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The Opinion Pages | OP-ED COLUMNIST

Erdogan in His Labyrinth

Roger Cohen JUNE 30, 2016

Pity the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in his labyrinth.

It's a large labyrinth. As he drifts from room to room — and there are about 1,000 of them in his new Ankara palace — Erdogan no doubt has time to reflect on Turkey's travails and perhaps ponder how events can escape the control of even the most megalomaniacal ruler.

Here's a sobering thought: Erdogan, the would-be leader of the Sunni world, after 13 years in power, alone in his vast palace with his neo-Ottoman dream in shreds and Turkish society polarized to the point of violence.

Erdogan blamed unspecified "terrorist organizations" for the vile attack at Istanbul Ataturk airport that killed 42 people. His prime minister, Binali Yildirim, tentatively blamed the Islamic State, or ISIS. This was a clearer statement from the government than last October when a terrorist attack in Ankara that killed 103 people, the deadliest in modern Turkish history, was attributed to a "cocktail" of jihadi Islamists and Kurdish militants — whatever that means.

Most of the victims then were Kurds. Mystery still surrounds the bombing.

For Erdogan, the word "terrorist" chiefly denotes the Kurdish militants of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party, or P.K.K., which has fought an intermittent insurgency against Turkey since the 1980s.

In Turkey's southeast, many towns are under curfew. Erdogan is waging a

relentless campaign against the Kurds in the shadow of the Syrian war. Kurdish territorial inroads and self-government in northern Syria have awoken the darkest specter in the Turkish psyche: a border-straddling Kurdistan.

ISIS, by comparison, has been an object of ambivalence. Erdogan has played a double game.

For a long time he allowed ISIS recruits to move across Turkey and over the border to the Islamic State's Syrian stronghold of Raqqa. Given a choice between the terrorists of the Islamic State in northern Syria and what, for him, are the Syrian-Kurdish terrorists of the P.K.K.-affiliated Democratic Union Party, or P.Y.D (and its associated militia, the Y.P.G.), the Turkish president has no doubt who is more menacing.

ISIS has had anti-Kurdish uses for Erdogan. By contrast, the Kurdish enclave in northern Syria, known as Rojava, is only trouble from a Turkish perspective. That the Y.P.G. has, in effect, been America's most effective ground force against ISIS complicates Erdogan's position. Turkey is a NATO ally opposed to America's anti-ISIS Syrian-Kurdish alliance.

Welcome to the Middle East. I hope everything is clear in this Kurdish alphabet soup (I have not even mentioned Turkey's Kurdish-dominated Peoples' Democratic Party, or H.D.P., out of deference to you, dear reader.) If all is fog, please at least retain the following:

Erdogan has found himself in a terrible neighborhood, his country destabilized by more than five years of war in Syria and the millions of refugees pouring across the border. He has been frustrated, with reason, by President Obama's unwillingness to back with a coherent policy his statement in 2011 that President Bashar al-Assad of Syria must "step aside." But, in the end, Turkey's descent into violence is of Erdogan's own creation.

Prickly and erratic, he has perceived enemies everywhere — in the press (whose freedom he has stifled), among former business allies, in the secular Turkey that resists his increasingly unbridled attempts to advance an Islamist agenda. Turning his back on years of attempted reconciliation with the Kurds, he has adopted an

uncompromising brutality. Seeing his power threatened, he was prepared to countenance violence to instill an atmosphere of fear in the run up to last year's November election, so that he could emerge as strongman-savior.

Borrowing from Vladimir Putin's playbook, Erdogan has gone through the alternating-office routine — in his case, prime minister to president — in order to render the Constitution pliant to his appetite for power. Forsaking diplomacy for braggadocio, he has gotten into fights with Israel, with Egypt, with Russia, to the point that Turkey's economy was reeling and he found himself obliged to apologize to Russia and settle differences with Israel in recent days.

Above all, Erdogan has contrived to turn Turkey — the poster child of moderate democratic Islam not so many years ago — into a divided and combustible country where the Erdogan personality cult grows daily at the expense of freedom. It was typical of the Erdogan order that access to Twitter and Facebook was cut off for hours in the aftermath of the airport attack.

In doing all this, Erdogan knew that he has the United States and Europe where he wants them. For strategic reasons (military for America; refugees for Europe), they need Erdogan more than he needs them. So he does what he wants — with dire consequences.

Funny how the “zero problems” foreign policy of early “neo-Ottomanism” morphed into a very problematic reality: Erdogan has reaped the bitter harvest of his machinations.

I grieve for the victims of the terrorist attack at Ataturk airport. It was in many ways a bloodbath foretold.

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Nicholas G. Karambelas Washington DC • 1 hour ago

The author misses an essential point as to why Erdogan played the "double game" with ISIS. Truckloads of ISIS oil have passed over the Turkish border. These trucks did not "sneak" across the border but had to take main highways which are manned with Turkish border guards. The trucks were allowed to pass. Clearly, Turkish interests were receiving cash or other items of value in exchange for allowing the trucks to pass. The cash has stopped flowing so ISIS attacks Turkey. Turkey is unreliable. It regularly violates Greek airspace, a NATO ally and EU member state, with its US made military aircraft. These incursions are illegal under US law as US supplied military items can be used only for defensive purposes. Erdogan is also the main impediment to a Cyprus settlement. If the Turkish Cypriots were left alone, they could settle the issues with the Republic of Cyprus.