



Published on *The Weekly Standard* (<http://www.weeklystandard.com>)

---

# Who Lost Turkey?

## An ally goes rogue.

**Daniel Pipes**

October 13, 2014, Vol. 20, No. 05

Only 12 years ago, the Republic of Turkey was correctly seen as the model of a pro-Western Muslim state, and a bridge between Europe and the Middle East. A strong military bond with the Pentagon undergirded broader economic and cultural ties with Americans. And then, starting with the 2002 elections that brought the Justice and Development party (AKP) and Recep Tayyip Erdogan, first as prime minister and now as president, to power, Turkey dramatically changed course. Slowly at first and then with increasing velocity since mid-2011, Erdogan's government began breaking laws, turned autocratic, and allied with the enemies of the United States.

Even those most reluctant to recognize this shift have been forced to do so. If Barack Obama listed Erdogan as one of his five best foreign friends in 2012, he showed a quite different attitude by having a mere chargé d'affaires represent him at Erdogan's presidential inauguration a few weeks ago—a public slap in the face.

What caused this shift? To understand today's unexpected circumstances requires a glance back to the Ottoman Empire. Founded in 1299, its control over substantial parts of the European continent (mainly the Balkan area, named after the Turkish word for mountain) made it the only Muslim polity to engage intensely with Europe as Western Christians rose to become the wealthiest and most powerful people on the planet. As the Ottoman Empire weakened relative to other European powers over the centuries, how to dispose of it became a major concern of European diplomacy (the "Eastern question") and the empire came to be seen as potential prey (the "sick man of Europe").

Turkey's defeat in World War I occurred against this backdrop, prompting the army's outstanding general, Mustafa Kemal, to seize power and close down the empire in favor of the Republic of Turkey, far smaller and limited mainly to Turkish-language-speakers. For the new country's first 15 years, 1923-38, Kemal (who renamed himself Atatürk) dominated the country. A strong-willed Westernizer, he imposed a sequence of radical changes that characterize the country to this day, and make it conspicuously different from the rest of the Middle East, including laicism (secularism on steroids) and codes of law based on European prototypes.

Starting almost immediately after Atatürk's death in 1938, a reversal of his secularism began. But the Turkish military, in its dual role as the country's ultimate political power and the self-conscious heir of Atatürk's legacy, placed limits on these changes. The military, however, is a force for neither creativity nor intellectual growth, so the adages of Atatürk, unceasingly repeated over the decades, became stale and restricting. As dissent increased, the parties holding to his 1920s vision stagnated, degenerating into corrupt, power-seeking organizations. By the 1990s, their revolving-door governments had alienated a sizable portion of the electorate.

In 2001, Erdogan and another Islamist politician, Abdullah Gul, founded the AKP. Promising good government and economic growth based on conservative values, it performed impressively in its inaugural election of November 2002, winning just over one-third of the vote. Erdogan focused at first on the economy and racked up Chinese-like rates of economic growth. In foreign policy, he emerged as a power-broker in the Middle East (for example, offering to mediate peace talks between Israel and Syria) and became the West's favorite Islamist. In the process, he seemed to solve a centuries-old conundrum of relations between Islam and the West, finding a successful blend of the two.

In reality, it seems that Erdogan sought to reverse the Atatürk revolution and return Turkey to an Ottoman-like domestic order and international standing. With that in mind, he weakened the military by contriving preposterous conspiracy theories its top brass had ostensibly engineered. For reasons still unclear, the leadership of the armed forces barely pushed back, even as its top officers were arrested and the general staff eventually fired.

As the military surrendered, Erdogan took aim at his domestic rivals, especially his longtime ally, Fethullah Gulen, an Islamist and leader of a massive national movement with networks placed in key government institutions. As Erdogan demonized his critics, he delighted his base—Turks who felt oppressed by Atatürkism. With each election, he accrued more personal power, as did Hugo Chávez in Venezuela.

