

Review – Erdoğan’s Empire: Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East

Written by Matthew Goldman

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2021/01/31/review-erdogans-empire-turkey-and-the-politics-of-the-middle-east/>

MATTHEW GOLDMAN, JAN 31 2021

Erdoğan’s Empire: Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East

By Soner Çağaptay

I.B. Tauris, 2019

This work takes up an ambitious task: mapping Turkey’s shifting relations with its ever-widening circle of allies, enemies, and – increasingly – frenemies. Soner Çağaptay, the director of the Turkish Research Program at the Washington Institute of Near East Policy, has the necessary contacts in Ankara and Washington to offer an insightful account of the rise and fall of Turkey’s efforts to become a “stand-alone power”, capable of exercising its will abroad without being dependent on its stronger allies. Such is the vision of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the populist leader who has transformed Turkey from a junior member of the Western bloc to an independent and often anti-Western wild card in world politics.

The book is written more for a policy audience than an academic one, providing a sweeping overview of Turkey’s foreign policy since Erdoğan came to power in 2003. And yet, IR scholars will still find much to contemplate as Çağaptay examines the impacts of identity, religion, and security on Turkish foreign policy. Its 16 chapters offer detailed studies of Turkey’s engagement with the US, the EU, Russia, Iran, and Syria; as well as less-covered regions including the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Horn of Africa. Throughout them all, Çağaptay examines how Erdoğan and his ruling AK Party have been inspired by their conceptions of Muslim and post-Ottoman identity to revise Turkey’s role in regional and global orders.

As the title *Erdoğan’s Empire* indicates, with a hint of playful irony, the revolution in Turkey’s foreign relations cannot be separated from Turkey’s authoritarian turn or the personality of the man who now wields that power. The word ‘empire’ performs three tasks: First, it evokes the imperious nature of Erdoğan’s rule, as he and his party have curtailed the checks and balances of the Turkish republic in order to concentrate political power in their own hands. Second, it refers to the transformation of Turkey’s international brand from secular European ally to an anti-Western revisionist power, more identified with its Neo-Ottoman pretensions than the legacy of Westernising founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Finally, the term ‘empire’ describes Erdoğan’s foreign policy ambitions: to create a broad zone of influence, including but not limited to former parts of the Ottoman Empire, that Turkey can use to achieve strategic autonomy in international affairs. It is the rise and fall of this project that forms the book’s core.

A decade ago, Turkey’s star was rising in both East and West, lauded by its NATO allies as a pro-Western Muslim democracy while reaping the benefits of a soft power charm offensive in Muslim-majority countries, all backed by a strong economy. Today, however, Turkey finds this goodwill mostly squandered. It is now engaged in numerous military conflicts abroad, trapped in delicate rivalries with Russia and Iran, feuding with the EU and its NATO partners, and challenged by a balancing coalition that includes Egypt, Greece, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. More alarming still, Turkey faces a looming economic crisis and may no longer enjoy the goodwill in Washington needed to procure an IMF bailout, having already incurred American sanctions through its arms deals with Russia.

One highlight of the book is Çağaptay’s recounting of his conversations with Foreign Minister and later Prime

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Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, the political science professor turned politician whose “Zero Problems with Neighbours” approach did much to shape Turkey’s foreign policy before his ouster in 2016. Davutoğlu’s 2001 book *Strategic Depth* set forth his strategy of using Turkey’s multiple identities to expand its foreign influence, diversify its portfolio of alliances, and break its dependence on its Western partners. While Davutoğlu did not openly advocate distancing Turkey from the Western powers at the time, which Erdoğan has since done, Çağaptay intriguingly writes that his own conversations with Davutoğlu in the mid-2000s led him to believe that this was indeed his ultimate goal (p.47), finding him both “an Ottoman revivalist and Muslim nationalist” (p.50).

