

# Erdogan: The Sultan Of An Illusionary Ottoman Empire

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*This is the fourth and last in a series of articles based in part on eyewitness accounts about the rapidly deteriorating socio-political conditions in Turkey and what the future may hold for the country. The first, second and third articles are available here: [First](#), [Second](#), [Third](#).*

In many conversations and encounters I had over the years with former Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, he emphatically echoed his boss President Erdogan's grandiose vision that by 2023 (the 100th anniversary of the Turkish Republic), Turkey will become as powerful and influential as the Ottoman Empire was during its heyday. Under the best of circumstances, Turkey cannot realize Erdogan's far-fetched dream. Had he stayed the course, however, with his socio-political and judiciary reforms and economic developments, as he had during his first nine years in power, Turkey could have become a major player on the global stage and a regional powerhouse.

Sadly, Erdogan abandoned much of the impressive democratic reforms he championed, and embarked upon a systematic Islamization of the country while dismantling the pillars of democracy. He amassed unprecedented powers and transformed Turkey from a democratic to an autocratic country, ensuring that he has the last word on all matters of state.

In retrospect, it appears that Erdogan had never committed himself to a democratic form of government. The reforms he undertook during his first nine years in power were largely induced by the European Union's requirements from any country seeking membership, which he exploited as a means by which to propel himself toward his ultimate goal. A quote attributed to him in 1999 describes precisely what his real intentions were from the day he rose to power. "Democracy" he said, "is like a bus, when you arrive at your destination, you step off."

His role model is Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (meaning "Father of the Turks"), who founded the Turkish Republic in 1923. Both share similar personal attributes as they sought to lead the nation with an iron fist while disregarding any separation of power. However, Atatürk was determined to establish a Westernized secular democratic state while Erdogan went in the opposite direction.

Erdogan steadily moved to create a theocracy where Islamic tradition and values reign supreme while assuming Atatürk's image, which is revered by most Turks. Erdogan presents himself as one who leads with determination and purpose, generating power from his popular support, ultimately seeking to replace Atatürk; with the new amendments to the constitution, he will be endowed with powers even greater than Atatürk ever held.

With his growing popularity and most impressive economic growth, Erdogan successfully created the status of a strong and resolute leader—the "father" of a new Turkish

Republic—and artfully penetrated the consciousness of the Turkish public while using Islam as the undisputed pathway that will lead Turkey to greatness. He is determined to preside at the 100th anniversary of the Turkish Republic over a powerful nation among the top ten largest global economies and that extends its influence East and West, akin to the prodigious influence that the Ottoman Empire enjoyed.

To realize his grand vision, Erdogan took several measures to consolidate his absolute power.

First, clearing the way: Erdogan embarked on the complete marginalization or elimination of anyone, in and outside the ruling AK Party, that challenged his authority or advanced new ideas for solving the country's problems. Those who did not support his policies and dared to question his judgment were not spared. He resorted to conspiracy theories, accusing his political opponents of being enemies of the state aiming to topple his government, in order to continue unopposed to realize his vision for the country, analogous to the influence and outreach of the Ottoman Empire. He even fired his long-time friend and confidant Davutoglu because Davutoglu differed from him in connection with the Kurdish problem, and especially because of Davutoglu's reluctance to support the constitutional amendments that will grant the president sweeping and unprecedented powers.

Second, the need for a culprit: Erdogan needed a scapegoat to blame for any of his shortcomings, and found the Gulen movement to be the perfect culprit that would provide him with the cover to overshadow the massive corruption that has swept his government. This also provided him with the "justification" to crack down on many social, political, and institutional entities, silencing the media, controlling the judiciary, and subordinating the military.

The aftermath of the attempted military coup in July 2016 gave him the ammunition to conduct a society-wide witch-hunt, providing him with the excuse to purge tens of thousands of people from academia, civil society, judiciary, military, and internal security. This has allowed him to assume total control of all departments in the government and private sector. He described his purge as a necessary evil to cleanse the public of the 'cancer' that has gripped the country. In so doing, he ensured that the political system revolves around the presidency, leaving him completely unchallenged to pursue his imperial dream to resurrect the stature of the Ottoman Empire as the country prepares to vote in the constitutional referendum on April 16.

