

# Erdogan the Magnificent: neo-Ottomanism begins to take shape

By Nikos Akritas

Is President Erdogan of Turkey laying the groundwork for an invasion of Syria? Putin has recently heralded Erdogan as a key player in peace efforts regarding the conflict in Gaza, referring to his authority in the region and the Islamic world. This is despite the Turkish prime minister having already cut ties with Israel, openly expressed antisemitism and his support for Hamas, and very recently warned of the 'Zionist threat' to Turkey.



Russia is too bogged down with its protracted invasion of Ukraine to assert any direct influence in the Middle East. It could not even stop Azerbaijani troops from entering Nagorno Karabakh, resulting in the ethnic cleansing of over 90% of the Armenian population. Russian troops had been posted there as peacekeepers to prevent this.

The latter event could be the result of an understanding between the two regional powers. Turkey gets a free hand in aiding its ally, Azerbaijan, take hold of Nagorno Karabakh and asserting its dominance in the Middle East, allowing it to address its own 'Kurdish problem'. Erdogan's military involvement would pre-occupy the West, thereby serving the interests of Putin's foreign policy machinations.

Erdogan would benefit three-fold from such action: 'pacifying' the Kurds in Syria, increasing his popularity in the wider

Muslim world by playing the ever-popular card of antisemitism, and asserting Turkey's dominance in the region. Advancing into Syria would also create opportunities for providing assistance to Lebanon, potentially taking Turkish forces right to the front line with Israel.

Hezbollah has already warned Cyprus it will be targeted if it allows Israeli forces to use its airports and bases. A widening of the conflict would also serve Iran's and Turkey's interests, even though Turkey's involvement in the region would undermine Iran's influence.

Maybe Western powers are already pulling strings behind closed doors. Recently, the UAE and the Saudis have distanced themselves further from the Palestinian and antisemitic alliance.

The UAE foreign minister recently had an acrimonious exchange with a senior Palestinian advisor at a meeting involving the US Secretary of State and representatives of Arab countries in the region. The meeting descended into chaos when UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan likened the Palestinian leadership to "Ali Baba and the forty thieves." He also called it "useless."

Saudi Arabia has, reportedly, increased arrests for those criticizing Israel on social media – although this is very likely due to its own security concerns, as [antisemitism remains a feature of its own mainstream press](#).

The fallout of such a scenario could fracture the NATO alliance, to the benefit of both Erdogan and Putin. Putin would face a disunited West in further acts of aggression and Erdogan will play all sides to his advantage. This would not only result in an increase of foreign territories under Turkish control but further his image as a strongman of Islamic principles (and the head of a wealthy, militarily strong country) and challenger to the 'Zionist threat'. Turkey

is, and will be further, well-positioned to manipulate the West's fears of, and garner its support against, the Russian threat and Islamic extremism.

Such influence will allow it to achieve its own immediate aims, resulting in further massacres of Kurds and tightening the noose around Armenia. This would thwart the tiny country's attempts to reach out to the West and shake off its dependence on ineffectual Russian protection from regional threats, most notably Turkey and Azerbaijan.

It would also result in dominating the waters around Cyprus, threatening that tiny country's oil and gas exploration in the area, as well as Israel. This would further serve its wider interests and dominance in the region; including in Iraq, where it already has troops stationed, and which is home to another sizeable Kurdish population.

Although standing up to the 'Zionists' is popular in Turkey, direct involvement in a Middle East conflict would not be. Turkey has its own serious economic and social problems as a result of Erdogan's blunders over the last twenty years.

However, he might judge this a perfect distraction. He would not be the first unpopular leader of a country, where things are going badly at home, to get involved in a foreign war in order to galvanise support and homogeneity of opinion around a 'common enemy'.

Antisemitism always has the potential to unite Muslim condemnation of Israel but this is now a regional power play. Iran has been operating through proxies since 1979 but is militarily weak. The Saudis use their oil diplomacy to influence regional events but do not directly intervene. However, Turkey's direct entry into a regional conflict, with its military capability and wealth (Turkey's GDP puts it in the top 10% wealthiest countries in the world), changes the regional game completely.

The cataclysm that could ensue should Iran achieve nuclear capability before the Ayatollah's are ousted (hopefully by popular uprising) is at the forefront of everybody's minds but just as, if not more, likely is the involvement of Erdogan, harbouring megalomaniacal delusions, and a widening of the conflict through his actions. Of course, this could lead to overreach and directly result in his downfall, which could destabilise Turkey further and cause additional undesirable ripples throughout the region.

Turkey is perfectly poised to meddle in Syria's affairs. Its army is already in the country; it hosts a very large Syrian refugee population that could be used as proxies; it has a vested interest in preventing the emergence of an independent Kurdish state on its border, given its own significant Kurdish population of around 15 million; and Erdogan seeks to position himself as a champion of Islamic opposition to 'the Zionist threat'.

*Nikos Akritas has worked as a teacher in the Middle East and Central Asia as well as in Britain.*