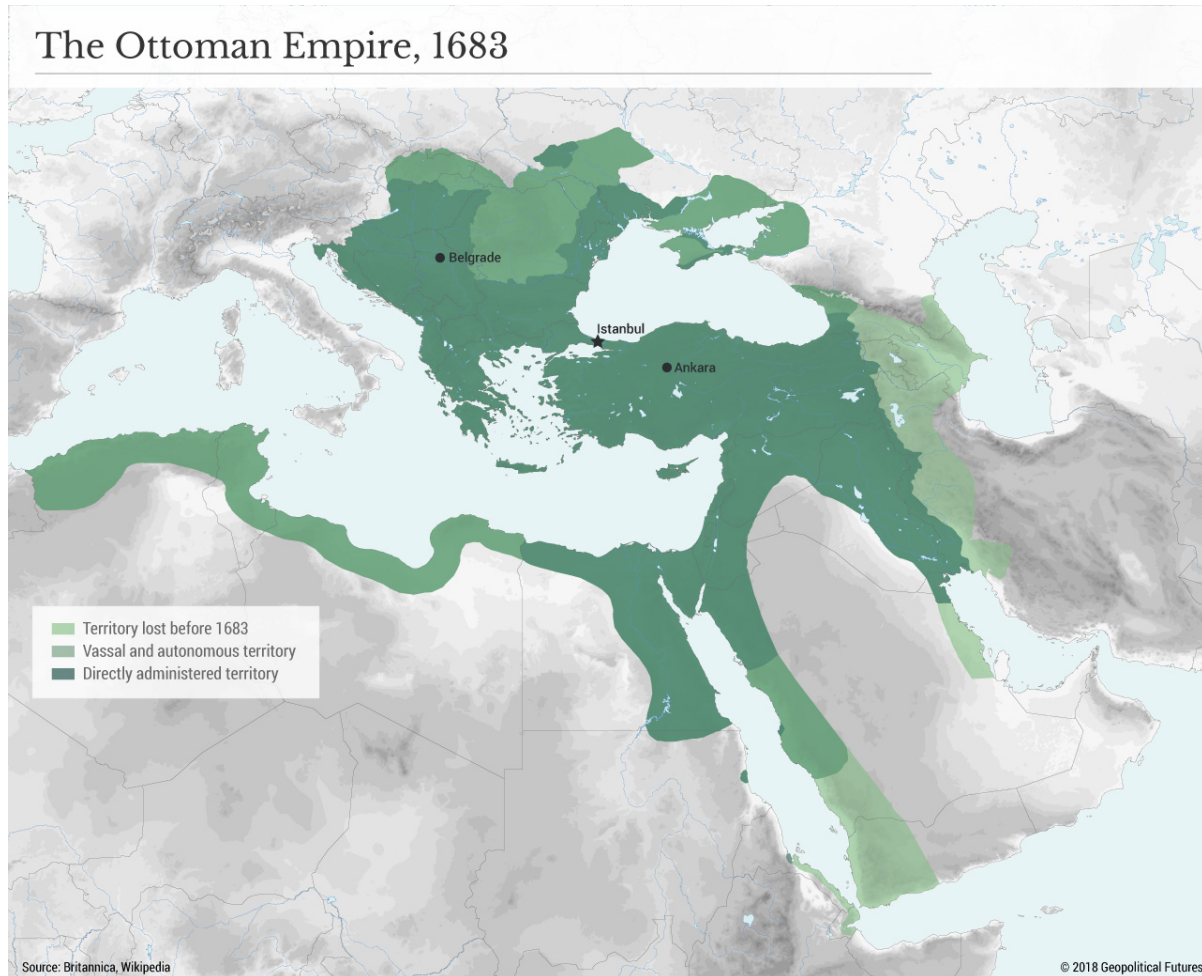


Erdogan's Plan for a Greater Turkey

by Hilal Khashan - December 6, 2022

The quest to create a greater Turkish state is an old idea. It was first promoted by the Committee of Union and Progress, which was secretly established in Istanbul in 1889 and sought to establish a Turkish entity named Turan on the ruins of the faltering Ottoman Empire. Followers of Turanian ideology believe the Turan region includes the areas between the Iranian plateau and the Caspian Sea. Some advocates of Turanian nationalism claim that the Turkic population includes peoples from western China to eastern Europe. They view the Turkic population today as the inhabitants of Turkey, the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Balkans.

