
Erdogan's Problems With His Neighbors

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Turkey's recent spat with Egypt, that saw a mutual downgrading of ties, is just the latest in a series of diplomatic incidents that have left Erdogan's government isolated in the Middle East.

Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan. Photo: REUTERS/Umit Bektas

Two days after Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan described the situation in Egypt as a "humanitarian drama" and dismissed the legitimacy of the trial of deposed leader Mohamed Morsi on charges of inciting murder of his political opponents, the Egyptian government announced its decision to expel Turkish Ambassador Huseyin Avni Botsali and cut off ambassadorial relations indefinitely.

Turkey reciprocated by downgrading its diplomatic representation in Cairo to charge d'affaires and declaring the Egyptian ambassador, who had already left the country in August, a persona non grata.

Following Israel and Syria, Egypt became the third country in the region to recently downgrade its relations with Turkey. This situation stands in stark contrast to the stated foreign policy aims of the ruling AKP government. In 2009, when Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu declared he would implement a policy of "zero problems with neighbors," the common assumption was that he would push for thawing of relations with Cyprus and Armenia - with whom Turkey has had no diplomatic relations since 1974 and 1994, respectively.

Four years later, Turkey has not only failed to improve relations with either of its longstanding adversaries, but has had its diplomatic representation formally downgraded with more countries in the region, in addition to enjoying rockier relations with most other countries in the Middle East.

What went wrong? Dubbed "neo-Ottomanism" by various analysts, the AKP Party's foreign policy sought to establish Turkey as a model state for the Arab world, at a time when the Arab Spring continues to reshape the political landscape. A romantic in nature, Erdogan envisaged a renaissance of Turkey's soft power - with him at the helm - that would push the ideas of democracy, modernism and peaceful reconciliation in a troubled region.

As a non-Arab actor, however, Erdogan found religion, rather than national identity, to be the common value to appeal to the Arab masses. As a self-declared "conservative democrat," he guided his party members to voice support for free elections in all Arab states, while allying themselves with the Islamist-leaning and populist political movements, with whom they share common ideological roots.

Turning his back on Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's legacy of building a secular nation, Erdogan endorsed the idea of pan-Islamic unity as an overarching identity across the newly emerging regimes of the region.

Recently, at his party's group meeting, Erdogan expressed this by saying: "For us, there is one certainty: That within our national borders, the Turks, Kurds, Laz, Circassians... all Islamic people share a common

interest - that they decided to work together, that there is a religious unity."

Yet when the strategy to win the hearts of the Middle Eastern masses meant taking leadership of political Islam at the cost of hurting Turkey's time-honored balancing acts on foreign policy, the strategy came crashing down.

First of all, Erdogan's Sunni-oriented messages did not resonate in Shi'ite-majority countries such as Iran and Iraq. Then, the secular Alawite regime in Syria was not overthrown as hoped by the ongoing civil war. And most recently, in the summer, the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Egypt lost its power to the military, despite having won the elections a year earlier.

The coup in Egypt became a turning point in AKP's foreign policy, as for the first time, Erdogan could not find considerable support from any of the major Arab states. When the toppled leader Morsi was arrested, Erdogan provided the harshest condemnation of any country in the region.

Moreover, after the Egyptian security forces' deadly raid on pro-Morsi protesters camps in Rabaa Square in August 2013, Erdogan adopted the hand gesture used by Morsi supporters for use in his own political rallies in Turkey, saying he "won't let [the world] forget the Rabaa."

Meanwhile, most Arab states assumed a neutral position toward Egypt, with Gulf countries offering significant financial aid to the military-backed government in Cairo. Even the staunchly Islamist Hamas government did not pick sides, referring to the events as "an internal matter of Egypt."

Last Saturday, the Egyptian Foreign Ministry issued a statement responding to Turkey's actions, saying the country "has persisted in its unacceptable and unjustified positions, by trying to turn the international community against Egyptian interests, supporting meetings for groups that seek to create instability in the country and making statements that can only be described as an offense to the popular will."

Following the statement, the Al-Youm Al-Sabea newspaper published an article which, citing an unnamed, high-ranking government source, claimed Egyptian intelligence had intercepted communications containing evidence of Turkey's ambassador carrying out a plan to destabilize the new Egyptian government - by lending support to Muslim Brotherhood, whose activities are now declared illegal in Egypt. The same source claimed that the Turkish ambassador sheltered activists inside the embassy, and transferred money to support the Brotherhood's armed cells training in Sinai and the Gaza Strip.

Turkish officials have categorically denied the claims, but Erdogan defended Turkey's approach.

Responding to Cairo's decision to cut off ties, he said: "I will never respect those who come to power through military coups."

It is possible that Erdogan's unwavering stance stems from his personal identification with the situation faced by the Brotherhood in Egypt. Having been jailed previously for "undermining the secular regime" and having survived a number of alleged coup plots, the Turkish prime minister has always had it rough with the secularists.

More importantly, Erdogan, too, has faced massive street protests in tandem with Morsi in Egypt. As a result of his government's strong crackdown on what started out as a peaceful environmentalist protest to save Istanbul's Taksim Gezi Park from demolition, the protests spread rapidly, with many calling for his resignation.

Indeed, according to a report released by the Turkish parliament earlier this month, an estimated 3.6 million people took part in street protests for two months straight, in 80 out of 81 provinces of the country.

Fearing a military intervention at home, Erdogan probably wanted to send a message of determination internally, by way of supporting the Morsi government abroad.

The result is a less influential Turkey. Losing its leverage with both the Arabs and Israelis, and now with the Iranians on track to reestablishing ties with the Western world, Turkey finds its ability to implement its own vision for the Middle East ever more difficult.

The situation is not that better on the Western front either. After the violent crackdown on the Gezi protests, the AKP government has lost some of its charm as a moderating force in the Islamic world in the eyes of the Europeans.

Being turned away from the EU and increasingly more isolated in the Middle East, Turkey has recently turned to Russia. Last week in St.

Petersburg, Erdogan asked Russian President Vladimir Putin whether Turkey could join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to "save us from the inconvenience" of the EU accession process. An economic and military alliance, the SCO comprises Russia, China, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

While the SCO could provide Turkey with a sought-after international alliance, it is unlikely to help fulfill Erdogan's ambitions for restoring Turkey's imperial prestige in the Middle East.

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