

# The Strategy of Turkey in the Middle East

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There are so many factors that would influence, direct and limit Turkey's strategies in the Middle East that it is very difficult to foresee the future initiatives of the Turkish government. Firstly, there are various countries engaged in all kinds of skirmishes and demands: Syria, Iraq, Iran, Israel and even the "unrecognized" Isis (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). The fights and territorial claims are not only between these states. The religious divide – the Sunnis and the Shiites and their variants – comprises a decisive factor in the forming of alliances and antagonisms. The Shiites form the majority only in Iran and Iraq but they constitute sizeable proportions in almost all the countries in the area. Naturally, ethnic differences – for example, the Kurds and the Turkic ethnic groups – also constitute the basis for tense relations. Military forces related to all these groups operate in various sections of the area. On top of it all, the so-called "great powers", the USA and Russia, are directly involved in the politics and in the fighting in the Middle East and their scenarios for the future are not known.

Even if one leaves aside the various dynamics that create additional controversies in each of the above-mentioned groups – due to personal ambitions, ideological differences, conflicting interests, etc. - the situation is still more complicated because the parties involved form quite often and unexpectedly new alliances. For example, Syria's president Bashar al-Assad from a "friend" and a "brother" turned to be the worst enemy of Turkey the last few years. The Israel-Turkish relations follow a hectic up and down trajectory. The relations of Turkey with Russia changed from downing-an-enemy-plane to developing military deals. The Iraq-Turkey, Iran-Turkey relations changed in the last few weeks, for the worse in the first case, for the better in the second. The USA-Kurdish relations are difficult to follow due to contradictory declarations from the Kurdish part. It is not clear if there are agreements between the USA and Russia vis-à-vis the future of the area. And the relations of Turkey with the "West" are becoming tense in the last months.

In view of the above, the analyst who will manage to foresee accurately the moves of Turkey will be the lucky one! Still, some predictions of the motives of the President of the country, R. T. Erdogan, the sole authority in power, who the last few years determines the state policies, can be made. To do this one has to put himself in his shoes.

At present his main concerns are the municipal elections in the spring of 2019 but especially the presidential elections later the same year. He can be reelected obtaining the majority of the votes, i.e., 50%, and he needs to win these elections to secure his presidency. Losing his present position encompasses special risks. Politically, the country is polarized, recently having faced a military coup, and himself and some of his family members being accused of corruption by his opponents. There was a scandal in December 2013 which was transcended only by vigorous and dubious interference in the judiciary system. A future trial about these interventions is a sword of Damocles for R.T. Erdogan.

On top of these, an additional forthcoming danger is the trial of Reza Zarrab who in March 2016 was arrested in the United States and was charged with evading the US sanctions on Iran and money laundering, involving ministers of the Turkish government of the prime minister then and now the president of Turkey. This trial will continue on 27 November and it is closely related to the scandal of December 2013. According to press news, the family members of R.T. Erdogan are named in the indictment. Erdogan on October 12, 2017 publicly criticized the USA saying “my citizen [Zarrab] has been in prison in the U.S for two years having committed no crime and they are trying to use him as a confessor”. Actually, the probable confessions of Zarrab may prove detrimental for the President.

To keep the presidential post as a protective shield against these threats is a high priority for R.T. Erdogan. Most of his latest political endeavors may be explained in the light of this objective: He tries to secure the highest popular support by launching initiatives that are to the liking of the greater portion of the Turkish population. The sudden hardening of the policies against the Kurdish origin Turkish citizens and the Kurds of Iraq is one example. Many Kurds within Turkey, from MPs to mayors and to members of the legal political party HDP, have been imprisoned and military measures are being taken against the Kurds of Iraq and Syria. With these actions it is envisaged that sympathizers of the nationalist party MHP will come to his side.

The analysts in Turkey – and this is affirmed by the opinion polls – state that the existence of a real or imagined foreign enemy creates the need for a strong leader and this feeling of the masses in turn favors the person(s) in power. The nationalist and populist (and Islamic) discourse and action operate to the advantage of R.T. Erdogan. When this very personal factor is taken into consideration, in conjunction with his almost limitless authority to take state decisions, at least some motives may be predicted: there will be tension in the foreign relations of Turkey.

The nationalist haughty discourse will continue. This does not mean that all foreign relations will deteriorate. On the contrary, there may be efforts on the part of Turkey to form new alliances and acquire new friends. It is difficult, however, to predict who these new allies will be since there will not be a well designed strategy that will dictate future steps but rather contingent short term expediencies that will come forth as tactics. The choices will be mainly dictated by the worries of R.T. Erdogan. There may be surprising changes in foreign relations, but somehow explained when the needs of the President are taken into consideration.

In the long term the Kurds will remain as the “enemies” and the creation of an independent Kurdish state will be opposed. Nationalistic discourse will be of great importance in the foreseeable future in Turkey. The alliances of Turkey will be mostly determined on the basis of

who is on the President's side. Pragmatism will have its roots in family interest and short term tactics. Turkey will be very friendly or the opposite, depending on who will be of any use to the President of Turkey and can or cannot be exploited. In short, the future is difficult to see but the motives are not.