

# Erdogan's Mischief-Making, and His Comeuppance

by Hugh Fitzgerald



**Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan** sees himself as the natural leader of the Muslim world. Last year saw published in his mouthpiece, the newspaper *Yeni Safak*, his plan for a pan-Islamic army that, with its huge collective armory of planes and tanks, and more than a million men under arms, would be able to attack and destroy the Jewish state. He was surprised when his plan was not applauded by other Muslims, but instead was greeted with a telling silence. Erdogan had overlooked – or more likely refused to recognize – the resentments still felt by many Muslim Arabs at their mistreatment by the Ottoman Turks.

His latest attempt to claim leadership of the Umma against Israel are seen in statements this past June by Turkish officials warning Israel against any attempt at “annexing” Jerusalem. The story, at the Jerusalem Post is [here](#).

*Turkey's Minister of Religious Affairs Ali Erbas vowed over*

*the weekend that “our struggle will continue until Jerusalem is completely free.”*

*The powerful religious scholar and voice in Turkey who is close to the country’s leadership and leading party, was speaking to an online forum of Palestinian scholars. The comments were reported in Turkish on T24 media.*

*He said that Jerusalem is a universal value [sic] and that “Islamic civilization has a memory of historical knowledge and values, and that it is never possible for Muslims to give up on the blessed city.” His views echo those of Turkey’s Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, who told a recent June 10 executive committee meeting that Turkey was putting its full support behind Palestinians against Israel’s annexation. “The ummah [Islamic community] will never give up on a sovereign Palestinian state with Quds al-Sharif as its capital.”*

Apparently not all the states in the Umma agree with this maximalist position by Turkey. Several Arab states – Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE – have been grateful for Israeli intelligence cooperation against a common enemy, Iran, and against the Muslim Brotherhood as well. The ambassadors of three Arab countries, the UAE, Bahrain, and Oman, attended the White House roll-out of Trump’s peace plan, which has been interpreted as a clear sign of approval. The Saudi Crown Prince has even been quoted as telling Mahmoud Abbas to stop his tantrums and accept whatever deal he can from the Americans and Israelis.

The Turkish Minister of Religious Affairs fails to recognize that the Temple Mount’s status will not change under the Trump Plan. It will remain part of the Jerusalem Islamic Waqf (a religious trust) under Jordanian custodianship, while Israeli security control will also continue.

*Erbas, who is also a professor, has as his Twitter background a photo of Jerusalem, not Mecca, which shows how Turkey’s*

*government is trying to adopt the Palestinian cause and make Jerusalem an "Islamic" cause to rally the Middle East against Israel. It is part of an increasing Islamist rhetoric coming out of Turkey, where military campaigns have been compared to "jihad" and where Turkish-backed fighters call their enemies "atheists" and "infidels." The rising rhetoric has also begun to suggest turning Hagia Sophia, the ancient church in Istanbul, into a mosque again.*

The re-islamization of Turkey by Erdogan has been demonstrated by several developments. Most important has been his promotion of the Imam Hatip schools, which began as vocational schools but now have been infused with a heavy dose of religious training. These public schools are now attended by 1.5 million students; they are lavishly funded by the state, provided with at least double the support of regular public schools. And Erdogan sees them as key to his re-islamization efforts, to create a de-kemalized "pious generation." He has also built nearly 20,000 new mosques in Turkey so far during his tenure, adding to the 75,000 that already exist. Under Erdogan, Turkey has been building thousands of mosques overseas, as well, from Accra, Ghana (the largest mosque in West Africa) to Maryland (an Islamic complex said to be the largest of its kind in the entire Western Hemisphere), to Bishkek, Kyrgystan (the largest mosque in Central Asia). In all of these mosques abroad, the sermons are supplied by the Turkish Ministry of Religious Affairs, and are identical to those heard, at the same time, in every Turkish neighborhood, village, and city.

Another example of re-Islamization is the attempt to turn back into mosques the two great edifices, richly decorated with Byzantine paintings and frescoes, that had originally been built as churches and then, after the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, became mosques, only to be turned, after Ataturk's secular reforms, into museums. Turkey's Supreme Court ruled in December 2019 that any structure that had once been a mosque must remain a mosque. The government has applied

this ruling to the Church of St. Savior at Chora, which became a mosque – the Kariye Djami – after the Muslim conquest in 1453, but having ceased to be used as a mosque in 1948, became a museum in 1958. Now it has again become a mosque. On July 10, Erdogan announced that the Hagia Sophia, for nearly a millennium the grandest church and largest building in Christendom, had also “reverted” to its status as a mosque.

