

Cooking Turkey's Goose

A cardinal maxim of political speech is, don't make comparisons to dogs and don't use the image of Adolf Hitler as a reference point. On December 31, 2015, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, President of Turkey, was unwise enough to ignore this and to make another one of his questionable and absurd statements. Since his election as president, which he won with 51 per cent of the vote in August 2014, he, like some U.S. presidents, has wanted to rule as a strong executive. This condition, he insisted in December, can exist in a unitary state: "There are already examples in the world. You can see it when you look at Hitler's Germany." This utterance, among other things, does not augur well for any Turkish friendship with the State of Israel.

Perhaps, as his spokesperson explained, Erdogan did not mean to glorify Hitler, but nevertheless earlier comments by the ambitious political leader are questionable, if not duplicitous. In a speech at Marmara University on October 13, 2014 Erdogan heralded past and future greatness. In denouncing Lawrence of Arabia as an English spy disguised as an Arab, Erdogan recalled the Ottoman Empire that was able to maintain this entire region in unity and harmony: "Once again Turkey is the hope of the whole region."

He implied that the old borders of the empire, the territories lost after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, which included the Gaza Strip and Arab countries, were in the hearts and minds of Turks. This may indicate future aggression in the area, but it certainly did not mean allowing Turkey to be divided so that Kurds in Turkey could form their own political entity.

It is not clear whether Erdogan, who wants to limit Turkish secularism, wants to assume the powers of the Islamic Caliphate in Turkey, as well as desiring to rule by executive

decrees rather than sharing power with the legislature. In this regard, it is worth remembering that Turkey is not only a member of NATO but its only Muslim member. Erdogan's political party, the Justice and Development party (AKP) which won the November 2015 election with 317 parliamentary seats and 49.5 per cent of the vote, does claim, though many would dispute it, to be not simply a Muslim party, but more a conservative and moderate religious one.

Even more potent is that, contrary to NATO requirements, Turkey has acted in undemocratic fashion, and has been an unhelpful if not unfaithful NATO ally. Memories are still vivid of violations of human rights in May and June 2013 that started with the antigovernment protests in Taksim Square in Istanbul. Thousands were arrested at the protests led by environmental activists against the proposed demolition of Gezi Park, a small park said to be the last public green space in the city, in the square, as part of a redevelopment plan that included a shopping mall, and a military barracks near the site.

Erdogan automatically called some of the protestors "terrorists," and the police and military crushed dissent in Istanbul and throughout the country. Even Amnesty International condemned the use of excessive force as the Turkish police used brutal methods that included tear gas and pepper spray, in killing a number of people and injuring 8,000. Ironically, it is still unclear whether Erdogan wants to go ahead with the planned shopping mall.

Few would regard Turkey as a true ally of the United States, whether in Middle Eastern affairs or elsewhere. True, Turkey did provide the U.S. with the Incirlik airbase for attacking ISIS in Syria. But its international behavior has been troublesome.

In 2012, Turkey joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a group of six countries, as a dialogue partner, not a

full member. Erdogan remarked that Turkey would give up its quest to join the European Union if it was given full membership in the SCO. Also, in September 2013 Turkey surprisingly choose a Chinese company for construction of a long-range air and antimissile defense system.

Erdogan has declared war not on ISIS, the main Islamist international terrorist threat, or on other Islamic terrorist groups, but rather on the Kurds in cities in the southeast of the country. Turkey has had close relations with Iran, Hizb'allah, and until recently, with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. It bought oil from ISIS, and allowed foreign jihadists, weapons, and funds to pass through its territory to ISIS.

It has collaborated with the al-Nusra front, the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, and with other terrorist groups.

In contrast, Turkey has had a hostile attitude to Israel especially since the *Mavi Marmara* incident in 2010, when it withdrew its ambassador from Israel, though it is now talking, in somewhat schizophrenic manner, of normalizing relations with Israel.

The strongest Turkish attack has been on the Kurds, about half of whom in the Middle East live in Turkey. The main group calling for an independent state, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (P.K.K.), which has declared autonomous regions, is fighting with rocket launchers to repel the Turkish onslaught against it. Yet, on January 1, 2016, nearly 300 Kurds, members of PKK, were killed in raids by the Turkish military in southeast Turkey.

About 100,000 Kurds have been displaced and businesses have suffered since the start of the Turkish military operation. Erdogan, using strong language, spoke of continuing the fight against the Kurds until "the area has been completely cleansed and a peaceful atmosphere established." In addition, he has

launched a criminal investigation, alleging “constitutional crimes,” of the leaders of the pro-Kurdish political party, the HDP, a party that won 59 seats and got 10 per cent of the vote, in the election of November 2015.

Erdogan in recent weeks has suggested better relations with Israel. Yet his rhetoric is again questionable. For some years he has supported Hamas, allowed the Hamas al-Qassam Brigades to operate on Turkish territory. In September he met in Ankara, for undisclosed reasons, with Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal. On November 25, 2015 he expressed support for the Palestinian struggle including those brigades in “the noble fight in defense of the al-Aqsa Mosque and holy places.” Again, on December 2, 2015, the very day when he spoke of better relations with Israel, he also declared his support for the struggle of the Palestinian people “against injustice, and the Israeli occupation.”

One interesting facet of this animosity towards Israel is Erdogan’s insistence on a number of factors for normalizing relations with Israel. One was an apology by Israel for the attack on the ship the *Mavi Marmara* which, as part of a flotilla headed from Turkey and attempting to breach Israel’s blockade of the Gaza strip, was intercepted. Nine Turks were killed and many wounded. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu offered an apology.

The contrast is striking in the case of Turkey, whose F-16 fighter jet downed the Russian Su-24. Turkey has not apologized to Russia, and Erdogan explained that Turkey does not need to apologize for actions that are violations of its airspace, which in fact in this case was all of seventeen seconds. For his part, Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu excused himself by saying he did not order the attack on the plane.

Russian President Vladimir Putin responded instantly and imposed sanctions, including cutting off Russian supply of

natural gas, to Turkey. He also on December 3, 2015, has made the most amusing and devastating comment on Erdogan, "It appears that Allah decided to punish the ruling clique in Turkey by depriving them of wisdom and judgment."

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