



Neo-Ottoman expansionism beyond the borders of modern Turkey: Erdoğan's foreign policy ambitions in Syria and the Mediterranean

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Introduction

The Turkish borders reflect a centuries-long transformation process from the multinational Ottoman empire to the Turkish nation-state, which after World War I found its legal base in the Lausanne Treaty signed on the 24th of July 1923. As stated in the document, “the British Empire, France, Italy, Japan, Greece, Roumania and the Serb-Croat-Slovene State” formed the signing coalition of winning powers following World War I (Lausanne-Treaty 1923). The participants of the Turkish delegation to Lausanne, led by İsmet İnönü, represented the nationalist government of Turkey – to be officially proclaimed on the 29th of October 1923 (Rogan 2015: 395). The main concern of modern Turkey was to achieve recognition of its borders in accordance with its so-called National Pact (see later). However, this was only to some extent obtained, with significant exceptions for instance regarding the areas around Iskenderun and Mosul in Syria and Iraq, respectively.

This historic reality has in recent years been questioned by the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, for instance when he, giving a speech at an opening of an educational facility in 2018, stated: “...the ancient cities of Iraq, Kirkuk was ours in the past, Mosul was ours” (Palabiyik 2018: 240). In addition to that northern Syria and the Greek Islands around southwestern Turkey have become ‘disputed territories’ (Meier 2020a) in speeches and statements by Erdoğan arguing or indicating that these territories used to be Ottoman and that Lausanne was unfair to the Turks. Furthermore, strategic interests in the seas surrounding Turkey have become a significant part of Erdoğan’s foreign and security policy rhetoric, launched as a national strategy for Turkey focusing on the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, named Blue Homeland (Turkish: *Mavi Vatan*) (Talbot 2020). The areas around Turkey has been exposed to foreign policy ambitions which go beyond the Kemalist visions of modern Turkey with its emphasis on the fixed borders of the nation-state. Following the failed coup against Erdoğan and the AKP-government in July 2016 the Turkish regime has become more autocratic, and, with a severely strengthened presidential mandate behind him since the constitutional referendum in 2017, Erdoğan has over the last years pursued an ambitious foreign policy aiming at expanding the Turkish influence in the Mediterranean region (Salt 2018).

The article in particular looks at two simultaneous cases in the Levant, where an activist Turkish foreign policy and attempts at reconfiguring Mediterranean politics affect what we, drawing on Daniel Meier's conceptual reflections related to cases in the Levant, can refer to as in-between spaces along Turkey's borders (Meier 2020b)¹. The two cases represent the most significant expressions of Erdoğan's neo-Ottoman agenda involving Turkey in the region. The first case, representing an intervention into what Turkey sees as an important sphere of interest, and where Kurdish identity and Syrian territory are at stake, deals with the Turkish incursions into Syria over the last years with the ambitions of prohibiting a permanent existence of an autonomous Kurdish entity in north-eastern Syria and, in a wider perspective, seeking to strengthen the Turkish role in determining the future of the Levant. The second case is the Turkish intervention in 2020 in the Libyan civil war on the side of the UN-initiated government in Tripoli with Fayeze al-Sarraj in charge of the Government of National Accord, and – in connection with that – the agreement on maritime boundaries in the Mediterranean between Turkey and Libya. A main interest related to this complex space characterized by only partly existing and therefore contested borders is for Turkey to gain access to offshore resources in the Mediterranean Sea, thereby strengthening Turkey's position in the competition on becoming a regional hegemon in the eastern Mediterranean.

Analyzing Turkish political strategies rebordering the Mediterranean space the article attempts to answer this research question: how and why has Turkish foreign policy developed in a more activist and expansionist direction? In short it is claimed in the following that the increasingly autocratic character of the regime in Turkey in combination with Erdoğan's neo-Ottoman aspirations constitute a significant part of the reason for the changing Turkish policies and its potentially expanding influence in the Mediterranean region, arguing that the policies not only are about exerting increased influence in the region but aim at expanded territorial control in the two contexts analyzed.

The article draws on available research on the relations between Turkey and its neighbouring countries, reports and material from relevant think tanks, international organizations, and media contributions. In addition to that the article rests on speeches by Erdoğan and former Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu and anonymized interviews (for security reasons) by the author collected in Turkey during fieldwork visits there over the last decade. The section below discusses important conceptual and empirical aspects of changes in Turkish foreign policy, followed by two sections which in detail analyze the above-mentioned cases, and the conclusion.

