

The United States Should Talk Turkey

by Michael Curtis



How are the mighty fallen. For centuries the Ottoman Empire was a powerful state, multinational and multilingual, controlling much of southeast Europe, western Asia, and North Africa. One amusing sign of its significance was the exchange of letters, envoys, and goods between Sultans and Queen Elizabeth I. On one occasion she sent gifts to Sultan Mehmed III including an organ made by a Lancashire craftsman, though the Sultan was notable for having murdered his nineteen brothers to prevent rival claims to the Ottoman throne. There is nothing amusing about the present political regime of Turkey, an “executive presidency” or the Republic that has now succeeded the fall from greatness and the end of the Ottoman Empire in 1922.

Operas and literature in the 18th and early 19th centuries, by

Handel, Mozart, Moliere, and Rossini, illustrate the importance of Ottoman subjects in a fashion that is not orientalism or imperialism but indicates familiarity between Turks and other Europeans, sometimes friendly and humane encounters, and cultural contact. Some Turkish music, unusual instruments, cymbals, triangles, piccolo flutes were introduced into Europe. At the same time, Western influences were introduced into the Ottoman lands, Western dress, as well as Western military music by Giuseppe Donizetti, who taught music at the court and conducted Western military music, and who was the brother of opera composer Gaetano Donizetti.

The Empire began to decline and fall with a succession of Ottoman defeats: Lepanto in 1517; 1683 at the Vienna siege; the 1718 Treaty of Passarowitz; and the impact of other forces; Hungary liberation; Greek independence; Serbia autonomy; French conquest of Algeria; the October 1912 war with the Balkan League; the 1912 Italian invasion of Libya; and the defeat in 1918 in World War I. The Ottoman Empire officially ended on November 1, 1922 and Turkey became a republic.

Optimistic expectations after World War I that a Turkish system, republican, nationalist, secular, and modernized under Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, would emerge and continue were frustrated. Hopes for a successful multiparty democracy ended because of chaotic politics and military coups. Turkey is no longer a functioning democracy but an authoritarian system under the control of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, an elected dictator, self-styled "grandmaster" who promise to make "Turkey Great Again," a combination of Islamic nationalism and Ottoman nostalgia, by the centenary of the Republic in 2023. This will be accompanied by a new Islamic Union, led by Turkey.

Erdogan has been in power for 15 years, prime minister 2003-2014, and president since 2014. On June 24, 2018 he was elected president with 52.69% of the vote compared to the Republican People's party's candidate who got 30.6%.

In the parliamentary election on the same day, Erdogan's Justice and Development party, AK, got 42.5% of the vote, and 49% of the seats, and his coalition partner, MHP, Nationalist Movement party, got 11.1% of the vote and 8.1% of the seats. Therefore Erdogan's alliance controls a parliamentary majority with 344, 57%, of the seats.

The authoritarian control of Erdogan was evident even before his new term as president began. The day before he was sworn in as president on July 9, 2018, he dismissed 18,600 public servants, 9,000 police officers and 6,000 military for false allegations of links to terrorist groups. Erdogan outlined his new powers in a decree after his inauguration. Those powers are almost unchecked by any other authority.

The Turkish constitutional referendum in April 2017, passed by narrow majority, 51.4% to 48.5% changed the existing parliamentary system with a ceremonial president, to a presidential system. Erdogan's power was thus expanded and consolidated. The office of prime minister was abolished, while the president has powers that include drafting the budget, suspending rights and freedoms, dismissing parliament and calling new elections, choosing military commanders and chief of staff, diplomats and other officials, public and private university rectors, governors, religious directors, intelligence heads, and judges. Turkey is now the biggest jailer of journalists in the world, more than China or Egypt..

Erdogan without public debate has modified the secular laws, and now women can wear Islamic headscarves in offices and in schools. New legislation will allow dismissals of civil servants supposedly linked to so called terrorist groups, and will allow city governors to ban protestors. Erdogan's son-in-law, Berat Albayrak, also rises with an appointment as economics minister.

