

TURKEY AT THE CROSSROADS?

TEN YEARS AGO, Erdoğan's Turkey was hailed in Washington as an example to the Muslim world—a free-market, pro-American Islamic democracy with high growth rates, renowned cultural monuments and beautiful beaches. 'A model partner', Obama affirmed in 2009, as he congratulated the leader of the Justice and Development Party (AKP).¹ Today, with perhaps 50,000 oppositionists in jail, including scores of journalists, politicians, lawyers and civil servants, Turkey is exporting radical Islamist mercenaries from its Syrian enclaves to Libya and Azerbaijan, clashing with France, Greece, Israel and Cyprus over gas-drilling rights in the Eastern Mediterranean and imposing a brutal occupation regime on swathes of what was once the autonomous Kurdish zone of Rojava. Predictably, the cry of 'Who lost Turkey?' has gone up within the American foreign-policy establishment, where the main concern is Ankara's purchase of Russian missiles.²

Strategically situated at the nexus of Europe, the ex-Soviet borderlands, Iran, Iraq and Syria, a NATO power with a US-equipped air force, a 350,000-strong land army and a large if resource-poor economy: few would dispute the significance of Turkey for the existing geopolitical order. But little is to be gained by swapping left-liberal illusions in an earlier democratic-era Erdoğanism for moralistic denunciations of Islamofascism, or imperial threats that Turkey needs to be taught a lesson—or, as Biden has put it, 'to pay a price'.³ To understand the shifts the regime has undergone requires also grasping the limits of the 'Turkish model'. These in turn need to be seen in the context of a changing world-economic situation and a regional order fractured by the NATO powers themselves.

A caution is in order here. The role of the security forces, combined with a modernizing political leadership, was foundational for the new

Turkish state that emerged from the 1920s from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire; a state constituted—after the extermination of Armenians, the expulsion of the Greeks and the linguistic assimilation of the Kurds—on the basis of one religion, one language, one flag. But the importance of the military, both domestically and in Turkish foreign relations, was reinforced under US hegemony during the Cold War, when Washington built Turkey into a frontline NATO bulwark on the USSR's southwestern border. For such a vital ally, with such impeccably 'secular' military and political elites, the US was prepared to turn a blind eye to operations that trampled on every democratic norm: Ankara's 1974 military annexation of Northern Cyprus and expulsion of the Greek-Cypriot inhabitants; the 1980–83 military junta, which broke the militant trade-union movement and the powerful, if fragmented, far left through a policy of mass imprisonment, torture and executions, paving the way in Chilean fashion for neoliberalization under the Özal government; the 1990s counter-insurgency against the Kurds, in which US weaponry was used to bomb and strafe the starving villagers of the southeast, killing an estimated 30,000. Only the first of these received (short-lived) US sanctions, and throughout the 1990s Turkey's crisis-ridden economy received privileged treatment from the IMF.

Needless to say, this history bears upon continuing US and EU strategies to set the Turkish state to work on the West's behalf, whether as overseer of refugees, policer of jihadis or USAF base for further wars. At the same time, the AKP view of Turkey as maltreated by arrogant Western powers is grossly self-serving, given its own murderous record and neo-imperial vainglory. Against both viewpoints, this essay will argue that there is a complex but legible state logic behind Ankara's twists and turns since 2012, even if these do not—cannot—amount to a coherent new course. Turkey's latest adventures in the Eastern Mediterranean and Nagorno-Karabakh, its partisanship in Libya and its bunkering in Idlib, are outcomes of the multiple impasses—economic, national, geopolitical—that have confronted the liberal-Islamic 'Turkish model' since the early

¹ For a typical example, see the *New York Times* celebration of the integration of 'Islam, democracy and vibrant economics' in Erdoğan's Turkey: Landon Thomas Jr, 'In Turkey's Example, Some See a Road Map for Egypt', *NYT*, 5 February 2011.

² Keith Johnson and Robbie Gramer, 'Who Lost Turkey?', *Foreign Policy*, 19 July 2019.

³ Jonathan Spicer, 'Turkey slams Biden's past call for US to back Erdoğan's opponents', *Reuters*, 15 August 2020.

2010s. They also demonstrate the limits of Erdoğanism's attempt to construct a new 'national' route beyond them, given the constraints of the domestic situation and the crowded regional landscape within which it operates. What follows will briefly sketch the lineaments of the AKP's first hegemonic formula and register the shocks that rocked it, before examining the novel regime structure that has emerged.

I. THE FIRST FORMULA

In earlier contributions I have argued that the objective effect of the Erdoğan regime's hegemony was a double absorption—in the sense proposed by Gramsci's theory of passive revolution—of the radical energies of Islamist revolt against the old ruling order. Through the mediation of the AKP, those energies would be absorbed, first, into domestic consumerism, glossed by patriarchal piety; and second, into the political-economic and military structures of the West, legitimated on the one hand by Islamic solidarity—Turkish occupation forces protecting Afghans from the depredations of the non-Muslim NATO troops—and, on the other, by old-fashioned nationalism: Erdoğan's backing for the US invasion of Iraq was read in the coffee-shops as a deep game to strengthen 'our' position. This was the formula of the 'Turkish model' that the Obama Administration aimed to see extended across the Middle East in the early days of the Arab Spring.⁴

The initial appeal of the AKP—as a voice for ordinary patriotic Muslims, long denied recognition by Turkey's 'secular elites'—was primarily to provincial business owners in the Anatolian heartlands and the conservative petty bourgeoisie. But around this social core the Erdoğanists constructed a much broader hegemonic bloc. Its cadre included the shadowy network of believers run by the cleric Fethullah Gülen, with extensive influence among the police. It also spoke to the millions driven off the land by cuts to agricultural subsidies, or the forced clearances of the Kurdish southeast, and hurled pell-mell into precarious proletarianization on the outskirts of the big cities, where the mosque and its school offered a chance of order and advancement amid the chaos of

⁴ See 'NATO's Islamists: Hegemony and Americanization in Turkey', NLR 44, March–April 2007 and 'Democratic Janissaries? Turkey's Role in the Arab Spring', NLR 76, July–August 2012. See also Tuğal, *The Fall of the Turkish Model: How the Arab Uprisings Brought Down Islamic Liberalism*, London and New York 2016.

urban life; something like this was Erdoğan's own story. Positioning itself as a new-model Muslim party, an eastern equivalent of Christian Democracy—pro-market, pro-NATO, pro-EU—the AKP also won the support of many Turkish Kurds and most of the left-liberal intelligentsia, who saw it as an expression of civil society against the authoritarian state and the best hope for EU entry.

Every successful hegemonic appeal is also a polarization. After winning its first landslide in 2002, the AKP positioned itself with growing confidence against Turkey's 'secular elites'—the big bourgeoisie, the upper ranks of the military and intelligence services—which likewise had little but contempt for the ill-educated provincial Islamists. Its struggle against the military leadership was waged by juridical means. In 1997, the Army High Command had intervened to remove an earlier Islamist government and purge the security forces of its supporters (Gülen himself fled to the US to escape arrest in 1997 and has been there ever since, running his network long-distance). After 2008, the Erdoğanists turned the tables. In a series of long-running trials—the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer investigations—that dragged in scores of officers, they shored up their domestic position through a purge of the upper ranks, re-staffed by the rapid promotion of pro-AKP or Gülenist officers. Quite what else was happening here, and how the trials related to the ongoing NATO modernization of the Army, remains shrouded in mystery. But it was clear that the Erdoğanists and Gülenists aimed not to dismantle the authoritarian-militarist structures of the Turkish state, but to infiltrate and re-populate them. This, nevertheless, was the liberal-Islamic model propounded to the Muslim world.

2. IMPASSE AND UPHEAVAL

Objective and subjective factors combined to stall this passive revolution. Within a decade, the liberalized Turkish economy was over-heating, under pressure from the massive quantitative-easing programmes unleashed by the major central banks after the 2008 crisis. At the same time, the regime confronted the double upheavals of the Arab Spring and the Kurdish uprising—and their lethally consequential arming by both Gulf and NATO powers. These serial shocks shook loose the coalition that had rallied to the AKP in 2002 and reconfigured the Turkish

political landscape. Although these dynamics unfolded simultaneously, they are analytically distinct and each will be considered in turn.