1. Increasing autocratic tendencies in Turkey, Erdoğan's neo-Ottoman aspirations and the borders of modern Turkey

Turkey was after the failed coup against Erdoğan and the Turkish Government in July 2016 exposed to a political transformation based on strategies of repression

¹ Meier defines in-between spaces as "a specific type of territoriality, located in-between borders, namely buffer zones, safe zones, no man's land and other interstitial spaces at the edges of the states" (Meier, 2020b: 274).

taking their starting point in new laws, emergency policies and intensified assaults against the political opposition, Turkish academia, media and civil society (Yilmaz and Turner 2019: 691)². During the emergency period, which followed the crackdown on the attempted coup, a landing field was laid out for the transition to presidentialism, which became the result of a referendum in April 2017. In the course of the following years the Turkish state, led by a dominant Erdoğan, developed distinct autocratic tendencies. It might be difficult to point out, when these tendencies appeared. When the AKP came to power after the elections in November 2002, the development pointed in the opposite direction. The party launched political as well as economic reforms and showed respect for human rights, both concerning media and ethnic minorities (Kirisci and Toygür 2019: 4).

It didn't last; gradually a line of measures was implemented during the years 2003-2013, which limited the options and room for maneuvering for the opposition. The contours of an illiberal democracy came to the fore. Plans in 2013 of establishing a large shopping centre at the Taksim Square in Istanbul, the so-called Gezi Park project, led to protests and demonstrations. The brutal crackdown on the demonstrators sparked mass protests, which spread around the country (Cagaptay 2020: 175). The whole situation appeared as a turning point on the way towards an autocratic development for Turkey³.

In 2014 a presidential election took place. Contrary to earlier it was based on the principle of direct elections and already in the first round Erdoğan with 51,79% of the votes won the absolute majority. He took over the presidency from Abdullah Gül, while Davutoğlu became Prime Minister. The election was criticized by foreign election observers, who in particular raised the issue of a noticeable dominance in the media by the AKP and Erdoğan⁴. The Turkish opposition was also highly critical of this, not least the Kurdish party, HDP, whose candidate, Selahattin Demirtaş, received 9,76% of the votes. In the years after the election the dominance of Erdoğan within the AK-party became more and more outspoken. He eliminated any critical voices and the rhetoric about his role both within the party and in the government gradually changed in a populist direction, claiming that he represented the people and the will of the nation (Kirisci and Toygür 2019: 5).

If Gezi Park symbolized the first significant turning point in the direction of autocracy, the attempted coup against the government in 2016 was the second. It became utilized to introduce a state of emergency, to bypass normal political channels and govern via decrees. The referendum concerning presidentialism in 2017 sanctioned reforms, of which some of the most important were: a) abolishing the prime ministry, and b) that the president could be leader of the governing party, c) could rule via decrees, d) bring forward a proposal for the state budget, e) and appoint ministers, leading government officials and judges for the supreme court (Yilmaz 2019).

² Informal interviews by the author with Turkish intellectuals in 2016.

³ Interviews by the author with European ambassadors to Turkey confirmed that the coup against the Turkish regime in 2016 led to significantly increasing autocratic tendencies in Turkey.

⁴ Informal interviews by the author with foreign election observers.

And following this process Erdoğan to an increasing degree made decisions himself regarding foreign policy issues and took on the role of representing Turkey in bilateral and multilateral fora, meetings in international organizations, summit meetings and conferences. In connection with these activities he reserved the right to decide if the given international contacts should be considered a threat against the nation and the sovereignty of the people – or not (Kaliber and Kaliber 2019: 9, 11).

The development in the neighboring Middle-Eastern states in connection with the so-called Arab Spring in 2011 for Turkey constituted an opportunity of focusing more on the potential in a closer Turkish-Arab cooperation. As shown by Esra and Alper Kaliber, it is relevant to distinguish between two phases in the Turkish foreign policy orientation under the AKP. A phase from 2002 to 2011 characterized by “thin populism” and a phase from 2012 and onwards, characterized by “thick populism” (Mudde 2004)⁵. In the period of thin populism Turkey was seen as the bridge between East and West: as an actor, which is oriented towards regional as well as international actors and without a clear ideological reason for its priorities. Contrary to this, in the period of thick populism, Turkey began to position itself as belonging to an Eastern civilization and defining itself negatively vis-à-vis the “Western Other” (Kaliber and Kaliber 2019: 5-12).

In connection with negotiations with the EU about an agreement on Syrian refugees a self-conscious Erdoğan put pressure on the EU-representatives and succeeded in turning Turkish policies regarding mainly Syrian refugees into strong foreign policy tools. According to the agreement Turkey would take care of more than 3,5 million refugees, against receiving 6 billion € from the EU and promises of free visas for Turkish citizens, who wanted to go to Europe (Seeberg 2018). Thereby Turkey tended to achieve a new status in its relationship with the EU, where the earlier subordination developed into a relation based on mutual dependence (Aras 2019: 48)⁶.

