

## Analysis

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**Summary:** In and around Turkey, both the dark and glorious pages of Ottoman and Republican Turkish history are being evoked in parallel battles. How the political leadership reframes various pages of Turkish history sheds light not only on the ongoing re-conceptualization of Turkish identity and domestic power struggles, but also on Ankara's regional strategic vision and strategy.

## Turkish History Revisited: Uniting or Polarizing?

by *Diba Nigar Göksel*

### Introduction

History has been very much on the Turkish agenda lately. In and around Turkey, both the dark and glorious pages of Ottoman and Republican Turkish history are being evoked in parallel battles. How the political leadership reframes various pages of Turkish history sheds light not only on the ongoing re-conceptualization of Turkish identity and domestic power struggles, but also on Ankara's regional strategic vision and strategy. So far, it appears convoluted.

One can discern a picking and choosing of elements of Ottoman and Republican history by the ruling party with which to rally popular support and justify their regional aspirations. The intensification of Ottoman references conforms to Ankara's current aspirations in its Muslim neighborhood. The tangled-up form this synthesis sometimes takes in the foreign policy sphere is also reflected in the words of the foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu: "Beyond representing the 70 million people of Turkey, we have a historic debt to those lands where there are Turks or which was related to our land in the past."

Combining elements that can appeal to a broad range of people with tradi-

tional sentiments rooted in religion and ethnicity inevitably results in a rhetoric riddled with contradictions and selectivity, creating new dividing lines alongside mutually exclusive expectations. Turkey may have grown out of the era when its history and identity dynamics can be "managed" as such. Given the diverse yet intertwined nature of identities and historical experiences within and around Turkey, it is only possible to move beyond entrenched dividing lines through embracing their full range.

### A Synthesis of Anniversaries

Throughout 2012, in addressing the nation, there are two dates to which Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has indexed his vision for the country: 2023 and 2071. Both mark crossroads that simultaneously divide and unite the diverse peoples of Turkey and its neighborhood.

2023 is the centennial of the foundation of the Turkish Republic, replacing the Ottoman Empire (and the Caliphate) with a European-inspired secular nation state — bringing with it both inclusive and discriminatory elements. Erdoğan set 2023 as a target for goals that would make Turkey a

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“great nation and great power,” in a sense declaring ownership of the Republican ideals he has been accused by his critics of countering.

In his party congress in September 2012, Erdoğan introduced 2071 as “the benchmark of greatness” for the young generation. 2071 is the millennium anniversary of the Battle of Malazgirt (Manzikert), marking the Muslim Turkish conquest of Anatolia. The 2071 reference is controversial among those who trace their heritage to pre-1071 Anatolia, such as Armenians, Greeks, and Assyrians because 1071 started a gradual transition, with first the Seljuk Sultanate of Rûm and then the Ottoman state asserting Muslim and Turkish-speaking predominance. The AKP leadership has generally been forthcoming in its embrace of Ottoman heritage, which in a sense compensates for the negative connotations of 1923 among people who see the Republic as an unfortunate severance of Islamic rule and unity under the Istanbul-based Caliphate.

Regional aspirations related to Ottoman glorification were portrayed in the prime minister’s victory speech in June 2011 when he announced that his party’s win was a victory for once-Ottoman cities — and only the Muslim ones. In his words: “Sarajevo won today as much as Istanbul, Beirut won as much as Izmir, Damascus won as much as Ankara, Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin, the West Bank, Jerusalem<sup>1</sup> won as much as Diyarbakir.”

Which social or political camps represent, or misrepresent, the Ottoman or Republican heritage is also a subject of domestic polarization. One example to this can be found in the case of the Turkish TV series “Magnificent Century” about the 16<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman Sultan, Süleyman. The prime minister harshly criticized the series because of its depiction of “intrigues” in the Harem, saying it “casts negative light on Turkish history to younger generations.” When the judiciary and the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTUK) could not find grounds to ban the series, a bill was submitted to the Parliament to enable “the ban from broadcast of films that misrepresent, belittle, or humiliate Turkey’s historical events or figures,” in order for “young generations to learn about history in a way that suits the Turkish family tradition and respect for moral values.”

