

For Malignant Erdogan, A Sea Of Defeats

by Hugh Fitzgerald



In the latest elections in Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party – the AKP – won 51% of the votes overall, but it lost in the three most populous and most important cities, where the Republican Party, headed by Evrem Islamoglu, prevailed. The AKP lost in Istanbul, the economic capital of Turkey, which was particularly humiliating for Erdogan; Istanbul was the city in which he started out in politics, and where he once served as mayor. The AKP lost in Ankara, too, Turkey's second city, and its political capital; it was the first time the AKP party had lost in that city in twenty-five years. The AKP lost by a very wide margin in Izmir, the third largest city in Turkey and its secular center.

This is the first time the AKP has endured such a loss, and it reflects, observers say, unhappiness with the economic situation. Turkey's lira has lost more than 40% of its value since the beginning of 2018; the credit bubble, sustained by low interest rates, burst just at election time, after Turkey's central bank raised interest rates from 8% to 24%. Turkey is now officially in a recession. Unemployment is above 12%, and rising. No recovery is in sight.

But Erdogan has mismanaged more than the economy.

In its foreign relations, Turkey, or rather Erdogan, has alienated his country's most important partner, the United States. First, Erdogan imprisoned an American pastor, Andrew Brunson, on trumped-up charges, for two years, before releasing him. Second, he has continued to demand that the United States extradite Fethulleh Gulen, and denounced America repeatedly for refusing to do so. Third, in the aftermath of the 2016 coup that Erdogan attributed to Gulen, more than 100,000 supposed Gulen supporters lost their jobs. Fourth, Erdogan has had people he deemed too wedded to Kemalism and secularism fired from government jobs. Fifth, for three years straight, Erdogan's Turkey has jailed more journalists than any other country in the world. 68 remain in jail. Sixth, in constantly railing against Israel and publishing his plan for creating a pan-Islamic army that would be sufficiently powerful to destroy the Jewish state, no doubt envisioning himself at its head, Erdogan reveals himself to be an unapologetic antisemite.

Erdogan's obsession with Israel has become ever more pronounced. He has described Netanyahu thus: "You are an oppressor, cruel and at the head of state terror."

In a televised speech in Istanbul, Erdogan also accused Israel of "occupying Palestine" and committing "sins, crimes against humanity, massacres."

Erdogan is a staunch supporter of Hamas. He has long been a harsh critic of Israel, and regularly likens its actions toward the "Palestinians" to the Nazi mass murder of Jews during the Holocaust.

"The Jews in Israel kick people lying on the ground. In fact, Jews don't kick men but also women and children when they fall on the ground," Erdogan said in a speech to young Turks at an Istanbul meeting of the Turkish Youth Foundation. "But as Muslims, we'll confront these people [the Jews] if they have courage to deal with us, and we'll teach them a lesson."

This kind of rhetoric does not go over well in Washington.

Then there is the question of the Russian S-400 air defense system, which Turkey has agreed to buy, ignoring the American requests not to do so, for fear it would compromise the security of the F-35, the most modern fighter in the U.S. arsenal, which Washington had previously said it would sell to Turkey.

On April 1, the Pentagon said it had suspended delivery of equipment related to the F-35 "pending an unequivocal Turkish decision to forgo delivery of the S-400." That is where things stand as of this writing: Erdogan refuses to consider Washington's security objections, that the Russians could use Turkey's F-35s to test the capabilities, and locate any weaknesses, in the performance of F-35s in eluding the S-400 air defense system. Erdogan is in turn furious, apparently incapable of taking American security concerns seriously. As of this writing, it seems that the Pentagon will not back down, and it is likely that Erdogan will not be getting those F-35s after all. This is the kind of conflict that makes sensible American officials reconsider whether Turkey's membership in NATO any longer makes sense, or whether it is time to show the despot Erdogan – anti-West, antisemitic, pro-Russian, and anti-democratic – the door, booting him out of a military alliance that was originally created to defend

Western democracies, not re-islamizing autocracies, against the Soviet threat.

Erdogan has seen himself as a future leader of the world's Muslims. After the Austrian government shut down some mosques and expelled some imams in June 2018, Erdogan, in a rage, gave a speech in which he foresaw a coming conflict "between the crescent and the cross." There is no doubt which side Turkey under Erdogan would be on in such a conflict, or on what side all the other NATO members would be on. That is another reason for not continuing Turkey's membership in NATO.

Erdogan's belief that Turkey could ever be accepted as a leader of the world's Muslims shows a failure to appreciate his country's history. Turkey is not regarded by the Arabs as their natural leader; they have not forgotten the Ottomans, who treated them with such contumely, and have no desire to be led again by the Turks and their self-appointed caliph, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. And even without that folk memory, there is the fury in Saudi Arabia, and among some of its Gulf allies, including the United Arab Emirates, about the way Turkey dragged out the Khashoggi investigation for maximum effect, releasing details with tantalizing slowness, and is still demanding more information from Saudi Arabia about the killing, the identities of the killers, and what punishments they can expect. In focusing on the killing and the coverup for six months, Erdogan has made a permanent enemy of Mohammed bin Salman. At the same time, the Turks have been soliciting more investment in their country from the Gulf states, and especially from Saudi Arabia. The Turks can carry on about Khashoggi, as Erdogan has been doing, or they can attract more investments from Saudi Arabia, but they can't do both.

So here is what Erdogan faces, as he sits in the Ak Saray, the White Palace with 1,100 rooms that he had built for himself. The Turkish electorate has just turned against the AKP in the country's three largest cities. The Arabs have chosen – their silence is telling – not to join his anti-Israel crusade, nor

welcomed his careless talk of a coming conflict between “the crescent and the cross.” Discussions with the E.U. about admitting Turkey are at a standstill. The American government is refusing to supply the F-35 fighters that Turkey was expecting, as long as Erdogan insists on buying the S-400 air defense system from Russia. Nothing is going right. The situation must leave the braggart Padishah confused and chastened. He who promised to deliver an “Ottoman slap” to Trump, and boasted that he would turn Hagia Sophia into a mosque to punish Trump for recognizing Israel’s sovereignty over the Golan, is surrounded by signs of defeat on all sides. Shakespeare famously wrote about a “malignant and a turbaned Turk.” Erdogan may not wear a turban, but as for the rest...

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