An explanation for the autocratic tendencies, which have become a reality in Turkey, probably also has to do with the specific character of the Turkish state and its development over time, in particular regarding the deep state (Turkish: *derin devlet*) phenomenon in Turkey, as described by Robert Springborg. Springborg mentions this well-known definition from *The Economist* of the notion of deep state: “a network of individuals in different branches of government, with links to retired generals and organized crime, that existed without the knowledge of high-ranking military officers and politicians” (Springborg 2018). However, in his actual analysis of the phenomenon he uses the term as a metaphor both for such networks of influential individuals and for a specific organization like for instance the Gülen movement. For decades a well-known, but normally not in the public sphere actively intervening deep state, functioned as a guarantor for the Kemalist character of the state. It was this strong actor, which several times in the post-war period carried out coups against incumbent governments. The last time it took place was the so-called post-modern coup⁷ in 1997,

⁵ The populism concept and its analytical potential is discussed by Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist”, *Government and Opposition*, 39 (2004), 542–563.

⁶ Anonymous interviews by the author with European ambassadors to Turkey confirmed the increasing level of mutual dependence between Turkey and the EU, in particular regarding the role of the refugee-question.

⁷ The notion of the postmodern coup was invented by the Turkish Admiral Salim Dervişoğlu.

where the coalition-government, led by Necmettin Erbakan from the Islamist Refah Partisi (Welfare Party), was dismissed. It happened without dissolving the parliament and without suspending the constitution – and after a while democracy was restored. Gradually and imperceptibly a kind of competing deep state developed, founded in the Gülen movement, which over time spread out in important sectors of Turkish society and gained significant potential power. After the AKP came to power, the party began building its own deep state, and from 2002 to 2013 they were successful, via an indirect form of alliance between the AKP and the Gülen movement, in outmaneuvering the Kemalist deep state. And in the following years an internal power struggle became a reality, culminating in the failed coup in 2016 and AKP's subsequent showdown with the Gülen movement, which ended with a defeat for the latter (Springborg 2018).

With the referendum in 2017 and the June 2018 presidential election Erdoğan, gaining 52,59% of the votes, consolidated his power. With the eliminated office of prime minister, and the additional political strength attached to the double status as president and head of the AKP, Turkey's parliamentary system was transformed into an extremely centralized autocratic regime. However, the development is far from enjoying popular backing and has not taken place without challenges for him and for the AKP.

Erdoğan is obviously trying to position himself and Turkey stronger on the regional political scene and seems to pursue goals, which can strengthen his support in the Turkish population, thereby contributing to maintain his legitimacy as president (Oğuzlu 2016). This is the case in the context of the ambitious intervention in Syria, where the decisive interest has been to roll back the Kurdish influence in the North-Syrian area and more specifically the Kurdish militias, which in connection with the battle against ISIS in Syria have worked closely together with the American forces operating there. Turkey has apparently had some success in bringing itself into an indirect alliance with both Russia and Iran, and also thereby comes closer to its goal of reducing any Kurdish dominance in Northern Iraq. Similarly, the interference in Libya, where Turkey supports the UN-initiated government in Tripoli, can be seen in a legitimacy-perspective (Skinner 2020). The different initiatives have under intensive media-coverage been presented for the Turkish population in order to promote nationalist currents (Bellut 2020). The Turkish foreign policy orientation has, in particular regarding the Syria dimension, changed from soft power to hard power – according to Jeremy Salt to a degree which hasn't been seen before in the history of the Turkish republic (Salt 2018).

It seems relevant to claim, that moving beyond the formal border visions of post-1923 Turkey is the ambition of Erdoğan. And rather than following in the footsteps of "Özal or Demirel, however, Erdoğan's vision for Turkey's foreign policy does not encompass Ankara as always being a loyal or obedient ally to the West". The goal, as described by Soner Cagaptay, is to revive the "Ottoman-era glory" for Turkey – to frame Erdoğan's vision in a neo-Ottoman narrative (Cagaptay 2020: 18-19). Neo-Ottomanism can hardly be perceived as a well-defined category but should be

understood as a complex analytical frame or concept, which has proven useful for the interpretation of Erdoğan's recent political practices. The complexity of the concept is underlined in this attempt at defining its character:

Neo-Ottomanism is a new mindset that seeks to resituate Turkish nation-building in its Ottoman roots by recognizing the Ottoman legacy and its communities as the constitutive elements of the nation that live on in the Republic of Turkey (...) sharing the Ottoman legacy and memories, along with the achievements of the Republic" (Yavuz 2016: 444).