While Çağaptay convincingly traces the links between the AK Party’s long-held Islamic-conservative identity and their foreign policy decisions, he also shows that Turkey’s turn away from the West has often been just as reactive as proactive, based on disappointments with the EU and the US. In 2004, Erdoğan suffered a loss when his efforts to reunite Cyprus failed and Cyprus entered the EU as an anti-Turkish veto player, frustrating Turkey’s accession goals. By 2005, France and Germany had turned against Turkey’s bid for full EU membership, throwing into further confusion the AK Party’s political platform of EU accession. Later, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring protests, Turkey’s relations with the US took a nosedive as well. Up until this point, Turkey’s warming ties with Muslim-majority countries had not yet put it at odds with its Western partners, aside from concerns over its relations with Israel. But while the beginning of the Arab Spring seemed to align Turkey and the US on the side of the protesters, relations worsened when protests gave way to a military coup in Egypt and war in Syria. When the US failed to reject Sisi’s coup or follow through on its threats against the Assad regime, Erdoğan felt deeply betrayed. When a failed coup attempt in 2016 almost took his life, Erdoğan had grown so wary of the US that he accused them of siding with the coup plotters. Turkey then pivoted towards Russia and adopted a more belligerent role in Syria and beyond, leading to the breakdown in Turkey-US and EU relations we observe today.

IR liberals argue that repeated interactions teach states how to overcome their collective action problems, enabling international cooperation under anarchy, while constructivist scholars describe how such interactions shape a state’s identity, socializing them into international communities. The EU, considered a grand success story of both international cooperation and norm diffusion, is often the subject of such studies. Çağaptay’s account of Turkey’s experiences with the EU and NATO provides, perhaps, a case study of the *converse*: repeated disappointments seemed to have contributed to a breakdown of trust and a divergence of identities. Scholars working on identity and foreign policy may find this book a valuable account of how interactions shape actors’ identities as much as identities influence foreign policy.

Not surprisingly for a book entitled *Erdoğan’s Empire*, the focus of this work is on Erdoğan, and it is true that he has the final say in Turkey’s foreign policy. However, he is not the only actor, nor does he make decisions in a vacuum. A fuller analysis of Turkey’s international relations could have looked more closely at the influence of the military, bureaucracy, business interests, and domestic political actors, as Çağaptay had done in his previous book on Turkey. For example, *Erdoğan’s Empire* did not address the role of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), the AK Party’s junior coalition partner since 2018, whose ultranationalist influence on Turkey’s foreign policy has occasioned a lively debate (including contributions from Çağaptay himself). A discussion of Turkey’s ambitious defence industry and its impact on Turkey’s foreign policy vision would have also been useful. Although the inner workings of the Erdoğan government have grown so opaque that scholars coined a Turkish equivalent to the word ‘Kremlinology’ to describe its analysis, I still felt this work could have done more to unpack the black box of Turkish foreign policy decision-making.

The book concludes with a discussion of three possible paths forward for Erdoğan’s Turkey, of which the first is deemed the most likely: muddling through with the same approach, collapsing under the weight of Turkey’s political divisions and economic problems, or quietly returning to the Western fold while maintaining the new Islamic-populist identity. It notes, accurately, that Erdoğan is a flexible political actor who has in the past been adept at shifting lanes. Still, it argues that Turkey “will continue to behave like an imperial nation, and its citizens will themselves want recognition of this as such” even after Erdoğan is gone (p.293). Çağaptay then provides his own recommendations for how Turkey can achieve the ‘greatness’ that Erdoğan aspires to, which includes providing the civil and cultural rights needed to stem the brain drain, keep educated and secular workers from emigrating, and resolve the Turkish-Kurdish conflict – in short, to fully reverse the course that Turkey has pursued since at least 2013. We shall see.

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Overall, *Erdoğan’s Empire* provides an excellent overview of Turkey’s foreign policy over the past two decades. Students of identity, national role conceptions (NRC), and IR will find its discussion of the impact of identities on international relations particularly useful, given its colourful descriptions of how conceptions of Islamic identity and Ottoman heritage have been interwoven into Erdoğan’s foreign policy vision. For those interested in Turkey, the global spread of populist authoritarianism, or the role of identity in the contestation of regional and global orders, *Erdoğan’s Empire* is a timely and worthwhile read.

About the author:

Matthew Goldman (PhD, University of Washington-Seattle) is a researcher and Middle East scholar based in Brussels and a member of the Swedish Research Institute-Istanbul. He has taught at George Washington University, New York University DC, the University of Washington, the Swedish Research Institute-Istanbul, and Boğaziçi University, Istanbul. His current research examines the impact of conspiracy theories on international relations, with a focus on Turkey.