not have any reservations whatsoever to cultivate conspiracy theories that equate his domestic political opponents with the foreign governments opposing his geopolitical expansionism. The point here, though, is that he is not merely constructing and propagating these conspiracy theories in order to rally his party basis and expand his political influence. *He is doing it because he believes them, or at least he believes they fit with his own Turkish-Islamist Weltanschauung.*

As professor Gürpınar underlines:

The AKP demonised and associated its domestic foes with its international foes, delineating an axis of evil comprised of international foes such as Assad, Israel, Iran, and domestic foes such as the secular opposition party CHP, Gezi protestors, and the now-notorious Gülen group, depicting them in close collaboration running an impossible alliance. The seculars were equated with the Baathists and Middle Eastern dictatorships, most vocally by one AKP public intellectual and ex director of the state news agency: “We have a fight with the baltagiya in Egypt, with the shabihas in Syria, with the [Shiite] sectarians in Iraq, and with the pro-Gezi people, Gülenists and Kobanists in Turkey”.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Kepel (no 68) 65-66.

⁸¹ Gürpınar (no 38). Baltagiya is Egyptian slang for ‘gangs of thugs or criminals’. Sabihas who literary translates in Syrian to ‘ghosts’, ‘shadows’, or ‘apparitions’, are mostly Alawite groups of armed militia in support of the Ba'ath Party government of Syria who have been accused of massive human rights violations and war crimes during Syria’s Civil War.

With regards to the core objectives of Erdoğan's foreign policy in the coming years, and given the fact that Russia -unless it collapses on the Ukrainian front- is highly unlikely to accept any additional territorial expansion of Turkey into Syria or, for that matter, Libya, the Turkish President is far more likely to focus his attention on Cyprus and Greece. Regarding Cyprus, he has unilaterally changed the parameters of the agreed framework on a negotiated settlement by agreeing with the nationalist Turkish Cypriot leadership to demand a negotiated partition plan that would lead to two states instead of a reaching an agreement on a bizonal, bicomunal federation. Erdoğan has in effect ended more than four decades of talks on the Cyprus Issue and is moving to 'resolve' the remaining parameters of the Cyprus question by gradually repopulating the Varosia district of Famagusta, expanding Turkey's military installations in occupied northern Cyprus and continuing to violate the Cypriot EEZ in ways that make the full exploration and potential exploitation of its reserves all but impossible.

Regarding Greece, Erdoğan will continue to expand the list of his unilateral claims in the eastern Aegean Sea, refusing to recognize Greek sovereignty even over large, populated islands on the basis of their militarisation, 'oblivious' to the fact that their militarisation has become unavoidable due to the existence of a Turkish landing fleet based across the Asia Minor coastline and the continued occupation of the northern 37% of Cyprus following the invasion of 1974. Despite the impressive pace of the Greek re-armament program and the US arms embargo of December 2020 imposed on Erdoğan as a result of his choice to deploy the S400 anti-aircraft and anti-missile system, the Turkish President will continue to press his Mavi Vatan claims against Greece, challenging 'on the field' the Greek-Egyptian EEZ agreement.

If Erdoğan sees the colossal February 2024 F-16 agreement with the USA through its implementation, he is more than likely to challenge Greek rights, even within the Greek-Egyptian EEZ, by sending one of his seismographic vessels to illegally explore for potential hydrocarbon reserves in the maritime zone he avoided during his latest showdown with the Greek navy, in the summer of 2020. In any case President Erdoğan will continue to follow a dangerous game of brinkmanship with Greece, unless and until he is convinced that the Hellenic Air Force and the Hellenic Navy can effectively project a credible deterrent throughout the *Mavi Vatan* maritime area he unilaterally claims as part of Turkey's continental shelf.

5. Conclusion

The unexpected, for many in Greece and E.U., victory of Erdoğan in the Presidential Elections of May 2023 reveals the difficulty many have in interpreting him and AKP as an Islamist revolutionary movement. Erdoğan was never just a political leader. He was and remains a quasi-messianic personality for the tens of millions of AKP loyalists and an entire generation of Turkish citizens who have known no other head of state or head of government. These solid socio-economic classes, whose rise was suppressed for seven decades by the Kemalist regime, have ensured the AKP comfortable parliamentary majorities for 25 consecutive years.