To start with the economic impasse of the ‘Turkish model’. The AKP had entered office in 2002 after the collapse of the ‘pure’ neoliberalism of the 1990s, which had left the traditional parties severely discredited. Financial deregulation had aided export-led manufacturing but rendered the entire economy vulnerable to capital-market shocks. It was hard hit in 1997, when Asian markets plunged into crisis and global cash flows seized up. Coupled with these international dynamics, local mismanagement contributed to severe recessions in 1999 and 2001; social expenditure was slashed amid soaring unemployment and inflation, while annual tax revenue was swallowed up in servicing the public debt held by a few big local banks, at extortionate interest rates.⁵ A vital aspect of Erdoğan’s hegemony was the promise to resolve Turkey’s longstanding economic problems and to share its wealth among broader sectors.

In its first years in office, the AKP implemented the ‘post-Washington Consensus’ reforms devised by Kemal Derviş, a centre-left World Bank economist. An important ingredient was the encouragement of household debt. As elsewhere in the world, private credit built on leveraged finance became a ‘stealth-Keynesian’ method of demand creation. At the same time, the AKP injected a dose of (selective) welfarism, spearheaded by the Mass Housing Authority, TOKİ, which privatized public lands and boosted the fortunes of construction tycoons, while also building swathes of new apartments for the lower- and middle-class regime supporters (predominantly Sunni and Turkish) who had relocated to the major cities.

External investment, pouring into land and construction development, powered a decade of high growth. Vast new infrastructural projects were initiated, largely funded from the Gulf. Malls sprung up in every neighbourhood and a spectacular presidential complex, the White Palace, was built for Erdoğan on the outskirts of Ankara. Fiscal policy was given a cronyist twist: the AKP raised taxes (especially on the middle classes) and

⁵ Çağlar Keyder, ‘The Turkish Bell Jar’, *NLR* 28, July–August 2004; Korkut Boratav, ‘The Turkish Bourgeoisie under Neoliberalism’, *Research and Policy on Turkey*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2016.

funnelled the wealth to its supporters. Breakneck growth and a boom in luxury consumption went hand-in-hand with growing insecurity, over-exploitative jobs and atomizing residential environments. Newly housed in TOKİ projects, the poor and working classes suffered most from their unpredictable existence in this new economy—but the middle classes struggled too. In the late 2000s, there were increasing numbers of suicides among consumers with high credit-card debt.

Turkey weathered the 2008 financial meltdown better than it had the Asian crisis a decade earlier. After a swift contraction in 2009, the economy was buoyed up by capital inflows, as near-zero interest rates and trillions of dollars' worth of quantitative easing in the US and EU sent funds flooding out from Wall Street and the Eurozone in search of higher returns. Like the BRIC economies, Turkey found itself cash rich, giving a further boost to debt-dependent expansion. Household debt peaked at 53 per cent of disposable income in 2013, up from 5 per cent in 2002. The AKP relaxed restrictions on domestic firms borrowing in dollars, with local banks acting as intermediaries with international markets—thus introducing a further element of vulnerability into a system already at risk of currency shocks. Beyond this, the AKP aimed to deepen Islamic bond markets, creating new financial instruments for debt securitization.⁶

In 2013, Bernanke's announcement that the Federal Reserve would 'taper' QE sent these capital flows into reverse, spelling the beginning of the end for the Turkish economic miracle. Nevertheless, while Brazil and Russia plunged into deep recession in 2014, the Erdoğan regime succeeded in postponing the reckoning for a number of years. This involved juggling a depreciating currency, which raised prices for imported manufacturing inputs and put further strain on the heavily indebted corporate sector, while also battling to keep interest rates low ahead of the successive electoral contests facing the AKP from 2014 onwards. For this, the regime developed a bifurcated economic strategy. On the one hand it deepened the 'embedded neoliberal' model, stepping up construction projects and leaning heavily on Qatar for continued capital flows. These were increasingly directed through Erdoğan and his

⁶ See the important analysis by Ümit Akçay and Ali Rıza Güngen, who theorize Turkey's economic trajectory as a form of 'dependent financialization': 'The Making of Turkey's 2018–2019 Economic Crisis', Institute for International Political Economy, Berlin 2019.

family, with geo-economic policy taking on patrimonial overtones, while Turkish-Qatari friendship was promoted as offering an international model of liberal-financial leadership for the Middle East.

At the same time, the regime tried to promote national-manufacturing projects with a patriotic tinge. One example is the BMC group, run by Ethem Sancak, a former Maoist, which produces military and commercial vehicles. Another would be the combat drones assembled (with imported components) by Selçuk Bayraktar, an arms manufacturer and son-in-law of Erdoğan. The Bayraktar drones would be a source of Turkish-nationalist pride in Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh. The AKP also deepened economic ties with China. In 2015 Turkey signed up to a major component of the Belt and Road Initiative, which cast the country as the 'Middle Corridor' for the Iron Silk Road between China and Europe. Four years later, the first 850-metre freight train from Xian pulled into Ankara, before proceeding on to Prague via the Marmaray Tunnel under the Bosphorus.⁷

As the Turkish lira sank, asset-hungry Chinese capital snapped up local firms at bargain prices. Turkey's e-commerce platform, Trendyol, was bought by Alibaba for \$750 million, and Chinese investors purchased a major share in a port on the Marmara Sea. Bilateral trade grew from \$1 billion in 2000 to \$23 billion in 2018, with a concomitant expansion of debt and widening of the trade deficit. China has a bigger hand in recent development than these numbers alone can capture; its companies have promised to sustain the Erdoğan regime's signature projects, such as the third bridge and the third airport.⁸ But needless to say, these moves could only succeed in delaying the inevitable crashing to earth of Turkey's highly leveraged, cash-dependent model.

Geopolitical fractures

This economic volatility formed the backdrop to a shifting geopolitical situation. The AKP's initial project was for an Islamicizing Turkish-Sunni hegemony over the region, integrated into NATO and EU membership. The Western wing of this strategy faltered after 2004, when accession

⁷ John Daly, 'Chinese Use of Marmaray Sub-Sea Tunnel Another First', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 16, no. 166, 2 December 2019.

⁸ Gönül Tol, 'The Middle Kingdom and the Middle Corridor: Prospects for China-Turkey ties', *Middle East Institute*, 29 May 2020.

to the EU stalled over the Turkish occupation of Northern Cyprus.⁹ The regime was then confronted with the insurrections of the Arab Spring and the Kurdish uprising on its southern border. In the early months of 2011, both in Egypt and Syria, AKP policy favoured democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood governments, a line initially adopted by the Obama Administration. (Ankara also opposed military intervention in Libya at first; once launched, however, it joined the fray.) The hegemonic project of Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's 'strategic-depth' approach anticipated that liberal-Islamic regimes would not only emulate Turkey but invite in Turkish capital and expertise. On this basis, the AKP also sought to liberalize the Brotherhood's national branches—occasionally resisted by the latter, even during the rosiest days of the 'Turkish model'.¹⁰

But as Assad refused to negotiate with the Syrian Brotherhood, and the Saudi line of regime change in Damascus gained support in Washington, Erdoğan's stance shifted. By July 2011, Turkey was hosting the anti-Assad Free Syrian Army in its East Mediterranean province of Hatay—an hour's drive from Idlib or Aleppo. Though the AKP's external policy still aimed to balance 'hard' and 'soft' power, the militarization of its Syrian intervention tilted the balance in favour of force. Its initial operations there involved not only equipping anti-Assad paramilitaries with heavy weaponry, with US assistance and Saudi funds, but also dispatching its own paramilitary force, known as SADAT. This secretive outfit was set up in early 2012 by a former Turkish general, Adnan Tanrıverdi, previously Home Front Commander in Northern Cyprus, purged from the Army for Islamism in 1997. Several Israeli reports have claimed that SADAT trained some of the myriad jihadi factions in Syria, possibly including ISIS and the Al Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra, which it has denied.¹¹ Since government involvement in SADAT and similar forces is exceptionally secretive, the extent of their influence is hard to gauge; but SADAT's involvement in Libya has been explicit.