1 While Jerusalem has a majority Jewish population today, its mention in this context could refer to the Muslims of Jerusalem, or the symbolic significance of the city for the Islamic world.

Ironically, this series had generated a surge of interest in the Ottoman era in both Turkey and the neighborhood, making all things Ottoman more popular.

Another example comes from domestic dissent to AKP’s “ownership” of the celebrations of the proclamation of the republic (October 29, 1923). The most recent anniversary of Republic Day, in October, was marked with tension. Opposition political and civil society groups were refused permission to hold their own rally instead of attending official celebrations organized by the government, with the reasoning that the opposition celebration would turn into a government protest. The opposition’s march was dispersed with water cannons, suggesting hypocrisy in AKP’s support of Arab Spring protests while restricting its own people.

### Politically Expedient Memory?

A trend of recognition of past persecutions born from Turkish ultra-nationalism and state impunity has taken hold. Besides addressing the wrongs committed against pious Muslims suspected of being engaged in organized political Islam, solving the entrenched conflict with Kurdish nationalists has surfaced as a priority. The high costs of the ongoing conflict for Ankara, the shared religion, the reality of Kurds’ rising power in the Middle East, and the injustice faced at the hands of the traditional antagonists of Turkey’s Islamist camp are factors that have been influential in the prioritization and formulation of the initiative. Historical references have also been at play.

Both in the Party Congress in September 2012 and later in December, Prime Minister Erdoğan referred to “his” Kurds being the descendants of Saladin Ayyubi. Ayyubi, a 12<sup>th</sup>

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century leader of today's Egypt and Syria, led the Muslim opposition against European Crusaders, defeating them and recapturing Palestine. He is known to be of Kurdish origin, but was also half Turkish. Erdoğan has referred to him as a symbol of the lack of real division between the Kurds and Turks. He has also pointed out that Ayyubi was a pious Muslim, adding that the PKK, with its lack of respect to Islam, does not merit the following of the descendants of Ayyubi.

The prime minister has evoked the heavy-handed military crackdown in the 1930s on the rebelling Kurdish Alevite population of Dersim in Southeast Anatolia on various occasions, when he emphasized that it was the main opposition party (CHP) that governed during these massacres. Both as an opportunity to undermine CHP and also to contribute to the ongoing effort to end the Kurdish insurgency, the prime minister has criticized past efforts to legitimize the massacres to end the rebellion, has read out literature describing the pain and suffering, mentioned that there are books on this subject that become etched in ones' memory, condemned the banning of such books, and even apologized on behalf of the state.

It has not gone unnoticed that the prime minister has not offered this form of rhetoric about some other repressed identities or restricted histories. While the rights of non-Muslim minorities have been expanded and the foreign ministry has adopted a more empathy-based narrative (which it calls "fair memory"), the prime minister has not demonstrated bold shifts in political rhetoric about Greek or Armenian minorities to recognize their victimhood. Expressions of heartfelt regret or changing public mindsets have been lacking. For a prime minister with far-reaching legitimacy and an ability to deliver transformative addresses, the expectation is that he would also target the entrenched negative perceptions — rooted in the learning of early 20<sup>th</sup> century history — about non-Muslim minorities. Though there was an opportunity to make a strong principled statement on the sixth anniversary of the assassination of Armenian Turkish journalist Hrant Dink, on January 19 of this year, that message was delivered by the culture minister, not the prime minister. Particularly as the centenary of 1915 nears, it is ever more timely for strong public addresses that stir deeper recognition of past Armenian victims, and that confront related stigmas.