International relations followed a similar pattern, with an initial set of modest foreign goals becoming, over time, ever grander and more dangerous. A “zero problems with neighbors” policy enunciated by foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu began successfully as Ankara managed warm relations with Syria and Iran, and mutually beneficial, albeit tepid, relations with Israel. Even longtime foes such as Greece and Armenia gained from Erdogan’s charm offensive. The great powers sought good relations. The AKP’s neo-Ottoman dream of acquiring primacy among its former colonials seemed attainable.

But then Erdogan displayed the same arrogance abroad that he had unleashed at home, and to much worse reviews. If a majority of the Turkish electorate applauded his tongue-lashings, few foreigners did. As the Arab upheavals changed the Middle East beginning in 2011, Erdogan and Davutoglu found their accomplishments slipping away, to the point that Ankara now has poor to venomous relations with many of its neighbors.

The break with Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, perhaps the most dramatic of Erdogan’s losses, has had many negative consequences. It saddled Turkey with millions of unwelcome Arabic-speaking refugees, led to a proxy war with Iran, obstructed Turkish trade routes through much of the Middle East, and gave rise to jihadist forces. Hostility to Israel ended Ankara’s strongest regional bond. Erdogan’s support for the short-lived Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt turned into open enmity toward the next government in Cairo. Threats against Cyprus in the aftermath of its discovery of gas further soured an already adversarial relationship. Turkish contractors lost more than \$19 billion in Libya’s anarchy.

Internationally, a feint in the direction of buying a Chinese missile system brought security relations with Washington to a new low. Erdogan’s urging the millions of Turks living in Germany to resist assimilation caused tensions with Berlin, as did Ankara’s possible role in the murder of three Kurds in Paris. These outrages have left Ankara nearly friendless. It enjoys warm relations with Qatar, the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq, and the Muslim Brotherhood, including its Palestinian offshoot, Hamas.

Erdogan will face three challenges over the next year: electoral, psychological, and economic. Having ascended to the presidency on August 28 requires constitutional changes allowing him to become the strong executive president he aspires to be. In turn, those changes require the AKP to do well in the June 2015 national elections; or, alternatively, to make substantial concessions to Turkish Kurds to win their support for his ambitions. Now that the party finds itself in the untested hands of Davutoglu, recently promoted from foreign minister to prime minister, its ability to win the necessary seats is in doubt.

Second, Erdogan’s fate depends on Davutoglu remaining his faithful consigliere. Should Davutoglu develop independent ambitions, Erdogan will find himself limited to a mostly ceremonial post.

Last, the shaky Turkish economy depends on foreign money seeking higher rates of return and a host of infrastructure projects to continue growing. Here, Erdogan’s highly erratic behavior (ranting against what he calls the “interest lobby,” rating agencies such as Moody’s, and even the *New York Times*) discourages further investment, while huge debt threatens to leave the country bankrupt.

With its youthful population of 75 million, a central location, control of a key waterway, and eight mostly problematic neighbors, Turkey is a highly desirable ally. In addition, it enjoys a position of prominence in the Middle East, among Turkic-speakers from Bosnia to Xinjiang, and among Muslims worldwide. The U.S.-Turkish alliance that began with the Korean War has been highly advantageous to Washington, which is understandably loath to lose it.

That said, one side alone cannot sustain an alliance. Ankara’s record of friendly relations with Tehran, support for Hamas and the Islamic State, undermining the authority of Baghdad, virulence toward Israel, and threats against Cyprus make it a questionable, if not entirely duplicitous, NATO partner. The Obama administration can signal that the bullying tactics that have won Erdogan votes at home have won him only animosity in the rest of the world. The White House can make clear that unless major changes occur quickly, it will push for Turkey’s suspension and eventual expulsion from NATO. If Erdogan insists on acting the rogue, then that’s how its former ally should treat him.

*Daniel Pipes is president of the Middle East Forum.*

---

---

[Subscribe now to The Weekly Standard!](#)

**Get more from The Weekly Standard:** [Follow WeeklyStandard.com on RSS](#) and [sign-up for our free Newsletter.](#)

Copyright 2014 Weekly Standard LLC.

---

---

**Source URL:** [http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/who-lost-turkey\\_808512.html](http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/who-lost-turkey_808512.html)