⁹ For a detailed account, see Perry Anderson, 'Chapter 7: Cyprus', *The New Old World*, London and New York 2009, pp. 355–91.

¹⁰ For these interactions between liberals, the AKP and the Brotherhood, see Tugal, *The Fall of the Turkish Model*.

¹¹ Jonathan Spyer, 'Erdoğan's Shadow Army', *Jerusalem Post*, 16 April 2018; Michael Rubin, 'Pakistan on the Mediterranean: Turkey aids ISIS while benefiting from havoc', *Washington Free Beacon*, 28 March 2016. See also Leela Jacinto, 'Turkey's Post-Coup Purge and Erdoğan's Private Army', *Foreign Policy*, 13 July 2017. SADAT's website defines its mission as thwarting Western conspiracies in Islamic countries.

In the short-term, Turkish backing for the anti-Assad forces backfired against Erdoğan, as the Syrian government concentrated its forces around Aleppo and Damascus, granting *de facto* autonomy to the Syrian Kurds under the leadership of PYD and its armed wing, the YPG (People's Protection Units). During the 2014–15 siege of Kobanî, as the YPG withstood repeated assaults by ISIS and other jihadi factions that Turkey had been backing, Erdoğan blocked any aid to the city, triggering mass protests on the Turkish side of the border. The success of the YPG in repelling ISIS and consolidating its hold across an expanded Rojava region would drive a wedge between the AKP and Washington, which for the next three years used the YPG as its ground force to deliver a decisive blow against ISIS.¹² The political repercussions of this victory produced results which nobody had quite calculated (perhaps with the exception of the Kurdish leadership itself). Western liberals and leftists proclaimed their solidarity with 'the Rojava experiment', inspired by PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan's reading of American eco-anarchist Murray Bookchin. The *New York Times Magazine* and *Rolling Stone* published glowing reports on Rojava's achievements, while eloquent Anglophone leftists such as David Graeber called for international solidarity on a par with the Spanish Civil War. That did not materialize, but the very possibility caused concern in Ankara's corridors of power, where Erdoğan was also facing disaffection on other fronts.

3. DOMESTIC RUPTIONS

The challenge did not come from the official parliamentary opposition, led by Turkey's former 'party of government', the Kemalist CHP (Republican People's Party). Through to 2010, under the leadership of the ageing Deniz Baykal, the CHP had proved so sterile—harping on about secularism, at the expense of every other grievance; flirting with military hardliners—that it merely helped solidify Erdoğan's regime, by reinforcing the image of secularism as a top-down affair. Contestation came from the street instead. The June 2013 Gezi protests erupted against the AKP's construction frenzy—plans to bulldoze a pretty little Istanbul park and turn it into an overblown Ottomanesque shopping

¹² In 2016, US Special Forces embedded with the YPG came under Turkish fire during Erdoğan's Operation Euphrates Shield assault on the Syrian-Kurdish border town of Manbij, aimed at preventing the YPG from consolidating its isolated western enclave of Afrin within a contiguous Democratic Federation of Rojava.

mall—but soon drew in broader layers, as numbers swelled in protest at police repression: secular middle classes, Alevis (along with the far left, organizing primarily in poor Alevi neighbourhoods), anti-capitalist Muslims; a strong female presence.¹³

Though the Gezi revolt was soon dispersed, it catalysed two further polarizations against the regime. First, the Gülenists decided to capitalize on Gezi's renewal of oppositional energies by launching a police investigation into the Erdoğan family's corruption. Relations had been souring since the 'One Minute' episode at Davos in 2009, when Erdoğan insisted on rebutting Shimon Peres's defence of the Israeli attack on Gaza; the Pennsylvania-based Gülen, a quasi-direct mouthpiece for Western interests within the Islamic camp, was deeply invested in Israel's role in the region. The corruption investigation, which unearthed tapes of Erdoğan and his son apparently discussing how to dispose of ill-gotten funds linked to the construction sector, dealt the final blow to their alliance. Erdoğan denounced it as a 'dark plot' orchestrated from overseas, and from early 2014, thousands of Gülenists were purged from the security forces. A significant if shadowy link to US interests had been severed.

The second outcome, unfolding against the backdrop of the Kobanî siege, was a short-lived unification of the Turkish and Kurdish lefts under the banner of the HDP, a Kurdish-affiliated party that now redefined itself as an expression of the Gezi spirit, uniting the entire progressive left—socialists, environmentalists, LGBTQ activists, feminists, radical Kurds. The results were significant. In the election of June 2015, the HDP won 80 seats in the Meclis, with 13 per cent of the vote—a historic achievement for the radical left in face of the authoritarian-militaristic Turkist structures that Erdoğanism had left intact.¹⁴ Most importantly, the election robbed the AKP of a sufficient parliamentary majority to push through the transition to an executive presidency at which Erdoğan had long aimed.

¹³ For a debate about the class and ideological character of the 2013 uprisings, see Tuğal, 'Elusive Revolt: The Contradictory Rise of Middle-Class Politics', *Thesis Eleven*, vol. 130, no. 1, October 2015; and Erdem Yörük and Murat Yüksel, 'Class and Politics in Turkey's Gezi Protests', NLR 89, Sept–Oct 2014.

¹⁴ Cengiz Gunes, 'Turkey's New Left', NLR 107, Sept–Oct 2017.

Rightward march

The AKP response to the June 2015 election was a chilling resort to the oldest practices of the Turkish state, combined with the latest resources provided by the collapse of social order in Syria and Iraq. Within weeks of the election, a bomb attack claimed by ISIS in the southern town of Suruç targeted radical students preparing an aid convoy to deliver toys and books to Rojava, killing 33 people. Two months later, an HDP peace rally in Ankara was bombed, killing over a hundred. A reprisal by the PKK gave the regime the excuse to re-open counter-insurgency operations in the Kurdish regions. In the onslaught that followed, thousands of people lost their lives, including hundreds of civilians. More than 10,000 homes were destroyed, tens of thousands of residents were displaced and towns were left economically crippled.¹⁵ Mobs attacked the *Hürriyet* newspaper's offices and torched or vandalized the party buildings of Kemalists, leftists and Kurds (CHP, ÖDP and HDP). They seem to have been organized by the AKP's Ottoman Hearths, a movement evoking the notorious neo-fascist Grey Wolf Hearths, the MHP militias that murdered thousands of leftists and Alevis in the late 1970s. Other vectors of paramilitarization are less public, but more weaponized. A number of gangs, as well as the Esedullah jihadi group, are said to have participated in the massacres of Kurds as part of the counter-insurgency operation.¹⁶

In November 2015 Erdoğan called a second election, in *de facto* coalition with the MHP, now running on the AKP's staunch record against Kurdish 'terror'. The MHP (National Action Party) had been founded in 1969 by Alparslan Türkeş, an officer serving in the Turkish branch of NATO's Operation Gladio after special training in the US. Its ideology

¹⁵ As telling as the mercilessness of this months-long campaign was its thin coverage in the Western media, which Erdoğanists often accuse of being 'anti-Turkey'. While sympathetic to Gezi and to the experiment in Rojava, the international press had gone back to normal when it came to the Turkish state's treatment of its Kurds.

¹⁶ A group of academics circulated a petition protesting against the brutality unleashed upon the Kurds. The regime reacted swiftly. Close to 400 were dismissed from their jobs and blocked from holding any public employment or travelling abroad. Turkish mafia boss Sedat Peker, a former Grey Wolf turned Erdoğan supporter, threatened the petitioners: 'We will spill your blood in streams and bathe in it.' He was tried and acquitted.

combines Pan-Turkic ethno-nationalism with rabid anti-communism, lethally practised by its ‘youth organization’, the Grey Wolves. Military and police cadres form the backbone of the MHP, but it also has deep links with organized crime; the grey economy has expanded in recent decades and some mafia bosses have become influential ‘businessmen’. In other respects, its base is typical for a reactionary party: small merchants and shopkeepers, the unemployed of the big cities, especially rural immigrants. Since 1997 its leader has been Devlet Bahçeli, a former economics professor who has tried to give the party a more respectable cast, without breaking its ties to the mafia. The MHP averages around 13 per cent of the vote and is usually the third or fourth-largest party in the Meclis—a useful spare wheel for Erdoğan’s project. In the November 2015 election, conservative nationalists rallied to give the AKP 50 per cent of the vote and—thanks to the disproportionality of the Turkish electoral system—58 per cent of Meclis seats. With its mandate renewed, the Erdoğan regime continued the work of demolishing the left-Kurdish alliance, begun by his thugs: dozens of HDP parliamentarians and mayors were imprisoned in 2016, and municipalities under HDP control were barred from effective operation.

