Turkey in Turmoil: Moving towards an Authoritarian Sultanate of Kitsch

In power since 3 November 2002, Turkey's Justice and Development Party (or AKP) has come a long way. Led by the charismatic Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the somewhat lacklustre, albeit highly influential, Ahmed Davutoğlu, the party has been moving along slowly, but now seems to have reached the point where its leadership is about to inflict its final victory upon the country and impose a systemic change upon the nation state that would alter the fate of Turkey and the Middle East.

The New Turkey's Dynamic Duo: Erdoğan and Davutoğlu

Even though Turkey has now been ruled by the AKP for more than a decade, the fact that the country is now well and truly advancing on a post-Kemalist path towards the establishment of a veritable authoritarian sultanate of kitsch has still not really sunk in amongst the country's opposition and its so-called secularist urbanites. Critical opinion at home as well as abroad continues to focus on the figure of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his truly outrageous statements, ignoring the fact that the AKP-led government in Ankara has slowly but surely succeeded in irrevocably changing the country's political landscape and discourse. These important alterations to the politico-social system and the educational apparatus will also ensure the future continuation of the present course, irrespective of actual individuals steering the state's ship. Tayyip Erdoğan and his erstwhile advisor, if not mentor, Ahmed Davutoğlu have changed the Republic of Turkey from a state somewhat ill-at-ease in its Middle Eastern context into a country that is set to become virtually indistinguishable from its Arab neighbours in the region. This dynamic duo of Erdoğan and Davutoğlu has been hard at work since 14 March 2003, with the former actively hugging the limelight and the latter laying out strategies and formulating policies behind the scenes -- strategies and policies meant to undo decades of Kemalist indoctrination and what has become proverbially known as "Turkish Secularism". Whereas, previously Kemalist social engineering and effective rewriting of national history and identity (1923-1994/2002) successfully transformed the Ottoman banner into a symbol of Turkish nationalism, adherence to the Muslim creed has nevertheless always been the common core of Turkish citizenship. This Muslim undertow of Turkish nationalism was always quietly accepted.

The division of labour between Davutoğlu and Erdoğan was somewhat changed, when the former was allowed to step out into the public eye, first as wily Foreign Minister on 1 May 2009 and next, on 28 August 2014, as the new Prime Minister when Tayyip Erdoğan became the first popularly elected President of the Turkish Republic. And both men (let's just call them the Prez and Wily) continued their hard work of deconstructing Kemalist Turkey. So that nowadays, the mere idea of Turkish nationalism is in the process of being re-interpreted along purely religious lines, with the Prez and Wily effectively redefining "the concept of Turkish unity (or Turkish citizenship, if you will) as a God-given quality." The continuous stream of speeches, delivered by either Erdoğan and/or Davutoğlu, spewing forth from Turkish television sets across the nation is quite literally drowning the country's population in a sea of words, a sea of words that functions as a seductive lure persuading more and more women to give in to social pressure and cover their heads and many men to don beards and go to the mosque. At the beginning of this year, for example, on 8 Jan 2016, to be precise, Wily issued the Friday Prayer circular that allows male public servants to attend the obligatory Friday prayers (Salatul Jumu'ah) without interrupting their office hours (female believers are obviously exempt from fulfilling this religious duty, as it would lead to a mixing of the sexes at the mosque). Reflecting upon what he had achieved, Ahmed Davutoğlu subsequently let it be known that henceforward "[o]n Fridays, an
environment like a holiday celebration, which will further contribute to our fraternity across Turkey, will occur.”

Tayyip Erdoğan vs Bashar al-Assad

These social and political changes have transformed Turkey into a country that now feels obliged to actively interfere in regional affairs. Syria's not-so civil war right next door is a case in point. From the very beginning Turkey has been at the forefront of the international effort to unseat Bashar al-Assad, albeit that its role was at first limited to a backstage part. Still, Tayyip Erdoğan, always keen to hog the limelight, relished (and continues to relish) in denouncing Assad time and again. At the time the so-called Arab Spring had erupted all around, in the form of “orchestrated” uprisings meant to usher in regime change and U.S.-friendly governments in the Middle East. Against this backdrop, in November 2011, in reference to the Damascus regime's reaction to an arguably Washington-engineered armed insurrection, Erdoğan did not shy away from threatening Assad: “[f]ighting your own people is not bravery but fear. Look at Hitler. . . look at the leader of Libya [Muammar Gaddafi], who was killed and who used the same expressions as you.” At the time, Tayyip Erdoğan compared Bashar al-Assad to Libya's strongman who was brutally killed by members of Libya's Islamist insurrection, liberally aided by NATO drone strikes. In this way, he unwittingly appeared to acknowledge that there was more than met the eye to the apparently spontaneous unrest in Syria. In fact there are indications that Turkey and the U.S. had been supplying “logistic aid and military training to the Syrian armed opposition” since “April-May 2011.” By means of invoking Gaddafi's fate, Erdoğan disclosed that the West, or if you will, the NATO alliance led by Washington also had its own plans for Syria, plans that arguably involved the forced removal of Assad and the imposition of regime change. And that the Washington-led Alliance was counting on a relatively swift resolution, comparable to the Libyan affair that had been settled in exactly 8 months, one week and one day. According to that logic, the Damascus regime should have fallen and Assad killed by late November 2011, about the time that Turkey's then-PM issued his underhand warning to Assad. Alas, Syria is not Libya in spite of the import of fighters from Misrata to overthrow (and arguably, kill) Assad.