Almost all social and political groups have been both perpetrators and victims at different times in the history of these lands, in cycles of ambition, vengeance, and paranoia. Recently, in the Fall of 2012, the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ethnic cleansing and forced exile of Ottoman Muslims from the Balkans was commemorated. The Balkan deportations, fuelling resentment, nationalism, and demographic pressures, were a precursor to the cleansing of Armenian communities from Anatolia in 1915. Intertwined histories, even if they generate clashing narratives, require that the range of tragedies be acknowledged and victims honored without creating a zero-sum game battle of histories. However, this will require much more fine-tuned and less patronizing approaches to history.

The perception among skeptics is that the ruling party acknowledges victimhood, identity, and rights opportunistically — those of political camps whose votes they need, and whose identity references they share. This view has been fortified by the experience of offense taken by dissent, the expectation of gratitude and compliance in return for the deliverance of rights, as well as the curtailing of democratization initiatives that do not seem politically expedient, or supposedly contradict the values of the core AKP constituencies. However, because of the intertwined nature of domestic and strategic contexts, internal dissent against the government's effort to score political points through reconfigurations of history, conveniently for AKP, can be framed as being unpatriotic.

### Conclusion – The Strategic Picture

Marking both 2023 and 2071 appears to be an attempt to create a synthesis that can unite the Turkish and post-Ottoman space — appealing to and fortifying the sense of righteousness and pride of Turkish nationalists and conservative Sunnis in and around Turkey. This can also be seen

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as a post-imperial instinct, resembling Vladimir Putin's synthesis of the grandeur of the former Soviet Union with Russian nationalism.

There are both domestic drivers and global/regional factors involved. Transitions in the Arab world have rejuvenated hopes of Sunni predominance and boosted the self-confidence of the Turkish government. The traction of the AKP synthesis has also been aided by the loss of viability for the EU membership vision to unite the widest range of Turkish interests and aspirations.

The synthesis of elements of Islamic and nationalist ideologies creates a majoritarian platform for the AKP, arguably geared to the first popular presidential election in 2014. However, the democratization and historical recognition that has been set in motion to empower and unite some social segments also opens a Pandora's box. A widening sense of entitlement for recognition of roots and religious conviction can be observed. For example, as Kurdish identity and rights are recognized or liberties regarding the Islamic veil are expanded, the denial of the identity and worship-related demands of Alevites becomes harder to justify. Overcoming obstacles to challenge some traditional historical narratives yet perpetuating others, or introducing new taboos, may very well be unsustainable.

Whether or not the AKP can substantiate its claim of influence over the large post-Ottoman geography is also yet to be seen. There are many variables that will determine this, including whether excluded powers — including the players that Israel, Russia, and Iran exert control over — coalesce to challenge Ankara, as well as the way the Ankara-Washington and Ankara-Brussels partnerships evolve.

Historical references can also play into regional geostrategic divides. While the Saladin Ayyubi reference can rally many Kurds, Arabs, and Turks, Ayyubi is controversial among the Shia Muslims since he was an ardent Sunni who destroyed Shia power in the lands he ruled. Given current concerns about Ankara's sectarian position towards Syria, Iraq, and Iran, the frequency of the Ayyubi reference also has geostrategic undertones. Notably, in a piece for *Financial Times*, David Gardner pointed out that there are comparisons drawn between Tayyip Erdoğan himself and Saladin: "There are those who argue he [Tayyip Erdoğan] is the non-Arab

leader Arabs have most admired since Saladin — a Kurd from Mesopotamia — recaptured Jerusalem from the Crusaders in 1187."

Mobilizing people with ethnic and religious references may boost AKP's votes and immediate strategic leverage, however the gratification can also be hard to sustain. It is a rhetoric that is bound to leave many contradictory expectations unfulfilled in practice — both among the "synthesized" and the "marginalized." Instead, given the diversity in Turkey and among its neighbors, leadership embracing values and norms of liberal democracy, with dividends for all, is needed.

### About the Author

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