An important aspect of the development of neo-Ottomanism in the context of AKP-policies is the role played by Islam. Since the AKP came to power in 2002, there has been a significant rise in the number of mosques in Turkey. Diyanet sources claim that from 2003 to 2014 10,000 new mosques were erected and many old ones were renovated (Gontijo and Barbosa 2020). In a more recent context, extraordinary significant mosques on several occasions have been utilized as symbolic edifices in the promotion of neo-Ottomanism⁸.

As argued by Hakan Yavuz Turkish politics is being driven by dueling visions of nostalgia (Yavuz 2020: 180). An important element in this is populism based on a close relationship between the leader and the ordinary Turks, turning the Ottoman past into an imaginary home for the believing Muslims of the Anatolian population. Neo-Ottomanism is about emotions, a longing for the well-known; inventing tradition, with the famous notion coined by Eric Hobsbawm. In the case of Erdoğan and AKP-rule Islam not only is about installing piety into Turkish society, but furthermore about utilizing religion as a way to control the masses, taking the 19th century Sultan Abdulhamid as a kind of role model. The autocratic regime of Abdulhamid was, according to François Georgeon, working "strenuously to protect Ottoman territorial integrity from European intrigue by politicizing Islamic identity and stressing pan-Islamic solidarity"⁹.

In a recent attempt at defining the notion of autocracy Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt have, building on Juan Linz' work the *Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*, suggested the following criteria as key indicators of authoritarian behavior: 1) rejection of (or weak commitment to) democratic rules of the game, 2) denial of the legitimacy of political opponents, 3) toleration or encouragement of violence, 4) readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including media (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018: 23-24). If we focus on the period since the coup in 2016 it seems obvious that the regime of Erdoğan and the AKP very much match these criteria. In addition to that the Turkish regime has developed an "extreme example of kleptocracy and nepotism in the

⁸ The opening of the gigantic Camlica Mosque in Istanbul in early March 2019 represents a recent example of this symbolic ambition. It is larger than any of the classical mosques, yet modelled after the mosques built by Mimar Sinan, the architect of Sultan Suliman the Magnificent (Cagaptay, 2020: 1-2). A maybe even more significant expression of the same ambitions was seen when Erdoğan on the 97 years anniversary of the signing of the Lausanne Treaty, 24 July 2020, reopened Aya Sofya as a mosque – thereby reversing a decision by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who turned the historical building into a museum in 1935.

⁹ The reference to François Georgeon was pointed out by Hakan Yavuz (Yavuz, 2020: 147).

republican system. For Erdoğan, the state exists primarily to serve his interests as the chief executive of the state and to reward his most loyal adherents and advisers” (Yavuz 2020: 150).

Indications of neo-Ottoman practices regarding foreign policies can be seen in the frequent questioning of the Lausanne Treaty in speeches by Erdoğan, where he refers to or hints at the National Pact (Turkish: Misak-i Milli), which was a strategic plan adopted by the Ottoman Parliament in 1920, according to which “Turkey claimed territories stretching from Eastern Thrace (now part of Greece), to Cyprus, the eastern Aegean islands, parts of northern Syria, northern Iraq, the entirety of modern Armenia, parts of Georgia, and even to Iran” (Maziad and Sotiriadis 2020). In recent years, as mentioned, the focus has been on Northern Syria as an area, where the “sacrosanct” borders of Kemalist Turkey could be challenged by a Neo-Ottoman agenda (Aydıntaşbaşı 2020). In the history of the Turkish Republic this mentioning of Ottoman territories, where it is indicated that these areas unjustly have been given away by Atatürk and that in principle this should lead to a reconfiguration of the current borders, has not been heard before (Yavuz 2020: 153).

2. Northern Syria and the Foreign Policy Strategies of Turkey

The borders of Syria stems from the secret Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916, forming the basis for the French mandate, which lasted from 1923 and until right after the end of World War II, where Lebanon and Syria appeared as modern Arab states. The Kurds probably constitute around 10-12 % of the Syrian population, and a significant number of the Kurds live in northern Syria (McDowall 1996). The Syrian Kurds have traditionally lived in three separate areas of Northern Syria, for many years deliberately prevented from forming any kind of regionally coherent or dominant ethnic group by the repressive Syrian regime (Allsopp and van Wilgenburg 2019). The civil war in Syria following the Arab Spring in early 2011, however, changed this. The war put Bashar al-Assad’s regime under extreme pressure and in order to concentrate its military holding on to the for him most important areas of Syria, namely the positions in and around Damascus and the Alawite homeland around the cities of Latakia and Tartus, al-Assad in July 2012 withdrew his troops from the Kurdish regions. Gradually local Kurdish autonomy developed in Northern Syria, causing great apprehension in Ankara (Gunter and Yavuz 2020: 87).

