

# COMMENTARY

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## **The Fall of the Would-Be Emperor**

**Alon Ben-Meir**

**New York University**

President Erdogan has recently come under intense criticism for his unwillingness to come to the aid of the beleaguered Syrian Kurds in the city of Kobani just across the Turkish border. Sadly, Erdogan's behaviour is not surprising as he has always pursued policies consistent with the image of himself as a great leader and his country as a regional hegemon and a global power.

To his credit, Erdogan served his country with distinction, especially during much of his first and second term as Prime Minister. He put Turkey on the map as a progressive and prosperous nation, one that struck a healthy balance between religion and democracy, admired by friends, envied by foes, and recognized as a major regional power.

Since coming to power in 2002, however, his achievements have been eclipsed by three themes which have dominated his political career: a) his distorted account of the Ottoman Empire and his vision of Turkey's future 'greatness', b) his religious fervour and support of Islamists, and c) his insatiable hunger for power domestically, regionally, and globally.

Erdogan never missed an opportunity to show off how much the 'new' Turkish Republic, as the successor of the Ottoman Empire, has achieved and how its importance has grown because of its geostrategic location, economic development, status as an energy hub, and unrivalled military prowess in the region.

Erdogan has never been fazed by the fact that today's Turkey is not the Ottoman Empire and that the Ottomans were not as admired by the peoples they governed, as Erdogan wants to believe.

As recently as September 2014, Erdogan stated that “The Ottoman State had a very successful administration system, and for centuries, these areas of crisis today had **maintained their existence without problems**. The Palestinian issue, the problems in Iraq and Syria, Crimea, Balkans, **all are issues that came about after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire.**” [Emphasis added]

Ironically, Erdogan’s boasting about the lack of problems during the Ottoman era seems to have escaped his doctrine of “zero problems with neighbours,” as Turkey today has problems with nearly every neighbour, standing in stark contrast to what Prime Minister Davutoglu (reflecting his boss’ view) stated:

“[Turkey wants] to integrate with our neighbours... have a belt of stability, security, prosperity in the surrounding regions” and at the same time seek to become a member of the EU.

In fact, Erdogan’s domestic policy has diminished Turkey’s prospect of becoming a member of the EU because many in the EU do not want to integrate an Islamic state with a large population, which would give it a leading role in a “Christian club.”

More important, the EU has raised concerns about the Turkish government’s interference with the judiciary, the restrictions it has imposed on the press, and the “excessive use of force [which] continues to be a matter of concern.”

In the wake of the Arab Spring, Erdogan was convinced that it was Turkey’s time to project itself as the leader of the Sunni Arab world. He believed that Turkey could offer a successful model of democracy and religion.

However, he was rebuffed by the Arab states as Arabs throughout the Middle East recall the reign of the Ottoman Empire and has little desire to see Turkey restore Ottoman-like power that would dominate the region.

Erdogan’s follies have severely strained Turkey’s relations with the United States, going back to the Iraq war in 2003. More recently, Turkey rebuffed the US’ request to use its air base near the Syrian border to aid the besieged Kurds in Kobani.

The US has openly criticized Turkey’s open border policy and the “jihadist highway” that has been created as the Turkish government did little to stop the flow of fighters joining ISIS.

Presently, there is intense discussion in the Obama administration about Turkey’s worthiness as an ally, its importance as a NATO member, and the extent to which the US should cooperate strategically and share intelligence with Turkey.

As a part of Erdogan's ambition to solidify his domestic and regional power, he embarked on a systematic Islamization campaign, aggressively making Turkey an ever-more Islamic state while openly supporting Islamist groups such as Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Many suspect that he in fact supports the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which could explain why he refused to join the American coalition against ISIS, albeit under the pretence that the PKK and the Syrian Kurds are one and the same.

Erdogan made Islamic credentials central to high profile political and military appointments. To further imbue the educational system with Islam, he transferred more than 800 people from the Religious Affairs Directorate to the Education Ministry.

He provoked outrage when he likened abortion to murder, pushed to allow more religious schools to create a new "pious generation," annulled the ban on headscarves, and enacted a controversial law banning the sale of alcohol overnight.

He doubled the number of schools that train Sunni Islamic clerics and instructed the military to include 'basic religious education.' In addition, the number of mosques has increased by more than 7,000 throughout his tenure.

Erdogan's obsession with Islam went as far as claiming that "Contacts between Latin America and Islam date back to the 12th century," which is far removed from the historic account. And his claim that "Muslim sailors arrived in America from 1178" is as absurd as his unfounded claim that "Columbus mentioned the existence of a mosque on a hill on the Cuban coast."

In order to consolidate his power, Erdogan understood that a strong economy is key to prevent the rise of domestic opposition to his wildly unpopular social and political actions.

In the summer of 2013, he cracked down on peaceful demonstrators in Gezi Park and arrested scores of journalists who are still languishing in jail. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, there are more journalists in prison in Turkey than in China or Iran.

He instructed internal intelligence to spy on ordinary people and passed a new law that empowers the intelligence agency to collect private data without the need for a court order.

Following accusations of corruption, Erdogan purged several thousand police officers and legal officials, accusing his rivals of plotting against him.

In 2013, he emasculated the military by deposing high ranking military officers and putting them under house arrest, accusing them of plotting to bring down the pro-Islamist government led by the Justice and Development Party.

To top it all, his unconscionable inaction to prevent the slaughter of the Kurds in Kobani only points to his self-centred interests and moral decadence.

Sadly, Erdogan does not understand that times have changed. He squandered a historic opportunity to make Turkey a model of Islamic democracy with impressive economic and political achievements.

His dream of presiding as the emperor over a powerful country with global outreach and influence, as the Ottoman Empire once was, is an illusion and just as illusionary is his desire to preside over the hundredth anniversary of the Turkish Republic in 2023.

Turkey has the potential of becoming a significant global power, but to realize that, Erdogan must change course or leave. His arrogance, though, and self-styled piousness will prevent him from doing either and deny Turkey its deserving place to play a constructive role on the global stage.

**Note:** This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal. Web Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/fall-emperor/>

**Dr. Alon Ben-Meir is a professor of international relations and Middle Eastern Studies at New York University. He is also a journalist/author and writes a weekly syndicated column for United Press International, which appears regularly in US and international newspapers. Email: [alon@alonben-meir.com](mailto:alon@alonben-meir.com)**

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