Third, the creation of Ottoman symbolism: To project his grandiose vision, Erdogan needed to instill Ottoman images into the public consciousness, including the building of a 1,100-room 'White Palace' as his residence at a prohibitive cost to taxpayers. His most recent project was the Çamlica Mosque, the now-largest mosque in Istanbul, standing on the eponymous hill that overlooks the entire city.

Recently, Erdogan started the construction of another mosque in Taksim Square—once the site of the fiercest protests against Erdogan in his career—with all the style of the Ottoman era. Erdogan has even instructed that the national anthem be played on modified drums and brass instruments to make the music sound as if it were being played by bands of the Ottoman period. His purpose is to indoctrinate the public in a subliminal way to his perspective of the glorious Ottoman period.

Fourth, foreign policy assertiveness: Under Erdogan, Turkey has become increasingly assertive and forceful in the region. In Cyprus, he is determined to strike a deal largely on his terms. In Iraq, he placed Turkish troops over the objections of the Iraqi government to maintain his ruthless war against the Kurds. In Syria, he allowed thousands of foreign fighters, including many who have joined ISIS, to cross the border to strengthen the anti-Assad fight, while fighting the Syrian Kurds to prevent them from establishing their own autonomous rule, fearing that the Turkish Kurds would also demand autonomous rule of their own.

Erdogan further promoted the policy of “zero problem with neighbors,” and although presently Turkey has problems with just about every neighbor (and its prospective EU membership has completely diminished), he continues to claim that Turkey enjoys good relations internationally. Erdogan still uses Turkey’s membership in NATO as a sign of greatness; the fact that Turkey has the second-largest number of ground troops in NATO reinforces his illusion that Ankara enjoys unrivaled military prowess in the region and commands the respect and attention of the international community that the Ottoman Empire was accorded.

Fifth, promoting Islam as a powerful tool: Erdogan is also using Sunni Islam to promote the country as a republic with Islamic ideals supported by a loyal state apparatus. He portrays himself as the leader of the Sunni world that would restore the Ottoman era of influence while cementing his authoritarian rule in the form of a neo-Sultan. To be sure, Erdogan is vigorously promoting – with the support of his party – Islamic nationalism systematically and meticulously. Mustafa Akyol, a Turkish analyst of politics and culture and author of the new book *The Islamic Jesus* says that “political propaganda is in your face every day, every single moment. If you turn on TV, if you open newspapers...”

Former Prime Minister Davutoglu said in 2015 that Turkey “will re-found the Ottoman state.” Although Davutoglu was fired, he—like most Turkish officials—depicts the government as the rightful heir of the Ottoman legacy. To that end, Erdogan uses Islam as the unifying theme that would propel Turkey to the greatness that the Ottoman Empire enjoyed. In fact, Turkish religious leaders have always thought of themselves as the standard-bearer of Islamic civilization, and though this failed with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, to them it must now be corrected. As they would have it, “Turks once again should lead the ummah [Islamic community] as the new Ottomans.”

Sadly, Erdogan, who is still seen as a hero by nearly half of the Turkish population, is leading the country on a treacherous path. Turkey and its people have the resources, creativity, and institutions to make Turkey a significant power. Erdogan, who demonstrated an uncanny ability to harness his country’s natural and human resources, could have made Turkey such a power on the global stage. Indeed, he would have been the Atatürk of the new era had he simply continued with his historic reforms while protecting the rights of every individual and creating a real model of Islamic democracy.

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire was largely precipitated, among other things, by its internal political decadence, the arbitrary exercising of power, and gross violations of human rights that dramatically eroded the foundation on which the empire was built.

In whichever form Erdogan wants to resurrect the Ottoman Empire, he will fail because no country can survive, let alone become great, as long as the government walks on the backs of the people and stifles their freedom to act, speak, and dream.

There is where the greatness of any nation rests and endures—the Ottoman Empire never provided a model worthy of such emulation.

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