The war in Syria, escalating in the early summer of 2011, led in the first place to a chaotic battle between the Syrian regime, its army and security forces on one side and on the other side a Syrian opposition consisting of an incoherent and poorly armed number of local resistance groups. Early 2012 witnessed the founding of Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian branch of al-Qaida, and in late 2013 ISIS appropriated the city of al-Raqqa and turned it into the jihadist center of gravity in Syria. By mid-2014 ISIS had secured a dominant position in much of Eastern Syria, proving a disaster for the Syrian Arab rebels and thereby, indirectly, a gift for the regime in Damascus and its propaganda painting all its opponents as terrorists (Harris 2018: 15, 55). During the

period from 2011 to 2014, and in particular after mid-2012 and the withdrawal of Syrian forces, Kurds primarily under the leadership of PYD along the Syrian-Turkish border established autonomous areas or zones there, and over time the war situation in Syria produced a hitherto unseen level of 'territorialization' of the fragmented country (Meier 2020b: 273).

The development has been influenced by the Turkey-US relationship, which during the presidential period of Obama deteriorated from a relatively positive relation in the years after he came to power in 2009 to a deeply problematic reality as a result of the close military cooperation between the US and the Kurdish YPG in northern Syria (Cagaptay 2020: 109). An analysis of which forces in the region might be capable of fighting ISIS would quickly indicate, that if the US wanted to avoid a significant increase in the number of US boots on Syrian ground, they more or less were left with no alternative but to support and fight together with the YPG (Totten 2015: 8). Strategically this created a critical situation in the cooperation between the US and Turkey, which according to Cagaptay might have irreversibly ruined the ties between the two NATO-partners (Cagaptay 2020: 227).

For Turkey it was important to defeat the Kurds, not least because the connections between the Turkish government and the PKK in Turkey had turned negative as a result of the collapse of a ceasefire in 2015, following a relatively long period of attempts at improving Turkish-Kurdish relations within Turkey (Cagaptay 2020: 175). From the viewpoint of Erdoğan the political success of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) at the parliamentary elections in June 2015, which denied AKP a renewed majority, made it more opportune to enter into a political alliance with Turkish right wing nationalists (Gunter and Yavuz 2020: 91).

Over the next years Turkey launched a more aggressive foreign policy regarding northern Syria. A large military operation, called "Operation Euphrates Shield", had several different purposes. Officially the aim was to fight against the ISIS and reduce their dominance in local areas in northern Syria. But for Turkey the main ambition was, via this intervention, to secure that the areas did not fall into the hand of the YPG: If this action hadn't taken place, it might have resulted in a scenario where the Kurdish forces would be able to connect together a front of what seen from Ankara would look like a 650 kilometer-long belt across Turkey's southern border where the YPG (and indirectly the PKK) held a dominant position (Cagaptay 2020: 218). The operation started in August 2016 and lasted seven months. Seen from a Turkish point of view the operation was a success – ISIS lost influence in northern Syria and the role of the YPG in the area was diminished.

And the long-term goal, gaining expanded territorial control, thereby securing that Turkey would have a say in determining the future of Syria, was also getting closer. In the following years this ambition was expanded through further military action and diplomatic measures. In January 2018 Turkish forces in collaboration with its allies in Syria, the Free Syrian Army, launched a second attack, dubbed "Operation Olive Branch", where they entered Afrin, the westernmost, mainly Kurdish canton. Two months later they had occupied the area. The operation cost the lives of 1,500 Kurdish

fighters, 289 local civilians and 46 soldiers/FSA fighters (Gunter and Yavuz 2020: 91). It also led to significant flows of refugees away from the area, which was condemned by the Kurds and also by international human rights organizations. In the media coverage of the Turkish intervention Erdoğan referred to one of the few Ottoman victories in World War I and stated that “In Gallipoli they attacked us with the most powerful army. Now that they do not have the courage to do so, they come at us with the world’s basest, bloodiest, specially trained and equipped terrorist organisations” (Economist 2018).

The action was followed, in October 2019, by a third major military operation entitled “Operation Peace Spring”. Again, the target was YPG and affiliated militias in northern Syria, but also in the border region as a whole to create a 30 km-deep “safe zone”, where it would be possible to resettle some of the 3,6 million Syrian refugees living in Turkey. It seems likely that it is the official Turkish understanding of the three military operations, that they should be perceived as a whole, altogether constituting a Turkish plan for the northern Syrian region, focusing on providing Ankara a strategic advantage by ending the coherence of the three YPG dominated areas (Erkmen 2020: 4). The defeat of ISIS in Syria in early 2019 was a result of efforts by several different actors. In the actual battlefield one of the most important actors was the US-supported Kurdish forces, but the Russian armed forces also played an important role. It is an interesting reality, that the Turks and the Russians share an interest in defeating ISIS, but also share an interest in reducing the influence of the YPG, especially as long as the YPG are on collision course with the Syrian regime.