And as a result, Syria's not-so civil war continued unabated thereby giving Erdoğan more than ample opportunity to flex his rhetorical muscle. On 10 April 2012, for example, he said that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad "is continuing to kill 60, 70, 80, 100 [civilians] every day. This is the situation." After he had stated that Assad's soldiers "are even shooting these fleeing people from behind. They are mercilessly shooting them, regardless of whether they are children or women." As is his wont, Tayyip Erdoğan turned the whole Syrian crisis into a personal affair, an affair that turned on the figure of Assad. In the next year, he even utilized Syria's President as a ploy in his sparring sessions with Turkey's opposition. On 27 August 2013, for instance, he told the leader of the opposition, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu that "[t]hose who call me a dictator are welcome to [go to] Syria. You want to see a dictator? [Bashar al-Assad] killed 100,000 people in 2½ years."

Assad and Baghdadi

And the hostilities continued next door, while the situation in Turkey remained the same with the exception of the above-mentioned switcheroo that transformed Erdoğan into the Prez living in his custom-made over-the-top palace boasting more than a 1,000 rooms and Wily moving into the Çankaya Palace, previously reserved for the figurehead presidents of the constitutional Republic of Turkey. Public opinion at home as well as abroad was aghast at the much-debated palace in Beştepe (the Ankara neighborhood inside Atatürk Forest Farm where the Prez's so-called White Palace is located), an architectural declaration of Erdoğan's personal endorsement of what I have earlier described as the AKP decision to erect a real estate Sultanate of Kitsch as a visual marker of its policy of an Ottoman revival or Ottomanitas (as a shorthand for an Islamic Réveil). Unperturbed by any kind of public outcry, both men continued with their mission, the mission of building the New Turkey (contingent upon a strong degree of Ottomanitas). At the same time, the Prez continued his habit of travelling the country to throw speeches. Speaking at the Marmara University in Istanbul in October 2014, for instance, President Erdoğan declared that the "Assad regime should be the target for a real solution in Syria," and then adding that "Turkey is the only country that can provide peace in the region. Turkey is the hope of Middle Eastern people. Turkey can remove the barriers between Middle Easterners, not by changing physical borders, but by instilling hope and trust." The spectacular appearance of the Islamic State (or IS) on 29 June previously had suddenly given a renewed urgency to the secret Sykes-Picot agreement of yesteryear (exposed by the Bolshevik government on 23 November 1917). The terror group previously known as ISIS/ISIL (or Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham/the Levant) had carved out its own geo-body in territories belonging to the states of Syria and Iraq and in doing so, declared its intention to smash “these borders, the borders of Sykes-Picot.” These words spoken in an online video by the IS operative Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani disclose that the stakes had now been altered. The U.S.-engineered Arab Spring intended to introduce regime change all around, yet fearfully beholden to preserving the status quo, that had directly led to Syria's not-so civil war to unseat Assad had now come to a grinding halt. Islamist and Jihadi factions that had been inserted as pawns had now clearly
appropriated the narrative and the status quo was no longer safe. In response, the Prez assured his home audience and the wider world that AKP-led Turkey would safeguard the Middle East yet create a new cohesion, "not by changing physical borders" but by means of projecting Ottomanitas and fostering a greater sense of Islamic unity and solidarity in the shape of "hope and trust."

But, Assad would still have to go. In order to drive home this point, Ankara started releasing curioser and curioser messages. In early December last year, the wily PM’s press secretary Osman Sert said the following to the journalist Sarantis Michalopoulos: "[t]he reason for the ISIS problem is Assad himself so we cannot and must not cooperate with Assad’s regime which is responsible for thousands of deaths and the displacement of millions more". And in the next instance, Sert disclosed the extent to which the dynamic duo is still working hand in glove, saying "[a]nd we have intelligence that Assad is cooperating with ISIS. Sometimes Assad's regime fights opposition groups and then the ISIS militants go to this place. Assad’s regime is the reason for Daesh [the Arabic acronym for ISIS/ISIL]." Next, the Prez himself came out and declared that "[i]t is the Assad regime that fosters and grows DAESH and the PYD [the Kurdish Democratic Union Party, allied to the PKK] in Syria." By means of pronouncing this short phrase Tayyip Erdoğan managed to have his cake and eat it, as he implied that the war theatre in Syria's not-so civil war contains but one enemy that combines the three threats to the security of AKP-led Turkey (and possibly the Capitalist world): the Iran-allied Baath regime in Damascus, the new Islamist bogeyman Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his terror outfit as well as separatist Kurdish factions striving for self-determination and espousing socialist and communalist ideas and ideals.