Coup and counter-coup

Another more dramatic shock jolted the AKP towards an embrace of old-regime elements and the nationalist far right—the direction in which it was already heading. On the night of 15 July 2016, rebel Air Force and Naval factions launched a coup attempt: F-16 fighter jets and military helicopters strafed the National Assembly building and police headquarters in Ankara and captured Istanbul’s Taksim Square and Atatürk Airport. Many of the details remain obscure—far more so than with Turkey’s earlier coups. According to some reports, soldiers descended on ropes from helicopters and opened fire at the Marmaris resort hotel where Erdoğan had been holidaying. Others say that his plane was harassed by two rebel F-16s as it circled Atatürk Airport, unable to land until loyalist forces—the First Army, controlled by the far-right MHP—had retaken it. Erdoğan certainly looked traumatized when he finally landed, although it’s unlikely that the government had no warning. Some say the sloppy execution of the coup, and its unpropitious timing—10pm on a summer’s evening, when Turkish city streets are packed with strollers, many of whom immediately rallied against the military putsch—were due to the plotters rushing it forward, once their plans had been discovered.

What seems certain is that the regime was preparing for a further showdown with the Gülenists and that Gülen himself was involved, despite his protestations to the contrary. Washington also took it very coolly. According to the *New York Times*, Obama waited four days before phoning Erdoğan with his condolences and refused to countenance extradition for the Pennsylvania cleric.¹⁷

In the aftermath of the coup, Erdoğan launched the largest purge to date, removing tens of thousands of suspected Gülenists from the military—above all the Air Force, including the country's top NATO detail—as well as other state institutions, against the objections of US Defense officials. In their place, the old-guard officers sacked during the 2008–12 Ergenekon investigations were reinstated. Instituting a state of emergency and ruling by decree, Erdoğan tightened relations with the MHP. The far-right party supported his bid for an executive-presidential system in the 2017 referendum, where it passed by 51–49 per cent, essentially legalizing Erdoğan's fiat. The MHP ran in alliance with the AKP in the 2018 parliamentary election, ensuring it another governing majority.

4. OUTCOMES

The upshot of the 2015–16 political upheaval was a new polarization. The AKP's first hegemonic formula—liberal Islamism—had united Gülenists, provincial business owners, the pious petty bourgeoisie, liberals, Kurds and the informal proletariat against secular Kemalists, the military and the far right, divided by the question of religious freedom. Its second formula, a novel Islamist neo-imperialism, united a now far richer provincial bourgeoisie, military hardliners, conservatives and the far right against Gülenists, Kurds and liberals, polarized on the question of PKK 'terror'. Through its crackdown after June 2015 the AKP had lost the support of even many conservative Kurdish voters, as well as alienating the left-liberal intelligentsia—the latter insignificant in electoral terms, but a blow to the government's image at home and abroad. Nevertheless, the far right and some of the several million Syrian refugees—a loyal vote bank for Erdoğan—made up the difference.

¹⁷ Mark Landler, 'Obama Denies US Involvement in Coup Attempt in Turkey', *NYT*, 22 July 2016. To Obama's insistence that the Justice Department would need to process any allegations against Gülen, Erdoğan riposted: 'When you ask us to hand over a terrorist, we don't ask for paperwork.'

The passive revolution on which the AKP embarked in 2002 has thus taken an unprecedented turn. Turkey's ruling bloc has been reconstituted, but not along the lines indicated by EU accession programmes—that is: separating a professional, NATO-integrated military from a liberal-democratic state with an open financial system and two interchangeable parties of government. 'Demilitarization' along those lines was never on the cards. First, the Gülenists and Erdoğanists aimed to take over the military-power structures, not to dissolve or depoliticize them. Gülenism would have meant militarism with liberal consent, not demilitarization. More importantly: unless the Kurdish Question can be solved—which means, first, guaranteed cultural and linguistic freedoms; second, a democratic constitutional process to address, among other questions, federal-democratic proposals—no government, Islamist, secular or liberal, will be able to demilitarize Turkey. Instead, these struggles took place against the backdrop of the rising power and international legitimacy of the Kurdish movement, together with the reactivation of armed struggles and uprisings in Turkey's southeastern cities. This gave a further impetus to far-right forces—the MHP, Grey Wolves and old-regime hardliners. With the purge of the Gülenists and restoration of the old guard, the traditional forces of domination are more nakedly revealed—but now in league with Erdoğanism, rather than the 'secular elite'.

The strategists

Strange bedfellows congregated at the White Palace as the AKP regime reconstituted itself after the 2016 coup. One of Erdoğan's top new security advisors was Tanrıverdi, the mystagogic Islamist general who headed SADAT; his mercenary force would play a significant role in Turkey's military intervention in Libya.¹⁸ Another was the ultra-secularist former-Maoist veteran, Doğu Perinçek. Over the years, the anti-imperialism of Perinçek's Workers' Party hardened into a virulent opposition to what it sees as US–EU attempts to divide Turkey by promoting Kurdish separatism. Perinçek was given a life sentence by Gülenist prosecutors during the Ergenekon trials but was released in 2014, as Erdoğan switched position. In 2015 his group changed its name to the Patriotic Party. One could say that its brand of increasingly Turkist (and

¹⁸ Tanrıverdi had to resign as national security advisor in early 2020, after informing a transnational Islamic congress that the regime was preparing for the Mahdi to come and unify the Muslim world into a single confederal state—implying that Erdoğan would play the role of Islam's Messiah.

anti-Kurdish) 21st-century Third Worldism converged with the AKP's gradual construction of a similar *mélange*, coming from the right.¹⁹

Perinçek's group is only one of dozens of Maoist and ex-Maoist groups in Turkey, including many within the Kurdish movement and among its allies, and is not the largest. However, it has an outsize impact due to its long-term strategy of infiltrating state institutions. It has built many relationships within the Turkish intelligence services, judiciary and military, while also cultivating ties with the Chinese and North Korean Communist Parties and with Russian insiders. Its members frequently meet Alexander Dugin, Putin's far-right ideologue, and systematically publicize his ideas. With typical grandiosity, Perinçek likes to credit himself with determining the regime's external policies. This is surely hyperbole, but the AKP's 'liberal' opponents, such as former Foreign Minister Davutoğlu, also like to hint (certainly with a touch of exaggeration) that this ex-Maoist has been running the government behind the scenes.²⁰

Perinçek has an unequivocally negative reputation on the Turkish left, unlike the liberal-Marxist intellectuals who clouded many minds in the early 2000s with their sympathies for the AKP's first period; interventions that still have a negative impact today, in the form of a vague nostalgia for that era's alleged democracy. The Patriotic Party can have no such influence on the left, but it does provide Erdoğanism with an anti-imperialist discourse and with bridges to the 'deep' state apparatus of China. It also has the potential to confuse the more nationalist-oriented of the secularists—although it has recently become so involved in Islamist mobilization, with its youth association announcing a coalition with the Ottoman Hearths, that it risks alienating them again.²¹

In the economic sphere, thinkers like Cemil Ertem have promulgated ideas of a paradigm shift to a New Economic Programme with a strong

¹⁹ Perinçek is best known in the West for taking his claim that the Armenian genocide was 'an international lie' to the European Court of Human Rights, which duly ruled in favour of the right to denialism in this instance.

²⁰ 'How an ultra-secularist gained clout in Turkey's Islamist government', *Al-Monitor*, 30 January 2020; 'Davutoğlu: Devleti Bahçeli mi yönetiyor, Perinçek mi?', *Karar*, 23 June 2020.