Modern Turkish leaders have taken up the cause of establishing a greater Turkish state. The Republican People's Party (CHP), established by Turkey's founding father, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, took the lead in championing the project. Most recently, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became its lead proponent after his Justice and Development Party (AKP) seized power in 2002. His focus has been on reviving pan-Turanism and blending it with neo-Ottomanism, a concept that Atatürk had discarded.



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Expanding Turkey's Reach

Turkish leaders have sought for years to forge alliances with other Muslim-majority states to expand Turkey's reach. During his time as prime minister from 1989 to 1993, Turgut Ozal sought to open a new chapter of Turkish relations with Arab and Muslim countries, following years of strained ties under the CHP. In 1997, Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan established the Developing-8 Organization for Economic Cooperation, whose membership includes Indonesia, Malaysia, Iran, Egypt, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nigeria. When the AKP took power, the foreign minister launched Turkey's "zero problems with its neighbors" policy aimed at minimizing tensions with other Middle Eastern states.

Turkey is also increasing its soft power in the South Caucasus. Its most important success has been in Azerbaijan, which benefited from Turkey's assistance in the second Nagorno-Karabakh War

against Armenia in 2020. In 2017, Turkey established a military base in Qatar amid reports of plans to invade the country, and in 2019, it deployed troops to Libya. Its military intervention broke the siege of Tripoli by the Tobruk-based Libyan National Army. Turkey recently signed a military cooperation agreement with Libya's unity government. And while it repaired its relationships with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and expressed a willingness to resolve its differences with Egypt, it escalated its dispute with Greece and Cyprus over its exclusive economic zone in the Eastern Mediterranean.

In 2016, Turkish state media published a new map of the country that expanded its internationally recognized borders. It incorporated a few Greek islands in the Aegean Sea, as well as territory in northern Syria, extending from Aleppo to the northern Iraqi cities of Mosul and Kirkuk. Publication of the map coincided with Erdogan's talk about the need to amend the 1923 Lausanne Agreement, which established the borders of modern Turkey. He also criticized Ataturk for abandoning Mosul and Aleppo.

Ankara has also long sought to defend Turkish minorities living abroad. It refused to recognize France's decision to divide Syria in 1920-21 into five states and established the autonomous Sanjak of Alexandretta, subsequently renamed Hatay, as a subdivision of the state of Aleppo. In 1936, Turkey submitted a complaint to the League of Nations, claiming that Turkish residents in Hatay were victims of abuse. One month before Ataturk's death in 1938, the French declared the establishment of the provisional Hatay state, co-administered by France and Turkey in violation of the terms of the Franco-Syrian Treaty of Independence. In 1939, Turkey annexed the territory after a rigged referendum showed that most inhabitants favored unity with the Turkish Republic.

Ankara came to the defense of ethnic Turks in Cyprus after clashes erupted with Greek Cypriots in 1963. Turkey deployed its air force and threatened to invade, before U.S. President Lyndon Johnson warned it against doing so. In 1974, the Cypriot National Guard orchestrated a coup d'etat ordered by the Greek junta as part of a plan to unify Cyprus with Greece. Taking advantage of Washington's preoccupation with the Watergate scandal, Turkey invaded Cyprus, seizing control of 40 percent of the island. The northern part of Cyprus later declared independence, establishing the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus in 1983.

Why Syria and Iraq Matter

Last month, an explosion in Istiklal Street in the heart of Istanbul killed eight people and injured dozens. Vowing revenge, Erdogan blamed the attack on the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – considered a terrorist group by Turkey – and its operations based in Kobani, Syria. The strategic

border city was seized in 2014 by the Islamic State but recaptured by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), which Ankara views as the Syrian arm of the PKK, in 2015 with the United States' help. IS was responsible for another blast on Istiklal Street in 2016, part a spate of terror attacks carried out by the group. The predominantly Kurdish Movement for a Democratic Society, which promotes democratic self-administration in north and east Syria, took issue with Ankara's allegation that the PKK/YPG were responsible for last month's explosion. The movement views the accusation as a pretext to justify Turkey's Operation Claw-Sword, a large military campaign against Kurdish targets in Iraq and Syria.