*Erbas wrote on June 10 that “conquest expresses a great ideal and moral value in Islamic thought; it is a blessed struggle.” The word “struggle” here to bless the conquest of Istanbul appears to be used in the same religious context as the vow to “struggle” for Jerusalem. The secular Turkish government had once eschewed these religious goals, but the current leaders of Turkey see their cause as increasingly religious. Turkey has met with Iran and Malaysia and other countries to discuss an Islamic currency and Islamic television station over the last year.*

As so often with Erdogan’s grand schemes, nothing has come of the “common Islamic currency” idea, nor is an “Islamic television station” in the offing. But it must have been fun to discuss such dreams, the same way that Muslims cheer themselves up by predicting that “Europe will be taken over by Islam by 2030.”

*The comments by Turkey’s top religious official is an indication of how Turkey wants to oppose Israel’s plans for annexation. Erbas says that “those who occupy Jerusalem find courage because they see Islamic societies as scattered and weak.” This language is a reference to Israel and appears to harken back to the period of Saladin, the Islamic leader who rallied the community against the Crusades.*

Jerusalem has been a Jewish city, inhabited uninterruptedly by Jews, for more than 3,000 years. They are not “those who occupy Jerusalem,” but those who live, rather, in the city

that has been identified with Jews and Judaism since 1000 B.C., when King David conquered the city and made it the capital of the Jewish kingdom. But why should Erbas care about anything that happened in the pre-Islamic period, the Jahiliyya or Time of Ignorance, to people who, the Qur'an tells him, are as Infidels "the most vile of created beings"? Erbas's reference to the Jews finding courage from seeing Islamic communities as "scattered and weak" again brings to mind Erdogan's earlier plan to remedy that, with a pan-Islamic army to be led by – who else? – Turkey.

*The Turkish official appeared to channel the antisemitic comments that Malaysia's leader Mahathir Mohamed is known for, accusing Israel of leading "the world to war and turmoil." Mahathir had said in 2003 to the Organization of the Islamic Conference that "the Jews rule this world by proxy... not only are our governments divided, the Muslim ummah is also divided."*

*The Turkish leadership now calls for Palestinian issues to be emphasized in education in Turkey and to strengthen the country's connection to Al-Aqsa mosque and Jerusalem. "Our president [Erdogan] advocates the loudest for the case of Jerusalem. Turkey will always be with all Muslims from East Turkestan [Xinjiang province in China] to Palestine." The speech didn't appear to mention Israel, suggesting that Turkey's officials are increasingly spreading a message denying that Israel exists, similar to the messaging that Tehran's regime uses.*

Turkey "will be with all Muslims"? Turkey is certainly not "with" the nearly 40 million Muslim Kurds in Syria, Iraq, Iran and, especially, in Turkey itself, who desire an independent Kurdistan, as was once promised the Kurds after World War I. Nor is Turkey "with" the Muslim Syrians fighting in the civil war on the side of Bashar Assad; the Turks have been steadily attacking them in Idlib Province. Nor has Erdogan, who likes

to present himself as the defender of oppressed Muslims everywhere, “been with” the ten million Muslim Uighurs. He was long silent about their mistreatment: “Turkey under Erdogan has consistently stood with the Chinese oppressors,” says Salih Hudayar, the founder and president of East Turkistan National Awakening Movement. Then, after more than a year of silence, not Erdogan, but a low-level official in February 2019 chastised China: In a statement the Turkish Foreign Ministry spokesman Hami Aksoy said the reintroduction of internment camps and the systematic assimilation of Uighur Turks represent “a great shame for humanity. It is no longer a secret that more than 1 million Uighur Turks incurring arbitrary arrests are subjected to torture and political brainwashing.” And that was it. Turkey said no more about any mistreatment. Worse still, when Erdogan was on a visit to China in July 2019, he said that “Turkey firmly supports the One China policy, and it’s a fact that residents of all ethnicities in China’s Xinjiang are living happily amid China’s development and prosperity.” Of course, he’s not been alone in his moral pusillanimity; other Muslim nations have also refused to complain about China’s re-education camps for Uighurs, choosing not to antagonize the Chinese whose investments they seek. But given his pose as Defender of the Faith, more had been expected of Erdogan.

*Turkey’s foreign minister has said that Israel’s annexation plan “destroys all hopes” of lasting peace in the Middle East. Turkey has long hosted Hamas and sought to have Hamas play a larger role in Palestinian issues. Turkey’s foreign minister also refused to refer to Israel by name in the meeting of the Islamic Cooperation Executive Committee. “If the occupying power crosses the redline, we [Muslim countries] must show that this will have consequences.”*

**Turkey’s support of Hamas – the Gazan branch of the Muslim Brotherhood – has angered several of the most influential Muslim states, whose leaders have their own reasons to be**

alarmed about the Brotherhood. These include Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt. As long as Turkey is seen as supporting the Brotherhood, it will not find any allies in the Arab world except for Qatar, which has been subjected to a land, sea, and air blockade by other Arab states precisely because of its continued support of the Brotherhood, including its hosting, and providing a television platform for, the MB's "spiritual leader" Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who broadcasts to his 30 million followers from Doha, and because of Qatar's continued insistence on remaining on friendly terms with Iran.

