



IN THE SPOTLIGHT: THE RETURN OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE?

“Jerusalem is a red line for the Muslims.” So declared most belligerently the President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan (pronounced AIRdoahn) several years ago, in response to U.S. President Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s united capital and his relocation of the U.S. Embassy to the Holy City. Erdogan’s words are not at all detached from his global hegemonic ambitions; he longs to be recognized as Caliph, i.e., the ruler over the entire Muslim world, and Jerusalem is a critical step.

Turkey’s actions over the last few years must be seen on the backdrop of the war in Gaza, which as we know, developed into a regional, Israel-against-everyone war and brought about the weakening of Iran, the collapse of Syria, internal shockwaves in Lebanon, and other major changes in the Middle East. With this in the picture, Turkey has been making significant moves of its own. Its goal is to establish its senior pan-Islamic status that it feels it deserves. For instance, the Turks have infiltrated Syria, capturing some northern parts not far from Damascus (and the Israeli border), and are investing resources to ensure their permanent presence there. At the same time, Erdogan is making a great effort – so far, quite unsuccessful – to take advantage of the role it played in the end-of-war agreement in order to deploy armed forces in Gaza.

The Turks recruited 2,000 men through the SADAT company – a “private” band of Turkish mercenaries (in the style of Russia’s Wagner Group), run by Erdoğan’s personal friends,

former members of Turkey’s security forces. The use of SADAT forces solves a serious headache for Erdoğan: Since Turkey is a NATO member, he knows he can’t drag other Western NATO countries – certainly not the United States – into an armed confrontation with Israel (as they are bound by the mutual alliance). However, a “private” force is not bound by the NATO charter.

Erdogan’s imperialist ambitions jibe well with the ideology of his Muslim Brotherhood organization, which does not recognize any borders to the Islamic world. That is, “all is Islam,” at least in potential; all Islamic countries are supposed to be one entity – the Caliphate – as was the Ottoman Empire in its day.

However, a number of obstacles are standing in Erdogan’s way to the sought-after Sultanate, such as:

1. Arab states and Muslim states are not eager to give up their independence simply to satisfy his political and religious appetite.

2. He is not a descendant of the Ottoman dynasty (today called the Osmanoglu family). Therefore, his status in any potential caliphate would be more like that of a Grand Vizier (de facto prime minister and ruler) than that of the religious leader sitting on Muhammad’s throne.
3. The Saudis – serious and leading competitors for the leadership of the Muslim world – have complete control over the holy cities of Mecca and Medina (though they used to be in the Ottoman Empire), and have no intention at all of giving up their status.

Erdogan knows there is nothing he can do, at least at present, about the first two matters. He therefore feels that he would be backed by Arab, Muslim and Western countries in seeking a “consolation prize” in the form of control over Jerusalem as a substitute for Mecca and Medina. His public statements leave no doubt that this is his intention, and the steps that he is taking, or is trying to take, are also in the same direction. These statements include:

- “Haram al-Sharif [the Temple Mount], which includes the Al Aksa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, is one unit, indivisible... and belongs exclusively to Muslims.” He is referring to all 144 dunams (35.6 acres) of the Temple Mount.
- “We will not allow Jerusalem to be abandoned to impure hands.”
- “Jerusalem is our city... built by Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. The issue of Jerusalem is unlike any other geopolitical issue for us... Even now, there can still be found footprints of Ottoman resistance in this city, which we were forced to leave





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with weeping eyes... What this means is that Jerusalem is our city... and from this standpoint, we will continue to pursue this bleeding wound on the world's conscience – the matter of Palestine and Jerusalem – until the very end."

- Erdogan has said that he is proud to belong to a nation that has waved the flag of Islam for centuries and served Jerusalem with honor for 400 years. This is of course a reference to the Ottoman Empire's leading role in Islam, and the belonging of Jerusalem to that empire.
- He has described Jerusalem as a "precious spiritual center for all Muslims, together with Mecca and Medina." His intention thereof is to equate the status of all three holy cities, for the sake of a future competition with Saudi Arabia.

The reason for Erdogan's support for a Palestinian state has nothing to do with the Palestinians. He, after all, is a Muslim Brotherhood man, which objects to such an entity. Rather, he understands that while the world will never support Muslim Brotherhood control over Jerusalem, it would agree to Jerusalem as capital of a Palestinian state. This would be ideal for Erdogan, in his hope that he will be called upon to fill the position of Patron of the Holy Sites in the city. This is why he is investing so much in the Palestinian Authority. But at the same time he is also investing in Hamas, hoping for something even better from his standpoint: a Palestinian state with its capital in Jerusalem, in which Hamas perpetrates an internal coup, as it did in Gaza, and takes over. Erdogan then feels that he will be called upon to rule Jerusalem, and by extension, the entire Muslim world.

To this end, as noted, Turkey is investing heavily both in projects in the PA and in Jerusalem itself. One of the former is the training of Palestinian security forces personnel by the Turkish governmental aid agency TIKA, operated directly by the

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Turkish President's Office via the Turkish consulate in Jerusalem. Erdogan's projects in Jerusalem itself include support for institutions identified with radical Islam, namely Hamas, as well as associations and organizations registered in Israel - such as the Al-Aqsa Association, Zakat al-Quds, the Islamic Welfare Fund, and others.

Official Turkish bodies such as Mirasımız/Miratuna ("Our Heritage") are active among Jerusalem youth, teaching them Turkish language and history, and inculcating them with the Ottoman heritage of Jerusalem. All this serves as background - and preparation - for Erdogan's long-awaited "great day."

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Turkey's Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan has also gotten in on the act. He used to head the Turkish intelligence agency MIT – the body that is officially responsible for Turkey's bonds with the Hamas leadership in the country; Hamas in Turkey very actively and openly directs terror operations. Fidan clarified, following one of Erdoğan's inflammatory statements, that the Islamic world will do "whatever is necessary" to protect the Islamic identity of Al-Aqsa Mosque.

It appears that these statements and actions – the above being only a partial list – are more than sufficient proof of Turkey's practical intentions regarding Jerusalem, for the sake of the fulfillment of Erdogan's dream. Turkey already has a political leg up in Jerusalem: The General Turkish Consulate is the official Turkish embassy in "Palestine," spreading declarations and indications of its support for "Palestine from the river to the sea." The Consulate declares that its jurisdiction includes the Corpus Separatum as defined in UN Partition Resolution 181 – that is, most of Jerusalem. This means that Turkey does not recognize Jerusalem as Israeli even within the pre-1967 borders. As far as Erdogan is concerned, this "foot in the door" is far from just his first step.