²¹ 'Sürpriz ittifak . . . Osmanlı Ocakları ile Vatan Partisi neden yan yana geliyor', *odatv4.com*, 18 April 2019.

emphasis on building a technology-capturing national-industrial base—to some extent imitating the Chinese model, although, as Ertem emphasizes, ‘fully open’ and competitive, still aiming for integration with the EU.²² From a Maoist background, Ertem studied finance and economics at Istanbul University and shifted to new-left journalism in the 1990s. He is now a top economic advisor to Erdoğan. In this line of thinking, the inexorable shift towards a post-Western world organized around a Russia–China axis is already underway. There is much talk of building up ‘national’ industries in autos and defence, with a higher proportion of domestic technology, supported by deeper capital markets. The Ministry of Development has become a more central player, and a new sovereign wealth fund has been repurposed for domestic investment.²³ Some see this as creating a state-capitalist sector, in Bukharin’s sense of the term: the politicization and centralization of the productive process, with expansionary (rather than competitive) aims.

Meanwhile the political culture has given rise to a paranoid-conservative outlook, strong on conspiracy theories. To give a flavour of this tabloid world: regime journalists have ‘proved’ that the US military was training Black Lives Matter and Antifa protestors in Kurdish PKK and YPG camps, for use against the Erdoğan regime; when the BLM protests erupted in the US in June 2020, they crowed that the chickens had come home to roost: ‘The weapon you pointed at us is now on your streets.’²⁴ The notion of a global interest-rate conspiracy aimed at weakening the Turkish economy has taken firm hold, despite—or, perhaps, because of—the fact that financialization has been at the root of the regime’s macro-economic strategy since 2002. The interest-rate conspiracy, driven by jealousy at Turkey’s achievements, is said to have been behind

²² See for example Cemil Ertem’s columns in the *Daily Sabah*: ‘Turkey’s New Economic Programme and Its Philosophy’, 25 September 2018; ‘On Turkey’s New Development Path’, 26 October 2016.

²³ Ziya Öniş, ‘Turkey under the Challenge of State Capitalism: The Political Economy of the Late AKP Era’, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2019; Cihan Tuğal, “‘Çin Tutulması’ (I): Neoliberal dönem biterken, rejimin yeni iktisadi model arayışları”, sendika.org, 20 March 2018; Yahya Madra and Sedat Yılmaz, ‘Turkey’s Decline into (Civil) War Economy: From Neoliberal Populism to Corporate Nationalism’, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 118, no.1, 2019.

²⁴ İbrahim Karagül, ‘ABD’de olağanüstü hal’, *Yeni Şafak*, 2 June 2020. *Daily Sabah*, a pro-regime paper published in English, explained that Gülenists were the real organizers of the BLM protests: ‘All those FETÖ members who fled Turkey and sought refuge in the US are at the forefront of the demonstrations’: Melih Altınok, ‘FETÖ and Antifa have turned against Trump’, *Daily Sabah*, 4 June 2020.

the Gezi protests as well as the 2018 currency crisis. A regime intellectual summarizes its world outlook:

In fact, everything that has happened is part of the multi-dimensional siege that has been carried out against Turkey since 2013, which Turkey has managed to break down every time. The world's economic centre of gravity is shifting from the West toward the East and its projects have made Turkey the 'centre of mass'. Also, while Turkey sets an example for Muslim countries, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has become the 'natural leader of Islam'. Turkey being at the table for the commercialization of the energy sources in both the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean, and Turkey no longer being 'that old Turkey' is badly frustrating some . . . They will soon understand that they need to sit and talk with Turkey on equal terms rather than using blackmail and bluffs.²⁵

5. POLITICAL LOGICS

How to characterize this novel political-ideological formation? Some have proposed 'Bonapartism', but this fails to capture the specificity of the Erdoğan regime.²⁶ One reason why Louis Napoleon Bonaparte could rise 'above' classes after 1848, and be all things to all men, was because he was neither a man of the movement nor of the people. Despite some Bonaparte-like qualities, Erdoğan comes from an ideological and popular background, which he shares with the most right-wing voices of the regime. Moreover, the use of ideological and organized private militias against both the Kurds and the left differentiates Erdoğanism from Bonapartism, which resorted to mob violence in a less systematic way. It has been speculated that Erdoğan may be planning to create a loyalist force from the *bekçi*, or 'night watchmen', a formation that goes back to Ottoman times. In the past, *bekçis* have acted as guardians of small property, as well as morality police; the suspicion is that Erdoğan may be arming them to fight the Kurdish and left opposition.²⁷ The AKP also fuses paramilitary mobilization with 'democratic' practices, as seen in

²⁵ Levent Yılmaz, 'A religion-based plan for trade wars: Pastor Brunson', *Yeni Şafak*, 2 August 2018.

²⁶ Barış Yıldırım and Foti Benlisoy, 'Turkey's Fragile Bonapartism', *leftvoice.org*, 6 January 2017; Murat Yetkin, 'Erdoğan's "regime change" and Bonaparte', *Hürriyet Daily News*, 17 August 2015.

²⁷ Ali Duran Topuz, 'Bekçi Baba ı: Düdükler kimin için çalışıyor?', *gazeteduvar.com.tr*, 1 February 2020; Canan Coşkun, 'AKP'nin yeni kolluk gücü: 9 Soruda bekçi yasaı teklifi', *diken.com.tr*, 5 June 2020.

the anti-coup mobilization in the summer of 2016, when the Gezi left's repertoire—neighbourhood assemblies, occupation tents and so on—was appropriated by the right.²⁸ Yet if the Grey Wolves and some radical Islamists have been pushing the regime in this direction, it's not there yet. Rather than try to fit the AKP into an existing definition, whether Islamo-Bonapartist, state-capitalist or neo-fascist, it may be more useful to get a bead on it by examining the logic of its operations, its political practice. How has Erdoğanism 2.0 coped with the major impasses of the 'Turkish model'—economic, geopolitical, domestic opposition?

First, again, the economic crisis. As the AKP shifted right in 2015–16, one of its major problems was the worsening economic situation. The third quarter of 2016 saw a sharp contraction, as investors took flight from the political instability. The Central Bank had to raise interest rates to 12–13 per cent to steady the currency, but thereby increased the debt burden on households and firms. In an attempt to compensate indebted companies in the run-up to the crucial April 2017 referendum on the new presidential system, the AKP launched a state-backed scheme of 3-year loans to small and medium businesses, with zero payments in the first year, pledging up to \$30 billion. This produced a short-lived economic rebound, but the Central Bank was forced to raise interest rates again as the Turkish lira continued to weaken through 2017, overtaken by rising inflation. The banking system itself, as the intermediary for firms that had loaded up on dollar-denominated debt during the years of QE plenty, was now highly vulnerable to currency shocks.

The economy was already slowing when the US Federal Reserve raised interest rates in June 2018, signalling the onset of fresh turbulence. Turkey was among the countries hardest hit, though Argentina, Brazil, India and Mexico also saw their currencies plunge as the rising dollar sucked in global funds. With his position strengthened by the 2017 constitutional changes, Erdoğan shifted to a more direct form of patrimonial intervention. Vowing to take personal control of the economy, he called a snap election. Cutting interest rates was the best way to solve Turkey's inflation problem, he explained to Bloomberg.²⁹ After the 2018

²⁸ Bülent Küçük and Buket Türkmen, 'Remaking the Public through the Square: Invention of the New National Cosmology in Turkey', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, no. 47, 2020.

²⁹ Benjamin Harvey, 'Why Investors Have Become Skittish about Turkey', *Bloomberg*, 17 May 2018.

election, he appointed his son-in-law as Finance Minister and took over the Sovereign Wealth Fund himself. When the lira plunged again that summer over a high-profile spat with Trump about extraditing Gülen in exchange for a dubious American evangelical being held in Turkey, the AKP secured a \$15 billion safety net from Qatar. Despite regime ranting about the interest-rate conspiracy, the Central Bank was forced into raising rates to a spectacular 24 per cent in September 2018, with predictable results—a catastrophic wave of debt defaults and bankruptcies, with unemployment soaring.³⁰ The economy had barely recovered when it ground to a halt again under the impact of the pandemic in 2020. This was the volatile, crisis-ridden background to Erdoğan's attention-grabbing external policy.