In July 2016 after the failure of the coup of July 15 which killed 250 people and wounded 1,400, a two year emergency rule

was immediately imposed, and officially ended on July 19, 2018. However, the powers now in the hands of Erdogan are in effect an extension of that emergency rule .

Since 2016, 150,000 civil servants have been purged, and 77,000 charged with links to the coup and its supposed organizer, Fethullah Gulen and a network associated with him. Gulen, a 77 year old Muslim preacher, an advocate of tolerant Islam, is living a quiet and tranquil life in a small town, Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania, in the Pocono Mountains. He also leads Hizmet (Service), a populist movement, which has several million adherents in Turkey and a network of organizations in commerce, finance, media, and education. Gulen is charged with treason, conspiracy, masterminding an armed organization, and forgery of official documents, and Turkey demands he be extradited from the U.S. to face trial in Turkey.

Of course the issue of Gulen is not the only factor of differences between Turkey and the U.S. More potent is that of the Kurdish military forces engaged in the war in Syria. The U.S. regards the forces as friendly while Turkey calls them an extension of PKK which for it is a terrorist organization. In 2018, Erdogan praised the country's ties with Russia. Together with President Vladimir Putin he launched the construction of its first nuclear power plant which is being built by Rosatom. Turkey has bought a Russian missile defense system.

Relations with the U.S. have worsened and tensions between the two countries have increased as a result of an unpleasant issue concerning an American named Andrew M Brunson, an evangelical pastor from North Carolina who has lived in Turkey for 23 years. Brunson is accused of terrorism and espionage and having links with Gulen and with the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers' party, and having aided terrorist groups. The US has attempted to have him freed. Nevertheless, on July 18, 2018 despite U.S. calls by President Donald Trump and Secretary Mike Pompeo for his release, a Turkish court in the Aegean province of Izmir ruled that Brunson be kept in detention .

If convicted, Brunson faces up to 35 years in jail. Trump tweeted on July 17, 2018 that he was a fine gentleman and Christian leader and is being persecuted: "Brunson is no more a spy than I am." The U.S. Senate passed a bill that prohibits Turkey from buying F-35 jets and from purchasing the S-400 air defense system. The Trump administration and Congress might consider imposing sanctions against Turkey if Brunson is still detained on false charges.

Erdogan has challenged other countries and foreign institutions. One case concerns the seizure by Turkey of independent media companies, a politically motivated confiscation that breaches investment treaties with UK and some EU states. The seizure is being challenged in the World Bank's International Center for Settlement of Investment Disputes, located in Washington, D.C..

Another controversial exercise of power is the banning in July 2018 of the screening of a British film, *Pride*, made in 2014 which is based on a true story, the help given by lesbian and gay activists to raise funds for families affected by the strike of coal miners in 1984. Turkey has not only begun repression of LGBT, but also banned the annual Pride parade.

Turkey, a non-Arab country, might have been helpful in facilitating a peaceful solution of the Israel-Palestinian conflict but Erdogan has been unhelpful and counter-productive. Already in June 1997 when he was Mayor of Istanbul, he remarked that the "Jews have begun to crush the Muslims of Palestine in the name of Zionism. Today the image of the Jews is no different from that of the Nazis." In March 2013 he declared that "Zionism was a crime against humanity." He sponsored the flotilla on May 3, 2010 seeking to break the Israeli blockade of Gaza allowing the Turkish ship *Mavi Marmara* involved in the incident to include members of the jihadist IHH organization, hard core terrorists.

Erdogan has converted Turkey into an authoritarian and

repressive state, one that challenges not only U.S. interests but also global human rights. Even though the effort may be fruitless, U.S. Ambassador Nikki Haley should bring the prejudicial and harmful nature of present day Turkey with its violations of human rights to the attention of the UN Security Council. Who knows? Perhaps the UNSC will drink and see the spider.