A significant aspect of the Turkish foreign policy ambitions in Syria is to achieve more or less indirect alliances with other autocratic regimes in the region, mainly Iran and Russia. The alliances in themselves imply a strengthening of Turkey’s strategic importance in the Levant, thereby contributing to laying a foundation for Turkish expansionism in a neo-Ottoman perspective – in the sense that the territories in which the Turkish strategic importance increases are the ones alluded to in some of Erdoğan’s speeches. Another example of this could be heard is his speech at the AKP-congress in Eskişehir in February 2018, where he talked about the military action in Syria: “Those who think that we have erased from our hearts the lands from which we withdrew in tears a hundred years ago are wrong. We say at every opportunity we have that Syria, Iraq and other places in the geography in our hearts are no different from our own homeland” (Bulut 2018).

It is at the same time, however, important to be aware of the distribution of power between the three significant regional actors, having parallel interests in some cases, but different agendas in other. The so-called Astana process¹⁰ (see below) has demonstrated that Turkey, Iran and Russia potentially seem to be the decisive actors in solving the problems in Syria, not least because they more than other players have spent significant foreign policy energy and military force to shape the political situation in the Levant (Thépaut 2020). The Astana process formally took its point of departure in UNSC Resolution 2254, which in December 2015 called for a ceasefire

¹⁰ Astana: earlier name of the capital of Kazakhstan; renamed Nur-Sultan in March 2019.

and political settlement in Syria. In late 2016 President Vladimir Putin and Erdoğan agreed to suggest Astana as venue for Syria peace talks and a joint statement with this ambition of December 2016 also included Iran (Federation 2016). Still in 2016, a week later, a nationwide cease fire plan was agreed laying the foundation for negotiations to come in 2017. Another important agreement was reached in the spring of 2017 on the establishment of so-called de-escalation zones in Syria. The idea of the agreement was that Russia, Iran and Turkey agreed to work as guarantors for the existence of the zones, in which combat operations were outlawed alongside a no-fly zone for military aircraft. The zones should include the Idlib Province and some areas in the neighboring provinces (of Aleppo, Latakia and Hama), an area north of Homs plus some areas in central and southern Syria (TASS 2017). Turkey had soldiers on 12 different locations in Idlib and supported rebel groups loyal to Turkey there.

Attempts at moving further along the Astana track followed in late 2019, where Iran, Russia and Turkey once again met for trilateral talks. The talks, however, was disturbed by the fact that Russia and the Syrian regime had resumed their bombardments in Idlib, allegedly in response to a refusal from some of the rebel groups accepting that the regime would take over areas in western Idlib – a suggestion Russia supported (Arab 2019). In 2020 the development brought Russia and Turkey on collision course and Erdoğan insisted that they would not move back on their positions in northern Syria including Idlib. Talks in Ankara between Russia and Turkey aiming at reducing tensions in the region did not solve the problematic issues at stake.

3. Turkish visions for Libya and the struggle for territorial control in the Mediterranean

A few months after the start of the Arab Spring, in an interview in May 2011, Erdoğan emphasized the significant role Turkey intended to play in support of the demands for democratic rights by the peoples of the Middle East (Erdoğan 2011). As mentioned by Yavuz, “as the Middle East dictators started to fall, Erdoğan became the most popular leader in the region” (Yavuz 2020: 230). It had for several years been the Turkish strategy to form a closer cooperation with Jordan, Lebanon and Syria and one of the tools was through economic and cultural cooperation to establish a “Levant Quartet”, which then later could be expanded and include other Middle Eastern countries (Yavuz 2020: 229). However, with the brutal clampdown on the opposition by the Syrian regime, the situation in Syria soon turned into a civil war, which ruled out any development along the lines of the Turkish ambitions.