Militarized expansion

In drawing up a balance sheet of Erdoğanism's external policy, it is useful to distinguish the regime's varying strategies in the multiple theatres in which it is fighting (or 'keeping the peace'). While it is true to note that paramilitarization at home has gone hand-in-hand with armed expansionism abroad, the regime's goals for the northern Kurdish-Syrian border zone are nevertheless distinct from its plans for the Sunni-Arab enclave of Idlib; military support for the Sarraj government in Tripoli is on a qualitatively larger scale than the anti-tank drones and mercenaries reinforcing Baku's push into Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020. The relative success or failure of each needs to be evaluated with these aims in mind.

On the Syrian-Kurdish border, Erdoğanism has given the Turkish state's long-standing policy of armed domination a novel 'imperial' twist. Since 2018, it has progressively colonized a swathe of what was once the Democratic Federation of Rojava. After its forces conquered the YPG's western outpost of Afrin in 2018, the UN documented a series of killings, abductions, looting and wrecking by Turkey's military and paramilitary allies, as well as the forced displacement of inhabitants and severe restrictions placed on women's actions.³¹ In 2019, with Washington's consent, the Turkish military assailed the towns and villages between

³⁰ Akçay and Güngen, 'The Making of Turkey's 2018–2019 Economic Crisis'.

³¹ 'UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria: Unprecedented levels of displacement and dire conditions for civilians in the Syrian Arab Republic', United Nations Human Rights Council, 2 March 2020.

Tell Abyad and Ras al-Ayn, which the YPG had earlier taken from ISIS. Turkey has occupied an 80-mile belt, some 20 miles deep, along the Syrian side of the border, while US forces there fell back to the American bases dotting the Syrian oilfields. One estimate suggests over a thousand civilian casualties; but the number of Kurds displaced far exceeds that.³² There is talk of turning the Turkish-occupied belt into a 'safe zone' for the millions of Syrian refugees in Turkey's cities—or, as some say, an AKP Gaza Strip. There has been no international outcry; the US, Syrian and Russian forces in the zone have come to operational agreements with the Turkish commanders, and the *New York Times'* solidarity with the Kurds only lasted as long as they were fighting for the Americans. For Erdoğan, the conquest counts as a success.

Two hundred miles to the west, the situation in Idlib is very different. Russian jets patrol the skies and Syrian, US and Russian forces guard the main highway. Idlib remains a hotbed of jihadi factions, as well as a vast refugee camp for hundreds of thousands displaced by the war. According to Fehim Taştekin, one of the best-informed correspondents in the region, the co-existence of multiple actors is itself a bar to a sustainable settlement.³³ Officially, the US and Russia expect Turkey to neutralize the jihadi gangs, while the Erdoğan regime wants to absorb them into its own tent of military forces, a spearhead for its broader ambition to integrate the Arab-Islamic right under Turkish leadership. Many of the jihadis perceive Turkey as un-Islamic, though they know they would not hold out long in Idlib without Turkey's guardianship; others are warmer to the idea. In other words, the Idlib game is not over yet. From the regime's perspective, the balance sheet to date is positive.

Tripoli to Baku

In Libya, Turkey is one among many international players, pitted with Qatar and Italy against Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Russia and France, with the US holding the balance. Regional and EU powers have long been divided over whether to prop up the weak, UN-sponsored Government of National Accord under Fayeze al-Sarraj, whose family had been a mainstay of the monarchy, or the new 'strongman', General Khalifa Haftar,

³² 'Monthly Statistical Report on Casualties in Syria', Violations Documentation Center in Syria, June 2020.

³³ 'Fehim Taştekin: Türkiye cihatçı yapılardan bir ordu kurma hayalinde; İdlib'e yeni bir operasyon düzenlenebilir', t24.com.tr, 28 April 2020.

supported by France.³⁴ Haftar's assault on Tripoli in 2019 brought things to a head. A former Gaddafi officer, Haftar was part of a failed Chad operation in the 1980s, escaped into exile and spent several decades in Langley, Virginia. For reasons best known to itself, the US was not interested in supporting Haftar's bid to lead the country after 2011 and did not back his campaign against Sarraj's government. But much like Egypt's Sisi, Haftar portrays himself as an anti-Islamist and thereby seeks support from Western 'secular' forces, while relying on the UAE and Saudi Arabia as his regional patrons. Russia also put its Wagner mercenaries at Haftar's disposal.

In 2019, when Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) seemed poised to occupy the whole country, the US started to weigh in on the Sarraj side, while striking a balanced tone so as not to alienate its loyal Gulf props. Turkey had been covertly supplying Sarraj with heavy weapons and now moved to overt military intervention, sending some 10,000 paramilitary ground troops while Turkish naval frigates shelled LNA positions from the sea. For foreign consumption, Erdoğan was careful to emphasize the legality of the operation, pointing out that the Sarraj government had formally requested international assistance. To a domestic audience, he proclaimed that Turkey had a duty to protect a million 'Köroğlu' Turks in Libya—the descendants of children sired in North Africa by the servants of the Ottoman Empire—while also deploring the fact that Haftar was backed by 'undemocratic countries', like Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE.³⁵ The Turkish intervention helped to stymie Haftar's advance; a ceasefire was called in June 2020, and Erdoğan's press declared victory.

The AKP's celebrations were premature. Bankrolled by Qatar, Ankara has continued to ship in military equipment and reinforce its presence at the al-Watiya air base. Meanwhile the UAE is supposedly financing Russia's build-up of Haftar's position in the east.³⁶ Even if

³⁴ Though Turkey had major investments in Libya, Erdoğan was initially sidelined in the six-month NATO war to overthrow Gaddafi in 2011. With the outbreak of the second civil war in Libya after the 2014 elections, Turkey and Qatar (with the UN and US) backed the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord.

³⁵ International Crisis Group, 'Turkey Wades into Libya's Troubled Waters', Crisis Group Europe Report, no. 257, 30 April 2020.

³⁶ International Crisis Group, 'Foreign Actors Drive Military Build-Up amid Deadlocked Talks', Crisis Group Libya Update, 24 December 2020. Throughout this process, Russia and Turkey were simultaneously engaged in arms deals with each other.

Haftar is somehow liquidated, other figures (such as Aguila Saleh, currently president of Libya's House of Representatives) are waiting in the wings to inherit his role. With no clear winner, the country seems to be deadlocked—much like Syria. While the civilian death toll in this latest round of the Libyan conflict is relatively low—an estimated 400, mainly killed by LNA strikes, compared to over 12,000 in Yemen, for example—the UN has recorded hundreds of thousands of people displaced in Libya and nearly a million in need of humanitarian aid.³⁷ Erdoğan, however, has managed to extract a diplomatic pay-off in the form of a Libyan–Turkish agreement on maritime borders, helping to shore up Ankara's claim to drilling rights in the newly discovered natural-gas fields off the coast of Cyprus. This has led to further collisions with Greece, Israel and France, in what is now being called the 'Eastern Mediterranean conflict'. Here once again, Erdoğan's stand plays well domestically.

Closer to home, the Nagorno-Karabakh war in late 2020 was another political win for the AKP. Turkish-Azeri 'brotherhood' has been a staple of mainstream-nationalist discourse, with some speaking of 'one nation, two states'—an imagined community that negates the ethnogeographical reality of Armenia, sandwiched between the two 'Turkic' powers. These Caucasian republics had suffered some of the worst fallout during the collapse of the Soviet Union. Ethnic conflict led to massacres on both sides; in 1994 Armenia, better armed thanks to diaspora wealth, seized territory around its enclave in mountainous Karabakh, forcibly displacing half a million Azerbaijanis. The post-Soviet Aliyev dynasty in Baku had been waiting for the moment to set the score straight. In 2020, Turkish arms sales supplied it. After ethnic clashes in July, Turkey and Azerbaijan stepped up their joint military exercises, while Erdoğan's Defence Minister declared that, in the struggle for the liberation of the occupied lands, Turkey, with its 83-million population, stood beside its Azeri brothers.³⁸

Azerbaijan's attack on Nagorno-Karabakh was launched in September 2020, with barrages of NATO-style long-range artillery and the

³⁷ Melissa Salyk-Virk, 'Airstrikes, Proxy Warfare and Civilian Casualties in Libya', *New America*, 26 May 2020.