Ankara launched Operation Claw-Sword, which includes airstrikes and a ground campaign against Kurdish positions from Aleppo to Erbil, on Nov. 20. Erdogan says he intends to establish a security belt on the Syrian side of the border, measuring 30 kilometers deep and more than 900 kilometers long from the Mediterranean to the Iraqi border. This is the fourth operation launched by Turkey in Syria since 2016. In every previous campaign, Turkey seized control of territory in northern Syria – part of Erdogan's goal, stated in 2015, to establish a buffer zone along the border. He argues that this project will protect Turkish national interests and help resettle 1 million of the 3.5 million Syrian refugees living in Turkey.

The U.S. and key European countries don't support Erdogan's plan. The YPG and the Women's Protection Units, both of which are also classified as terrorist groups by Ankara, constitute the most significant components of the Syrian Democratic Forces, with which the U.S. has partnered in its fight against the Islamic State. Fellow participants in the Astana peace process, namely Russia and Iran, also oppose any Turkish military operation in northern Syria.

Erdogan, however, is trying to take advantage of his country's rising position as a mediator in the Ukraine war to seize control over a larger share of Syria. Ankara reached separate agreements with Washington and Moscow to remove the SDF from Tal Rifaat and Manbij, two strategic cities located west of the Euphrates, and from areas along the border. The agreements would have given Turkey control of the international highway known as the M4, but the Americans and Russians reneged on the deals. Now, however, they need Erdogan's cooperation on Ukraine. Turkey has become a major link between Washington and Moscow, especially after it negotiated an agreement with Russia to export Ukrainian grain through the Black Sea. Erdogan is hoping this will open the door for acceptance of Operation Claw-Sword.

The plan has two parts: The claw refers to targeted airstrikes, and the sword to a ground offensive. Turkey obtained tacit approval from Russia and the U.S. to launch the first phase of the operation.

Erdogan said Turkey would soon attack Kurdish forces with armor and infantry in response to the bombing in Istanbul. It's doubtful, however, that the U.S. will authorize a ground offensive against the SDF.

Bashar Assad's regime handed over control of parts of northern Syria to the YPG. Assad considered the Kurds allies of his government, which had embraced the PKK leader and offered him refuge in Damascus for nearly two decades during a tense period in Turkish-Syrian relations. The Kurds felt empowered when the civil war broke out, boosting their dream of establishing a Kurdistan in Syria on the model of Iraqi Kurdistan.

The official Turkish position is that Kurdish separatists in Iraqi Kurdistan determine the political orientation of the Syrian Kurds. There are more than 20 Turkish military bases in northern Iraq, predominately in Bashiqa near Mosul, the country's second-largest city after Baghdad. Turkey is also expanding its post in the Metina region in Duhok governorate, despite the Iraqi government's protests, to become the focal point of its operations against the PKK. Turkey's interior minister has said that his country will act in Iraq, as it did in Syria, and control new areas in its northern region.

The Rhetoric Continues

In 2020, Erdogan said the reopening of the Hagia Sophia mosque in Istanbul reminded the Turkish people of their strength, symbolizing their resurrection and the breaking of the shackles on their feet. He promised to continue the march until Turkey reaches its destination. He also said that by 2023, when the country celebrates the centenary of its founding, it will be strong, independent and prosperous.

But his expectations are unrealistic, given Turkey's economic crisis, structural weakness and collapsing currency. Erdogan's approval ratings are falling, as the Turkish people struggle to make ends meet and grow increasingly unimpressed by his adventurism abroad. Though the war in Ukraine increased Turkey's significance to NATO, the U.S. can curb Erdogan's foreign ambitions if he threatens its other regional allies. Erdogan's plans for a greater Turkey are now in doubt.

Author: Hilal Khashan

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