**Authoritarianism & Megalomania in Turkey**

In the meantime, the Syria crisis drags on, with many thousands fleeing the violence and seeking refuge in neighbouring countries, or further afield. And, as always seems to be the case, in this context too, AKP-led Turkey charges ahead, hosting nearly three million Syrian individuals according to data collected by the UNHCR. These huge numbers of refugees have now also influenced Turkey's relations with the EU, as more and more desperate Syrians and Iraqis plunge into the Mediterranean from Turkish shores in frantic attempts to land on Greek soil, with the hope of subsequently venturing deeper into the European heartland. These tired, poor and huddled masses yearning to breathe free and secure are now constituting a new threat to Fortress Europe, as expressed by the intrepid Pepe Escobar, "the EU crumbles under the strain of a massive refugee crisis," crumbles under a "tsunami of Muslims," seeking entry into Frau Merkel's promised land. The UNHCR indicates that between January 1 and February 29, 2016, 131,724 migrants and refugees crossed the Mediterranean Sea, of whom 122,637 landed on Greek soil. Given that Turkey is hosting nearly three million victims of the "Western-engineered wars" in the Middle East, the EU has pledged €3bn to Turkey.

And the dynamic duo of Erdoğan and Davutoğlu have since been parading around the country presenting this EU pledge as a personal victory. But their work is far from over, as they are still in need of forging a new constitution that would accommodate their desire to replace Turkey's parliamentary system with a presidential one, a system that would truly transform the as now somewhat constrained Recep Tayyip Erdoğan into "Turkey's Sultan Erdogan," to use Escobar's idiosyncratic phraseology. As such, Erdoğan's recent spat with Turkey's Constitutional Court indicates that the dynamic duo is all but ready to enact their coup that would reinstate a purely authoritarian system in the erstwhile Ottoman heartland. Under the AKP news gathering has become an increasingly dangerous trade, with more than ten journalists in prison at the end of last year and at least seven more Kurdish journalists under arrest since December 2015. In this context, the case of Can Dündar and Erdem Gül, of the daily newspaper Cumhuriyet stands out. The Committee to Protect Journalist (CPJ) put it as follows: Dündar and Gül "spent 92 days in pre-trial detention, [and they] still face multiple life sentences if convicted of exposing state secrets, espionage, and aiding a terrorist group for publishing reports alleging Turkey tried to smuggle weapons to Islamists in Syria." And now they have been conditionally released in the early hours of Friday, 26 February 2016 due to the intervention of the Constitutional Court. The country's top court namely ruled that the journalists' "[i]ndividual rights as well the freedom of the press and expression have been violated." Upon their release, the Prez, who was on his way to Africa when the news broke, erupted in a fighting mood, unabashedly declaring that "[t]he Constitutional Court may have reached such a verdict. I will remain silent. I am not in a position to accept it. I do not obey it nor do I respect it."

These words have now upset Turkey's pubic opinion, as such a statement would appear to indicate that Tayyip Erdoğan is already acting as if he were "Turkey’s Sultan." The Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmuş came to his boss' aid, declaring that "Mr. President expressed his personal opinion on the Constitutional Court's decision." But rather than calming the waters, these conciliatory words only led to even stronger outbursts, this time voiced by one of the Prez's key advisors, a man called Mustafa Akış, who tweeted that "[t]he fact that our president criticized the Constitutional Court decision is not 'putting up a personal position' but a statement in the capacity of 'the head of
The advisor thereby all but reinforced the impression that Tayyip Erdoğan is now already in the habit of acting as “Turkey’s Sultan,” even before the necessary change in Turkey’s Constitution. In contrast, Erdoğan has remained silent in view of the recent acquittal of Salih Mirzabeyoğlu, the leader of Great Eastern Islamic Raiders Front (İBDA-C). Following his initial pardon in 2014, Tayyip Erdoğan even met with the Islamist leader. At the time he was arguably also acting “in the capacity of ‘the head of the state and government’.” Tayyip Erdoğan’s authoritarian tendencies and his propensity to micro-manage Turkey’s affairs have been the subject of many complaints in the past. This has led to many people in Turkey voicing their displeasure in public, which in turn has led to the opening of about 2,000 legal cases in the past 18 months: “Mocking the president carries a maximum of four years in jail with schoolchildren and journalists amongst those arrested.”

On the other hand, it is a plain fact that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan remains incredibly popular amongst the wider population of Turkey. The ordinary man and woman in the street love the figure of the President. These voters have made Erdoğan what he is today, a politician at the height of his power and influence poised to become Turkey’s strongman, Turkey’s authoritarian leader who will lead the country further down the post-Kemalist path to its final destination. The dynamic duo of Erdoğan and Davutoğlu has painstakingly prepared the way, and now the former is on the brink of instituting a systemic change that is meant to lead to a succession of strongmen in Turkey’s future -- strongmen overseeing an authoritarian sultanate of kitsch that has already taken the place of the Kemalist Republic of yesteryear.

Dr. Can Erimtan is an independent scholar residing in İstanbul, with a wide interest in the politics, history and culture of the Balkans and the Greater Middle East, especially for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook.”