³⁸ Ruslan Rehimov, 'Azerbaijani President Receives Turkish Defence Minister', *Anadolou Agency*, 14 August 2020. The current Defence Minister, General Hulusi Akar, is an active-duty officer who commanded Operation Euphrates Shield in 2016.

deployment of Turkey's Bayraktar combat drones, which Armenian radar couldn't track. Israel, which sees Azerbaijan as a useful base for operations against neighbouring Iran, also supplied kamikaze Harop drones. Ankara has flatly denied sending at least 1,500 Syrian mercenaries to Nagorno-Karabakh during the conflict, as widely reported in the Western press.³⁹ The war ended in less than two months with Azerbaijan's recovery of territories lost in 1994, at a cost of some 5,000 lives. Russia, which played the (deceptive) role of neutral overseer, undoubtedly profited most from the conflict, further expanding its hegemony over the region with new military bases for its peace-keeping forces. But Ankara has also increased its presence abroad, shown off its military-hardware capacity with the Bayraktar drones and normalized its use of Syrian fighters abroad—an atrocious abuse of the situation. At home, Erdoğan has further secured the coalition with far-right nationalists.

Fractured opposition

Military prowess abroad—as conveyed by the loyal Turkish media—also helps to reinforce the AKP's hegemony over the fragmented opposition parties, which hesitate to criticize Turkey's martial feats for fear of appearing 'unpatriotic'. As the AKP moved right, the CHP has repositioned itself as a tepid centre-left party under the leadership of ex-bureaucrat Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. The makeover has been ineffective, partly due to Kılıçdaroğlu's personal shortcomings, but also to the lacklustre example of the party's primary model: right-wing European social democracy. Rigid secularism has given way, not to a new political project, but to the lack of one. The three smaller parties that have appeared in the past few years merely contribute to the clamour. The secularist İYİ (Good Party) was founded by an MHP faction that broke with Bahçeli over his backing for Erdoğan's presidential-supremacist bid in the 2017 referendum; it has 37 Meclis seats. In 2019 and 2020 two liberal splitters from the AKP each founded his own electoral vehicle: the former AKP Foreign Minister Davutoğlu set up the Gelecek (Future) Party, and the ex-AKP Finance Minister Ali Babacan announced the advent of the DEVA (Remedy) Party, an acronym for democracy and progress. With the exception of the HDP, all the opposition parties coalesce under the banner of national unity

³⁹ Liz Cookman, 'Syrians Make Up Turkey's Proxy Army in Nagorno-Karabakh', *Foreign Policy*, 5 October 2020.

whenever the regime targets Kurds; the CHP went as far as ('reluctantly') supporting the Afrin occupation of 2018.

The fragmentation of the opposition multiplies its political weakness. An exception was the Istanbul mayoral election of 2019, held in the aftermath of the currency crisis. The CHP candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu scraped in, but Erdoğan annulled the election and ordered it to be re-run. That enormity served to rally the city to İmamoğlu, who triumphed with a winning margin of 800,000 votes. Altogether, CHP candidates took five of Turkey's six largest cities, winning 30 per cent of the national vote; but even in a bad year, the AKP still won 43 per cent. Erdoğan's increasingly autocratic behaviour—most recently, the imposition of an unqualified AKP hack to lead Istanbul's premier state university—should be an asset for the opposition. Yet it has to be said that Erdoğan himself remains a formidable electoral force. He has not been mummified by his eighteen years in office. Though older now and tired, he has not lost his popular touch. He is energized by power, and many of his supporters like what he does with it. Even his thousand-room palace is read as proof of Turkey's renewed imperial strength. If he wins again in 2023, he will be in office through to 2028—an unprecedented reign for a Turkish leader.

6. A NEW HEGEMONIC FORMULA?

The confluence of the AKP's economic and geopolitical shifts has not quite added up to a coherent new model. The regime occasionally appears to be forging ahead in the direction of state capitalism, neo-imperialism, or even in instances neo-fascism, but can never take any of these to its logical conclusion. The limits of Turkish state capacity, the crowded regional field and the world conjuncture frustrate Ankara's economic and neo-imperial ambitions alike. It shifts uneasily back and forth between these and patrimonialism, the rambling use of neoliberal discourse and a poorly articulated Islamic nationalism. In some respects, it still projects its own version of the 'Turkish model'—taking the Turkish-Sunni synthesis as a starting point for hegemony over the Muslim world, as the Ottomans had done. As a hegemonic formula, this can be inflected in various different ways—liberal-democratic, military-imperial, Turkish-nationalist, neo-caliphate—and the Erdoğan regime, as pragmatic as it is ideological, draws upon all of them, often several at a time.

Ankara can still market itself as a beacon of liberal-democratic Islam in the region, especially in contrast to Saudi Arabia. The Khashoggi affair was an example of this. Turkey continues to house many exiled Muslim Brotherhood activists from ‘Arab Spring’ countries, as well as other Arab dissidents. The US-based Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi had been an important conduit between Arab activists, on the one hand, and Turkey’s Islamist journalists and politicians on the other.⁴⁰ His killing in Istanbul in 2018 by the Saudi secret police was therefore no mere operation against a journalist who was out of line, but a symbolic act against the Turkish model’s pan-Islamic capacity.⁴¹ Although scathed, the Erdoğan regime managed to turn this into an opportunity. Turkey was momentarily able to promote itself as a guardian of the free press, in spite of holding a record number of journalists in prison, and Erdoğan could emerge in the *Guardian*’s report as a figure of pristine incorruptibility.⁴² The *Guardian* was representative of a broad layer of commentators, who saw Khashoggi’s killing as proof of the Turkish regime’s ‘democratic’ superiority to the only Sunni alternative—the Saudi model.

The mirage of liberal Islam is also promoted by a network of regime-supported academics, journalists, think tanks and educational institutions in Europe and North America, who use progressive and anti-racist arguments to picture Erdoğan’s Turkey as a world leader of anti-imperialism.⁴³ Many oppositional Islamic intellectuals have fallen into line, shutting down the possibility of critical or liberation-theology perspectives emerging from the failures of both liberal and fundamentalist interpretations of Islam in the last few decades. Some former

⁴⁰ Sarah El Deeb, ‘Saudi writer saw Turkey as base for a new Middle East’, *AP News*, 21 October 2018.

⁴¹ A salient liberal Islamic journalist, Abdulkadir Selvi, among others, interpreted the assassination along these lines. ‘Kaşıkçı cinayetinde oynanan oyunlar’, *Hürriyet*, 6 November 2018.

⁴² The *Guardian* reported: ‘Senior members of the House of Saud, including the crown prince, are partly blaming Turkey for the global revulsion, which they say could have been contained if Ankara had played by “regional rules”. Central to the resentment . . . is a view that the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan betrayed the Kingdom by disclosing details of the investigation and refusing all overtures from Saudi envoys, including an offer to pay “significant” compensation.’ Martin Chulov, ‘Crown Prince’s wings clipped as Khashoggi death rattles Riyadh’, *Guardian*, 12 November 2018.

⁴³ For a critical account, see Sinem Adar and Halil İbrahim Yenigün, ‘A Muslim Counter-Hegemony? Turkey’s Soft Power Strategies and Islamophobia’, *Jadaliyya*, 6 May 2019.

critics have become top ideologues of the regime. Hayrettin Karaman, once considered Turkey's finest Islamic jurist, has recently decreed that giving bribes is not necessarily a sin.⁴⁴

There have been a series of attempts to revive 'the original AKP formula' to battle against the supposedly more nationalist AKP 2.0—that is, to pit the primitive form of Erdoğanism against its advanced version. There are many ludicrous aspects to these campaigns, which are usually led by secular liberals who attribute a progressive mission to lone Islamist figures. Abdullah Gül used to be at the centre of these efforts, but he has consistently frustrated the hopes invested in him, mostly by refusing to take any action. In the last few years columnists on the Islamic daily *Karar* have also broken ranks with the regime, raising liberal hopes, and as noted, two liberal factions have split from the AKP—Davutoğlu's Gelecek Party and Babacan's DEVA. However, sharing the same unfounded nostalgia for the AKP's first term as the secular liberals, they have no vision beyond it.