For Turkey this meant, that for some years attempts at expanding the Turkish sphere of influence in the Levant, by establishing alliances or multilateral cooperation, was on hold. As shown above, this changed with the Turkish military interventions in Syria, and in addition to that, it became possible to look for other options in the region. Around 2015 there were contacts between Israel and Turkey regarding establishing a cooperation on utilizing offshore resources in the eastern Mediterranean,

but it didn't develop into a lasting alliance. And regarding other actors in the region Turkey was maneuvering in a difficult field, up against several opponents, which seemed to have an interest in not involving Turkey. In Cairo in January 2019 Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan and Palestine created the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), aiming at working together on exploring and exploiting the offshore resources of the Mediterranean and also to distribute them where possible, hereunder to build pipelines from the place of drilling in the Mediterranean to Jordan and to Europe. Erdoğan characterized the move as a "game to imprison Turkey within its land boundaries" (Cohen 2020), indicating that his policies in the Eastern Mediterranean aim at moving beyond the borders of Kemalist Turkey. In this context the Turkish interventions in Libya became means to reach Erdoğan's geostrategic goals regarding the in-between borders of the Mediterranean seabed. Yet, the interventions in Libya also, as shown below, have their own rationale.

In February 2019 the largest naval exercise in Turkey's history was launched. It was the official ambition to test the ability to carry out coordinated operations simultaneously in the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean (Talbot 2020)¹¹. It was something of a novelty that Turkey positioned itself as a maritime power, and the activism might be part of a larger geopolitical project. Indications of this can be seen concerning the energy aspects. In reality Turkey does not recognize the post-World War I arrangements in the Aegean Sea, and since those might have consequences for the use of the energy resources, minor confrontations between the potential exploiters of the resources have taken place in some instances.

As a countermove to the EMGF Erdoğan, together with Fayez al-Sarraj, representing the GNA-government in Libya, in November 2019 signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) called the Turkey-Libya Maritime Delimitation Agreement (MDA) – thereby establishing a so-called Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) between Libya and Turkey (Memorandum 2019). In connection with the launching of the MOU Erdoğan stated that "Other international actors cannot conduct exploration activities in the areas marked in the memorandum. Greek Cypriots, Egypt, Greece and Israel cannot establish a natural gas transmission line without Turkey's consent" (TRT-World 2019). Erdoğan was referring to a pipeline project by Cyprus, Greece and Israel aiming at transporting gas reserves from the Eastern Mediterranean to southern Europe, which would be made difficult by the Libya-Turkey undertaking.

It seems obvious that Turkey wants to expand its activities and presence in the Mediterranean in general and in Libya in particular. Turkey, as mentioned earlier, has played an active role in the battle in Libya in 2019-20 in and around Tripoli, and is probably interested in following up on these efforts with a more permanent presence in Libya for instance in the form of a naval base or other military facility on Libyan territory (Barkey 2020). Turkey has for decades had significant economic interests in Libya and obviously wants to protect those interests. Since the 1980s Turkish workers and engineers have taken advantage of booming opportunities for Turkish business

¹¹ The name of the exercise was Blue Homeland, which also, as mentioned, is the name of Turkey's national strategy for Turkey regarding the three sea areas. 103 military ships and 20.000 soldiers took part in the naval operation.

in Libya. Around 10,000 Turks were evacuated during the early days of the civil war in 2011, and there are still plans and interests in resuming these activities (Cagaptay 2020: 105).

Erdoğan visited Libya in September 2011 to develop ties with the post-Qadhafi regime – and to maintain or re-establish Turkish economic interests in Libya. It is an interesting coincidence that 100 years earlier, in September 1911, the Italo-Turkish War, also known as the Tripolitanian War, took its beginning. The Ottoman empire lost Libya to Italy in October 1912, but Libya had been a part of the Ottoman Empire from 1551 and even today small groups of descendants from the Ottoman era can be found in some cities of Libya. Davutoğlu underlined the neo-Ottoman perspectives in Turkish-Libyan relations in a speech in 2011, where he stated:

Just as the state, which was the political center of an ancient civilization, was torn apart (...) from the Tripolitanian War (...) and foundational elements of this state were psychologically and historically divided, only to be replaced by a new republic founded in 1923 as a nation-state (...) now we need to unify the elements of this broken and fragmented nation again (Yavuz 2020: 186).

The quotation underlines that neo-Ottomanism not only in recent years has contributed to forming the ideological basis for Turkish foreign policy. However, with the increased autocratization of the Turkish regime and the more explicit hard power dimensions of Turkish foreign policy as shown above, the neo-Ottoman aspirations have moved beyond a status as ideological foundation and turned into a more explicit aspect of Erdoğan's and the AK-Party's foreign policies in the Mediterranean. Davutoğlu might, as shown by Cagaptay, have influenced the conceptual trajectory of neo-Ottomanism in Turkish politics in a more obvious way than Erdoğan (Cagaptay 2020: 45). But when it became possible for Erdoğan, strengthened by the 2017 presidential referendum to intervene in an expansionist way in the context of the geopolitical conflicts in the Mediterranean, neo-Ottoman statements became efficient tools in his narrative concerning the interventions.

