Modern Turkey: History and Today

The Treaty of Lausanne, which had the 96th anniversary of its signing on July 24, is considered the last treaty of World War I. It stipulated the establishment of the modern Republic of Turkey after the War of Independence against the occupational forces of the United Kingdom, France, Italy and Greece. The treaty recognized the new Turkish borders, as well as the conditions on which the Muslim minorities had to exist in the new republic.

The French-language Treaty of Lausanne was signed in the city of Lausanne, Switzerland. It was the result of the second attempt after the failed Treaty of Sèvres that had been signed by all the parties except for the Kingdom of Greece, however it was later rejected by the Turkish national movement which fought against the former terms and a considerable loss of the territory. The Treaty of Lausanne put an end to the conflict and defined the borders of the modern Republic of Turkey. As per the treaty, Turkey abandoned all claims for the rest of the Ottoman Empire, and the allies, in their turn, recognized the Turkish sovereignty within its new borders.

“Today, we are proud to celebrate the 96th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne, the founding document of the Republic of Turkey,” said the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in his statement of July 24. “The Turkish War of Independence was fought against the world’s strongest armies and was crowned with the Treaty of Lausanne, the seal of independence of our country,” Recep Erdogan added. However, “the Republic of Turkey, as it was the case a century ago, has also today the strength and determination to eradicate any threat
directed towards her independence, survival, and the peace and security of her citizens,” he said.

At the same time, the Turkish President did not fail to use this case to express his point of view on a number of the contemporary issues. In particular, he emphasized that the recent Turkish action in the East Mediterranean and Northern Syria, including drilling for natural resources and counter-terrorist operations, clearly showed its determination to protect the rights of both the Republic of Turkey and the Turkish Cyprus. No threat of sanctions, be it implicit or explicit, can keep Turkey from what it is entitled to have. “With these thoughts, on the 96th anniversary of the Treaty of Lausanne, I commemorate once again the founding father of our Republic Ghazi Mustafa Kemal, our noble martyrs, and our veterans with respect and gratitude,” Recep Erdogan added.

In only 4 years time, the Treaty of Lausanne will be 100 years old. Although the term of its termination is not specified in the Treaty, the Turkish leaders are sure that, as of 2023, they will not have to observe the duties undertaken in this document, in particular:

- the free passage of foreign ships through the Straits of Bosporus and Dardanelles
- the sovereignty of certain Greek islands in the Aegean Sea;
- recognizing the city of Mosul as part of Iraq and several other points.

The Turkish leadership believes that the Treaty includes confidential points which will be declassified only by 2023.

The Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan believes that the Lausanne Peace Treaty, which established the borders between the countries nearly 100 years ago, needs updating. The Turkish leader specified that this question not only concerns the Greek islands, but also the region as a whole, since the Treaty established the territorial borders between Turkey, Iraq and Syria as well. He did not say what specific amendments to the Treaty are necessary, explaining only that the distances between certain islands in the Aegean Sea were “problematic” and adding that the questions connected with the territorial water areas, air space and continental shelf of two states could be easily resolved in his opinion.

To be precise, Turkey is accusing Greece of its intention to make the Aegean Sea its domain. In his book titled Strategic Depth, the former Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu notes that these islands are “natural continuation” of the Anatolian land and therefore “must” belong to Turkey. R.T. Erdogan naturally does not mind making these islands and rocks part of Turkey in spite of the fact that he had previously officially stated that Turkey had no territorial claims its neighboring countries, including Greece. Most likely, the incumbent President is tormented by his own conscience for having given the islands to Greece, and the Turkish opposition brings it up at every possible occasion. Now, the Turkish President wants to make amends, which is why he recently began to make hints about his territorial claims concerning Greece.

The latest statements of the Turkish President on the need for revising the Treaty of Lausanne have to do with Syria and Iraq as well. The document established the Turkish borders with Iraq and Syria, but the resolution of the issue of the control over the oil field region of Mosul was postponed until its resolution by Turkey and the UK and, in the absence of an arrangement for 9 months, was transferred to the League of Nations. Now, after the defeat of the ISIS, Turkey certainly wants to get its share “for the contribution to the fight against terrorism” (in fact, Ankara, under the pretext of countering terrorism, established its military presence in the neighboring countries and does not want to withdraw the troops). R.T. Erdogan already gets accusations that, because of his policy, Turkey lost its tiny enclave in Syria. It is about the tomb of Suleyman Shah where the legendary founder of the Ottoman Empire is buried. Under the international treaty of 1921, the place of the burial of the Ottoman Empire founder on the bank of the Euphrates is a Turkish enclave. Suleyman Shah’s tomb was protected by the Turkish army guard of honor, namely about 40 servicemen who were withdrawn in February 2015. By the way, according to the Turkish press, it was the only territory outside the borders of the Republic of Turkey that belonged to it.

Judging by the statements of R.T. Erdogan and other official representatives of the Turkish authorities, it is possible that Ankara will present a territorial claim, first of all, to Syria, and will use the issue of the tomb of Suleyman Shah to this effect. Ankara can not only demand that the Turkish enclave be returned, but also demand a corridor with Turkey “for ensuring the security of the tomb”, “for preventing a repetition of the situation when Turkey had to withdraw its small garrison protecting Suleyman Shah’s tomb.” Turkey would also like to get the control of the Afrin District currently controlled by the Kurds which is like a wedge in the territory of Turkey and can be used as a base helping the Syrian Kurds to reach the Mediterranean Sea.

In 2023, which is coming soon, the Turkish people will celebrate the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the republic; however R.T. Erdogan wants it to be the New Turkey, rather than the Turkey of Ataturk. He considers
himself the father of the new Turkish nation, the father of the New Turkey where there will be no place for M.K. Ataturk. And to enable R.T. Erdogan in a way be compared to Ataturk regarding his merit in the history of Turkey, he has to expand the Turkish territory. Let us remind the reader that the Treaty of Lausanne established the new borders of Turkey, except for the Sanjak of Alexandretta (the Hatay province) given to Turkey only on June 29, 1939. And, although this area is a part of Turkey today, Damascus never reconciled with this loss, which increases the challenge to establishing friendly relations between the neighboring states.

All the latest activities and deeds of the current Turkish President make it clear enough that he is seeking to revive the former greatness of the Ottoman Empire. Hence, the aspiration to carry out an independent policy, to a certain extent separating the country from the US and other countries of the West, the implicit support of Iran in its opposition against Washington and the desire to play the Russian card. The question is whether R.T. Erdogan will have enough time and mainly aptitude to play on the world arena skillfully and only for the benefit of Turkey. And make sure there is no new version of the Treaty of Lausanne.

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