*After US President Donald Trump announced his decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem, Turkey hosted a meeting of Islamic countries to coordinate efforts against American and Israeli policies.*

The meeting, held in December 2017, was a fiasco. Of the 57 member states in the O.I.C. (Organization of the Islamic Conference), only 22 – the less important countries – sent heads of state, while 35 of the more important ones sent lower-level delegations. A statement of disapproval of the American embassy move was issued; the U.S. ignored it and, on May 14, 2018, the American Embassy in Jerusalem opened as planned. And the sky did not fall.

Erdogan continues to harbor the notion that Turkey can again become the leader of the Muslim lands. Erdogan pushes his neo-Ottoman schemes, but keeps being brought up short by reality. The Arabs resent the Turks for the centuries of mistreatment they received at the hands of the Ottomans, and have no intention of allowing Turkey to lead them once again. And even though the Sunni Arabs oppose Bashar Assad, as an Alawite (and thus also a Shi'ite), they have been greatly displeased to see Erdogan sending Turkish troops into an Arab state – that is, into Idlib Province, Syria – where, having chased the Kurds away from the Turkish border, they have remained to confront Assad's troops. The Arabs have also been alarmed by the

Turkish intervention in Libya on the side of the GNA (Government of National Accord), and against General Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA). Haftar is supported by both Egypt and the UAE. He was besieging Sirte and Tripoli, but has since been forced to retreat eastward by the Turkish forces Erdogan sent (along with 5,000 Syrian mercenaries); the Turks have also made effective use of their armed drones, that have apparently turned the tide in favor of Favez al-Sarraj's GNA.

In summary, Erdogan will continue to present himself as the natural leader of a pan-Islamic effort to dislodge Israel from its present position, especially in Jerusalem. He fails to realize that there will be no change in the status of the Temple Mount under the Trump Peace Plan. It will continue to belong to the Jerusalem Islamic Waqf, controlled by Jordan, with Israel responsible only for security. What has most alarmed the Arabs about the situation in Jerusalem is not anything Israel has done, but the Turkish attempt to gain influence, at Arab expense, in East Jerusalem. Turkish entities have been buying property in East Jerusalem and offering trips to Turkey for local Arabs. Their plan includes increasing Turkey's influence over the Arab population of Jerusalem and turning Arabs there into Islamists, while Turkey also tries to infiltrate the Waqf, the Islamic trust that controls daily affairs on the Temple Mount and in the Al-Aqsa Mosque that is now controlled by Jordan.

In early June, the Erdogan regime opened a new Islamic center near the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The center had been renovated by TIKA, a Turkish government aid organization that runs several Islamic projects in East Jerusalem. The Islamic center, Khan Abu Khadija, plans to host Arabs with existing ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and who regard the Erdogan regime favorably. Among its offerings is a film about the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II.

The Islamic center also screens clips of Erdogan's speeches where he denounces Israel's "occupation" of Jerusalem, sure to



be popular with the Arab audience. In addition to offering trips for Arabs in East Jerusalem to Turkey, there are reports of business deals being made between Turkish entities and Jerusalem's Arabs, and even of money being delivered by agents of Ankara to buy the support of Arabs in East Jerusalem.

These activities have greatly worried both Jordan and Saudi Arabia, who see them as part of an attempt by Erdogan to replace Jordan as the Muslim power controlling the Jerusalem Waqf, and hence the Temple Mount. Turkish visitors to the Mount have recently been waving Turkish flags, another sign that has caused the Saudis and Jordanians anxiety. Israel is reportedly talking to the Saudis over partial participation in the Waqf, in order to help keep Turkey out, while Jordan is also reconciling with Saudi Arabia, sharing its anxiety about Erdogan's imperialistic moves. Amman and Riyadh are concerned that these activities – the Turkish Islamic Center that has opened near the Temple Mount, the offers of trips to Turkey, the business deals between Turks and Arabs in Jerusalem, the deliveries of cash – together constitute a move by Turkish President Erdogan to obtain support for his claim that Turkey is the rightful custodian of the Muslim sites in the city, having ruled Jerusalem for 400 years. Turkey, Erdogan might also claim, is better able to protect the rights of Muslims to the Temple Mount than tiny Jordan. Riyadh and Amman, with reason, see Erdogan's mischief-making in Jerusalem as damaging their own – that is, Arab – interests.