Liberals inside and outside Turkey watch both parties with great expectations, but it is worth remembering that Davutoğlu was the architect of Erdoğan's failed Syria policy during the first months of the Arab Spring, and Babacan devised 'early' Erdoğanism's economic policies. Neither have come to terms with their blunders. In a lengthy television interview during the Gezi revolt, Babacan explained that there were no unemployment or wage issues in Turkey, and therefore no basis for mass protests. The real reason for them was provocation by the global 'interest-rate lobby', which was disturbed by Turkey's social peace, low interest rates and real growth.⁴⁵ Babacan completely failed to understand that Gezi was a protest against urban pillaging—that is, the dispossession that he had orchestrated. The broader June revolt targeted the government's Sunni-patriarchal authoritarianism, not its wage and employment policies (although the AKP's socially impoverishing economic policies had contributed to the malaise). The regime press serenely mocks these two parties by asking what difference they would have made if they were in power during the key turning points of AKP rule: the Gezi revolt and the 2016 coup.⁴⁶ Islamic liberals have no credible answer.

⁴⁴ Hayrettin Karaman, 'Zarurete dayalı uygulama örnekleri', *Yeni Şafak*, 6 May 2018.

⁴⁵ 'Basın Kulübü,' *Haber Türk*, 14 June 2013.

⁴⁶ Burhanettin Duran, 'Yeni partilerin asıl zorlukları neler?', *Sabah*, 29 May 2020.

With the deepening militarization of the region, and of its own role therein, the fantasy of liberal Islam has been reduced to just another card for the Erdoğan regime, if occasionally a trumping one. The ideological gloss for the AKP's neo-imperial military adventures is more usually supplied by variants of Turkish-Sunni *gloire* and appeals to Turkic unity. It's worth noting that all these interventions have been done on the cheap. The Libyan operation, the most expensive to date, was funded by Qatar and the Tripoli government. Azerbaijan paid over \$120 million for Turkish drones and rocket launchers in 2020, up from \$20 million in 2019.⁴⁷ And so far, all have had a successful political payoff at home, creating stirring headlines to distract from bad economic news. Erdoğanists are well aware that they are minor partners in any winning imperial game. In their moments of grandeur, they may dream of regional domination, unaided by Russia or others; but most of the time they are more pragmatic and are happy enough playing this kind of sub-imperialist role. Launched at all points of the compass, Turkey's multiple small-scale interventions may not add up to a coherent overall picture, apart from their salutary effects at home. But so far none has been a major debacle.

7. INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

For all the regime's nationalist and Eurasianist discourse, it still pays to take a cool look at how far Turkey has actually moved away from the West. Washington was the prime mover in first promoting, then ditching the Muslim Brotherhood model, under Obama; arming then abandoning the Syrian Kurds under Trump. Both administrations refused to sell Ankara its latest-model missile-defence system and then reacted in overblown fury when Turkey took delivery of the Russian S-400s, slapping sanctions on top AKP military officials. The Pentagon has not yet shown how this missed sale for US arms manufacturers has put NATO's defences in jeopardy. Turkish arsenals are stuffed to the gills with over-priced American military hardware. The country hosts US forces and weaponry at Konya, İzmir and Kürecik, as well as the giant base at İncirlik, where the Pentagon parks enough nuclear weapons to blow up the entire Middle East. Turkey, for its part, has been careful to

⁴⁷ Ece Toksabay, 'Turkish arms sales to Azerbaijan surged before the Nagorno-Karabakh fighting', *Reuters*, 14 October 2020.

stay on the right side of international law: it sent sea and land forces to Libya in 2019 at the formal request of the UN-recognized Sarraj government; got the go-ahead from Washington for its 'safe zone' operation in northern Syria, and US funding for its 'humanitarian aid' in Idlib; organized arms sales and joint military exercises with Azerbaijan through the official channels.

The hypocrisy of US and EU moralizing about Turkish military interventions in the region needs no underlining here. Macron has spearheaded the criticism, accusing Ankara of 'playing a dangerous game' in Libya.⁴⁸ France itself, lead warmonger for the overthrow of Gaddafi in 2011, has now decided that Libya needs a strongman leader after all and added its bomber jets to Haftar's attack on Tripoli, while its six-year counter-insurgency operation across the Sahel has wreaked chaos and produced a new generation of jihadis. Paris condemns Erdoğan's use of mercenaries from Idlib, while exporting its own Foreign Legion to Afghanistan, Chad, Mali and the Ivory Coast. Macron's latest wave of repression against French Muslims is a gift for Erdoğan's attempts to portray himself as world leader of Islam.

Meanwhile Merkel, who flew over in person to offer Erdoğan cash to keep Muslim refugees out of Germany, makes between-the-lines insinuations that his regime is comparable to Hitler's.⁴⁹ There are now an estimated 4 million refugees in Turkey, most of them from Syria, though with significant numbers from Afghanistan. This medium-income country does not have the resources to handle such a population on its own, especially when compared to much richer European states. Instead, refugees often live in deplorable conditions, with no clear roadmap for the resolution of their status. Their predicament shows up the hollow fashion in which liberal and Islamic ideals of international solidarity have been instrumentalized. The Erdoğan regime has twice or thrice encouraged refugees to amass at the European border when EU funds failed to materialize. Merkel protests that Turkey should not use refugees in this way, while quietly offering a bilateral payment.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ 'Statement of the Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs', *mfa.gov.tr*, 23 June 2020.

⁴⁹ Marcel Fürstenau, 'Merkel, Erdoğan and a Faustian refugee bargain', *Deutsche Welle*, 24 January 2020.

⁵⁰ 'Merkel: Turkey's Erdoğan shouldn't use refugees to show discontent', *Reuters*, 2 March 2020.

Neither she nor any other European leader has proposed a structural path forward that would prevent these insecure people from being used as bargaining chips. That would require a progressive restructuring of European state and society, not just of Turkey.

Clashes of interest with Europe occasionally boil over into verbal spats, which are then contained. A prime example of this was Erdoğan's 2017 falling-out with the Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte, which produced sensational coverage without serious follow-up. The Dutch authorities not only banned AKP pro-referendum rallies among the Turkish community but humiliated the diplomats and politicians who organized them, with Dutch neo-fascists offering vociferous support. It became clear that Rutte was stepping up the confrontation on the eve of the Netherlands' election to win support from the far right.⁵¹ Erdoğan, meanwhile, called those voting against him in the 2017 referendum 'the Dutch within'. But Rutte toned down his rhetoric once electoral victory was in the bag, and later gave Erdoğan backing as he crushed Kurdish self-rule in northern Syria in late 2019, saying that NATO couldn't make it without Turkey, geopolitically or strategically.

In other words, no bridges have been burned. Even if Turkish discourse increasingly depicts the country as part of Eurasia and the Middle East, its entrenched economic relations tell another story. In 2020, 56 per cent of Turkish exports by value were shipped to EU countries, above all Germany, while only 26 per cent went to Asia. Around half of Turkey's imports came from the EU, compared to a third from Asia.⁵² Israel also remains a top partner, and the Netherlands contributed handsomely to Turkey's growth in exports in 2018–19. Erdoğanists frequently like to say that the Kemalist Republic was but a parenthesis within centuries of Sunni-Turkish historical development, but the country's deep links with the EU make one wonder whether Erdoğan's economic nationalism is not the true parenthetical note. Late in 2020, after the pandemic had further crippled the economy, he sacked his son-in-law as Finance Minister—a peace pipe extended to the West, as Albayrak was perceived to be the mastermind behind the government's economic-nationalist moves.

⁵¹ Robert Mackey, 'Spat with Turkey Appears to Boost Dutch Prime Minister on Eve of Election', *Intercept*, 14 March 2017.

⁵² Daniel Workman, 'Turkey's Top Trading Partners', worldstopexports.com, 1 February 2020.

Yet despite these strong ties with the West, there is no going back to the golden era of the ‘Turkish model’. The binding ties of the Cold War have come undone and the post-1990 momentum—when the financial-globalization bubble lifted all boats—has faltered amid capitalist-heartland stagnation. Neither the EU nor the US is in a position to sustain liberal-democratic capitalism in the region. Those who still harbour this empty dream are wasting their time. That, however, does not mean Erdoğanism represents a coherent alternative. Turkey is drifting in the wind, propelled by neo-imperial arrogance, cronyism, unsettled accounts with the West, militarization, debt dependence and the rise of China.