The longevity of this political dominance that allowed Erdoğan to change the structure of the Turkish Republic in 2017-2018 cannot be explained only in political or economic terms, but in terms of cultural identity and ideology. Erdoğanism does not replace, it has already largely replaced Kemalism as the

revolutionary ideology upon which the power and ambitions of the modern Turkish state were and are being built. To a large extent the two ideologies were, and remain, mutually exclusive, contrastingly antagonistic, although almost identically anti-Hellenic.

Erdoğan is the anti-Kemal. He dismantled Kemalism in terms of what the military-judiciary secular bureaucratic elite believed and practiced for almost 70 years regarding the secularisation of the state, the westernisation of the society and the pro-Western geopolitical orientation of the country that supported, with the exception of his anti-Hellenic policy, a strategy of non-intervention in regional developments. Erdoğan's main opponent in the 2023 presidential election and then leader of the Kemalist CHP Kılıçdaroğlu, tried to turn back time by affirming the three aforementioned principles of the Kemalist Revolution, not realising that time had simply passed him by.

Erdoğan as head of his Turkish Islamist revolution succeeded, almost bloodlessly and within a period of about 16 years, in overturning the Kemalist structure of power that had been built precisely to prevent the rise of an Islamist party to power. The fact that the dismantling of Kemalism took 16 years and was not achieved through a popular revolution, as happened in Iran in 1978-1980, or an armed uprising, as was attempted in Egypt or Algeria between 1992 and 1997, does not mean that Erdoğan's revolution was less Islamic or less revolutionary in its scope and ambition. The changes that have occurred in the Turkish society are structural. The Islamisation of the educational system, the anti-secularisation of the Diyanet, the emaciation of the Military, the dictatorial powers of the Presidency over the Parliament, the suffocating control of the Judiciary, and the dominant influence of a police state established during the period of the purge

between 2016 and 2018, have drastically changed both the internal character and the external orientation of Turkey.

Emphatically after 2016, Erdoğan completely dismantled the Kemalist ‘levers of power’ by replacing Kemalism with an Islamist-Ultranationalist ideology that is now embraced by the great majority of the Turkish political forces and inspired by the work of Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, the ideological guide of Alparslan Türkeş, founder of the Grey Wolves party MHP. Türkeş’ direct (Bahçeli) and indirect (Akşene, Oğan) political descendants garnered 25% of the vote in the May 2023 parliamentary election and, together with AKP, make up for more than 60% of all deputies in the Turkish Parliament.⁸² The biggest devotee of Kısakürek’s anti-Western, ultra-nationalist and Islamist ideas is Erdoğan himself. The political alliance of AKP and MHP co-ruling Turkey after 2015 was not imposed on Erdoğan only as a result of electoral necessity. It was built on the basis of the great ideological affinity of the two parties that derive their common ideological inspiration from Kısakürek.

Kısakürek’s ideology is structurally anti-democratic in its separation of powers, anti-Western in its geopolitical orientation, quintessentially anti-secular and fanatically anti-Semitic to an almost metaphysical level of historical revanchism, as it attributes to the leaders of the Zionist movement a macabre conspiracy responsible for the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of Kemalism. Erdoğanism follows the same ideological imperatives despite the regular diplomatic maneuvers that Erdoğan and the AKP chose to implement

⁸² ‘Turkey Election Results 2023 by the Numbers’, *Al Jazeera*, 14 May 2023, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/14/follow-the-vote-turkey-election-results-2023> (last accessed 27 March 2024).

against their neighbours and potential victims in the Eastern Mediterranean. Erdoğanism is also fundamentally irredentist and revisionist.

Both Kemal himself and İnönü have been openly accused since 2016 by Erdoğan himself of being unacceptably submissive to the West and Greece, to which they ‘handed over’ the Aegean islands. The dissolution of Kemalism at home is also accompanied by the dynamic revision of the Treaty of Lausanne abroad, as all Turkish Islamists have historically desired and as it is already being applied on land and sea against Iraq, Syria, Cyprus, and Greece, with an increasing rate of audacity and aggression. Driven by this virulent ideological synthesis of Islamism and Ultrationalism, Erdoğan will continue down the same path of revisionism, despite the Turkish President’s 2021-2023 tactical détente, which was dictated by the need to secure, in February 2024, the mammoth \$23 billion deal with the USA to modernise the Turkish Air Force.

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