Conclusion

The article has attempted to show, that, inspired by Sultan Abdulhamid II, Erdoğan has launched a neo-Ottoman version of autocratic presidentialism with foreign policy ambitions of becoming a regional hegemon in the Levant and the Mediterranean. The increased autocratization in recent years can be explained from different perspectives. On one side we have internal Turkish critical and oppositional pressure, which has made Erdoğan and the AKP-regime react with growing autocratic practices. As mentioned the Gezi Park incident represented a significant turning point as to the tendency to authoritarian behavior, but the coup in 2016 with its explicit security threats against the regime more than anything else led to repressive measures, which then became institutionalized via the changes of the political system towards autocracy dominated by Erdoğan.

On the other side more immaterial and emotional elements should also be mentioned as preconditions for maintaining a certain level of legitimacy behind the AKP policies. An important aspect of this is the religious dimension, utilized as an attempt at turning the Ottoman past into an imaginary home for the believing Turkish Muslims, but also as a politicized ideological strategy for the purpose of controlling the population. As underlined by Yavuz different types of nostalgia related to the Ottoman past are being utilized in this way, both in the emotional sense and in a more direct, instrumental way, where for instance the intensive mosque-building since the AKP came to power in 2002 is a tangible example (Yavuz 2020: 240). The Sykes-Picot based borders between northern Syria and Turkey have been penetrated several times by Turkish forces in a recent context. Entering the territories in northern Syria where the Kurds, as described, during the Turkish civil war had expanded their influence and obtained a dominant position, has led to control over a Sunni-Arab-majority zone in Syria. At the same time the Kurdish dominance has become rolled back. The struggle for becoming a regional hegemon has, as regards northern Syria, left Turkey in a strengthened position. Or, as mentioned by a Turkish border-official: "this is our first experiment in establishing an order in the Middle East in over a hundred years" (Aydıntaşbaş 2020: 14).

The Turkish initiatives regarding the complex in-between border issues of the Mediterranean seabed and the offshore resources also aim at Turkish expansionism. The ambition of the policies was to go up against regional attempts, in the words of Erdoğan, at "imprisoning" Turkey behind its land boundaries. A complicated game unfolded, dealing with not too well-defined borders in the Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea. In the first place Turkey looked into the possibilities of reaching an agreement with Israel in an attempt of getting Turkey involved in the deep-sea exploration activities in the Mediterranean. When this seemed to fail, because Israel preferred to join forces with other Mediterranean states, a different strategy had to be followed, leading to the alliance with Libya, which made it possible to put pressure on the competing alliance in the Eastern Mediterranean consisting of Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, and Israel.

Hundred years after the Tripolitanian War the Ottoman legacy in Libya became the historical background for a new Turkish intervention there. In the course of the recent battle of Tripoli, which started in April 2019 with the siege of the Libyan capital by Khalifa Haftar and his Libyan National Army, Turkey, after having signed the MDA in November 2019, in January 2020 intervened militarily in Libya and saved a critical situation for the surrounded Government of National Accord and forced Haftar and his forces away from the capital. The interests in Libya on behalf of Turkey focus on possible economic contracts, trade and other business, but also on expanding the Turkish sphere of influence in North Africa. The fragmented situation in Libya, where Turkey's alliance partner is under severe pressure, underlines that the ambitions can turn out being difficult to realize. The religious dimension is a part of the game, in the sense that Turkey is up against Haftar's regional allies, one of which is Egypt's Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who crushed a close ally of Erdoğan, President Mohammad Mursi, in the

military coup in July 2013. This was, regarding the ambition of establishing an alliance of Sunni-Muslim governments, something of a blow for Erdoğan, and Turkey and Egypt have since been on collision course. Another ally of Haftar, Russia, is in a geo-strategic perspective a strong adversary and an obstacle for Turkey becoming a regional hegemon in the Mediterranean.

Summing up, Erdoğan's neo-Ottoman expansionist ambitions has turned Turkey's soft power policies hard – regarding Syria, Libya and the Mediterranean. In the case of Syria, the Turkish intervention, as shown, tends to redefine the changing identities in the North-Syrian space, where the Kurds had gained influence since the Arab uprisings in 2011. Similarly, the Turkish alliance with Libya and the involvement in the struggle for Mediterranean offshore resources could imply a redrawing of (sea) borders, leading to a reassessment of the Mediterranean space and – potentially – an increased Turkish influence in what for centuries was Ottoman territory. The Turkish ambitions in the analyzed contexts have, despite significant challenges, overall tended to work out in accordance with the foreign policy goals. The expansionist strategies seem – at least for a while – actually to lead to changing patterns of territorial control in two important ways: a rebordering of in-between spaces in Northern Syria, and a potential restructuring of the regional power balance in the Eastern Mediterranean.

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