Erdogan has over-reached. In suggesting the creation of a "pan-Islamic army to fight Israel" with Turkey to head up the whole operation, he evoked memories of the Ottoman rule over and mistreatment of, the Arabs. When Turkish forces entered Syria's Idlib Province, and remained even after their original purpose – to push the Syrian Kurds further south, away from the Turkish border – had been accomplished, he reinforced the anxiety about Turkish dominion over Arab lands. Still worse was his sending of Turkish military aid to the GNA in Libya,

where it has been used effectively to push back the forces of General Khalifa Haftar. The GNA has no Arab allies, while Haftar has the support of several Arab states, including two of the most important, Egypt and the UAE. Turkey, which was already viewed with alarm by both countries for its support of the Muslim Brotherhood, has by its Libyan intervention only deepened their distrust.

And now Erdogan is trying to establish a Turkish presence in East Jerusalem. This may be his biggest mistake of all in his dealings with the Arab states. As noted above, he has offered local Arabs trips to Turkey, encouraged business enterprises between Turks and Arabs in Jerusalem, and distributed funds to win Arab support for Turkey's Jerusalem plans. Both Jordan and Saudi Arabia are alarmed at these efforts, which are clearly aimed at giving Turkey a say – perhaps even an exclusive say – in the Islamic Waqf that controls the Temple Mount. In order to prevent that, Jordan has – with Israel's blessing – entered into discussions with Saudi Arabia about having the Kingdom play a role in the Waqf that is currently run by Jordan alone. The hope is that with Saudi financial and political backing, Jordan could more easily keep Turkey out.

Erdogan has now antagonized the very people he hoped to woo and win. His plan for a pan-Islamic army to conquer Israel raised not hopes, but rather fears, of a neo-Ottoman attempt to lead the Muslim world; the Arabs were having none of it. His continued intervention in Syria, long after the putative Kurdish “threat” to Turkish interests had disappeared, and his subsequent intervention in Libya, against General Haftar – whom the UAE and Egypt support – have reinforced the suspicion that Turkey regards the Arab states as places where the Turks, their former overlords, feel they still have a right to meddle. There is now great anxiety, too, over Turkish moves in Yemen. The UAE media have accused Turkey of building up its presence in Yemen, specifically in support of the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Al-Islah Party. The allegations against

Ankara include Egypt's concerns about such Turkish "interference" under the guise of humanitarian aid operating in three southern coastal regions and a joint "Qatar-Turkish plot" to establish a militia recruitment camp in the Shabwa province.

Erdogan has made mischief in Syria, in Libya, among the Arabs in East Jerusalem. In the process, he's made enemies of Egypt and the U.A.E. in Libya, of Saudi Arabia and Jordan in East Jerusalem, and antagonized the Arab states over his intervention in Syria, which for them, despite their opposition to Assad, remains an Arab state where no Turks should be allowed to work their will.

And now we have the latest installment in his neo-Ottoman adventures. He's turned the Hagia Sophia into a mosque, as he has long threatened. Erdogan regards this as a "triumph." In the process, he's angered the U.S., Russia, Greece, Cyprus, the E.U., UNESCO and most of the world's Christians, including the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, the leader of 300 million Orthodox Christians, who had said the massive site should remain as it is, a place of Christian-Muslim encounter that belongs "to all of humanity." The Ecumenical Patriarch tried to appeal to Erdogan by noting that "the Turkish people have the great responsibility and honor to make the universality of this wonderful monument shine," given that as a museum it is "the symbolic place of encounter, dialogue, solidarity and mutual understanding between Christianity and Islam." It didn't work; Erdogan ignored Bartholomew, and all the others who pleaded, implored, and warned, and went right ahead in having Hagia Sophia "revert" to its status as a mosque.

All Pope Francis could muster about this matter was "I think of Hagia Sophia, and I am very saddened." He must be in a quandary, given all that he has done in the past to praise Islam, for "authentic Islam and the proper reading of the Quran are opposed to every form of violence." And who can

forget his fulsome praise and embrace in Abu Dhabi of the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmed el-Tayeb in 2019, despite the latter's well-documented antisemitism? He can't even bring himself to express "concern" over the move.

Erdogan may believe that, in making Hagia Sophia a mosque again, he has now made himself a hero to the world's Muslims, but the enthusiastic response he expected from them has not been forthcoming. In the immediate aftermath of his move, the only praise from the Muslim world came from Hamas: "Opening of Hagia Sophia to [Muslim] prayer is a proud moment for all Muslims," said Rafat Murra, head of the international press office of Hamas, in a written statement. And that was it.

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