

“I AM OBLIGED TO MARKET MY COUNTRY”: US-TURKEY NEXUS AND AUTHORITARIANISM

Dr. Evren Altinkas, University of Guelph, Department of History

In 1952, U.S. government has published a propaganda video about Turkey and described the country as “in-between”.¹ The country “in-between”, then was named as a “torn country” by Samuel Huntington in his famous article “The Clash of Civilizations”. What was Turkey in-between? What is Turkey in-between today? How did Turkish-American relations evolve into a point where Nancy Pelosi refers to Turkey as a country which has no respect to democracy?

The concept of “strategic ally” was used by Turkish governments to explain the position of Turkey in her relationship with the U.S. After the end of Cold War, Turkey declared that it would continue supporting democracy and the quest for a free world by being a close ally of the U.S. again. The expansion of Turkey in the newly independent Central Asian countries by using the historical and ethnic ties through opening “Islamic-Turkish” schools within the region can be considered as an example of this. By calling itself the “Big Brother”, Turkey “brought” religion, democracy, and Western values into the region, thus imitating the role of the U.S. towards the Middle East throughout the Cold War. The relations between the USA and Turkey were defined by this “new strategic model” until early 2000s.

When Erdogan came to power in 2002, he was pursuing a “flirtatious” policy. In 2003, Erdogan gave a speech at Harvard University, Kennedy School of Government and said: *“As Turkey proceeds in the direction of membership to the EU, also the modern democratic values which she represents create greater attraction in the Middle East. This attraction will enable the Euro-Atlantic community to act as a catalyst for positive change in peace and interaction with the outside world. The web of cooperative relationships that Turkey has woven helps harmonize the strategic interests of the peoples of the region, the U.S. and EU.”* As we can see, he was flirting with the Middle East by calling Turkey as a model country and with the EU and the U.S. by saying that peace was possible if Turkey became an EU member. Today, the EU has stopped the negotiations with Turkey and none of the neighbours of Turkey consider it as a model. I am planning to give some specific examples which could be considered as the milestones of Turkey-U.S. relations in the last 10 years to justify my thesis of rentier state. In 2005, Erdogan gave a speech at the opening ceremony of a Shopping Mall in Istanbul and said: “I am obliged to market my country”. He did. But he also added the authoritarian ingredients of his regime into this marketing model.

Syrian Civil War brought with it two “bargaining powers” in the hands of Erdogan. One of them is the refugee crisis and the other one is ISIL. When the Syrian Civil War started in 2011, Turkey has officially condemned the Syrian government. Immediately, Turkey started to train the defectors of the Syrian Army in its territory and declared its open support to Free Syrian Army, which was established by those defectors who were trained in Turkey. When Turkey started to accept the refugees from the Syrian Civil war into the country, Erdogan said that they will remain in the country “until freedom and democracy comes to Syria”. In June 2013, when Gezi Protests started in Turkey as a reaction to the authoritarian affiliation of Erdogan regime and Erdogan’s anti-secular policies, both the EU and the U.S. have criticized the violent methods used by the Turkish government against the civilian protesters. Erdogan, with a total influx of approximately 500.000 Syrian refugees in Turkey during that time, made a statement and said that “Turkey knows the foreign powers behind these protests and Turkey will never become Syria”. He then added that the Syrian Refugees in the

country and the Free Syrian Army indicates Turkey's democratic regime. The card played by Erdogan by using the Syrian refugees and the training of Free Syrian Army prevented the U.S. and the EU to consider the human rights violations towards the Turkish opposition groups during Gezi Protests as the acts of an authoritarian regime. Coming from a family with very strong commercial relations and being a distributor of a large company in the country, Erdogan realized that he could use his commercial skills to "reach a deal" with Turkey's "strategic ally". So, using the Refugee Crisis as a Sword of Damocles over the EU and the U.S., Erdogan's regime detained thousands of people and sacked hundreds of academics and civil servants because of their participation in the Gezi Protests.

Short after the Gezi Protests, ISIL became an international hot topic. Since 2012, Turkey had been supporting the "Army of Conquest" in Syria. Al-Nusra Front was a part of this group and Turkish officials said that they were giving logistical and intelligence support to them. In January 2014, a few trucks were searched by the Turkish gendarmerie close to the Syrian border in Turkey and it was documented that these trucks were carrying weapons to Syria. It was claimed that the lorries belonged to Turkish National Intelligence Organization. Although these claims were never confirmed by the Turkish government, footage of the search showed that there were weapons in the trucks. Erdogan said that this was a "national secret" and the journalists who published the news were imprisoned, along with anyone (including the elected parliament members of the opposition parties) who claimed that Turkey was supporting ISIL in Syria. Erdogan quickly stepped in and used the "bargaining card" again, saying that Turkey was indeed fighting against ISIL, and not providing weapons to this organization. So, Turkey, fighting against ISIL (which received a considerable amount of support in during its early formation from Turkey), has prevented the criticism of imprisonment of journalists and opposition deputies, again.

Then came the military coup attempt on July 15, 2016. On July 15, 2016, a group of military members in Turkey have attempted a military coup but failed to reach their goals because the number of actual military members who joined them was very limited. The plotters were following a religious cleric named Fethullah Gulen who had been in the United States since 1999. Erdogan blamed United States of America for harbouring the leader of these plotters and in October 2016, Turkish government has arrested an American Pastor, Andrew Brunson who has been living in Turkey for a long time. Brunson was blamed as being a member of Gulen movement in Turkey and that he was also involved in American espionage within Turkey. While all the attention of public opinion in the U.S. was concentrated on Brunson, Erdogan did two things: first, he requested to exchange Brunson with Gulen and second, he used this military coup attempt to purge most of the anti-government academic and civil servants from their government positions, thereby strengthening his authoritarian rule. One of the leaders of HDP, fourth largest political party in Turkey, Selahattin Demirtas was detained in November 2016 and he is still in prison. Erdogan's regime has not only sacked those who were active members or sympathizers of Gulen movement, but also those who have been critical to the rule of Erdogan since 2002. Here, we see the rentier attitude of Erdogan along with his trade skills. He said: *"You have a pastor too. Give him to us. Then we will try Brunson and give him to you"*.

Then came the S-400 crisis. In September 2017, Turkey and Russia have signed a treaty and Turkey acquired two S-400 anti-aircraft systems and as a reaction to this, senators Thom Tillis and Jeanne Shaheen have petitioned a bill changing the NDAA to block the transfer of F-35 fighter jets to Turkey and in the legislation created it said that "Turkey was wrongfully and unlawfully detaining the

American citizens". Erdogan saw another opportunity in this case. There was another ongoing crisis between Turkey and the U.S.: The Halkbank Case. In March 2017, deputy head of the bank Hakan Atilla was arrested by American authorities for "conspiring to evade sanctions against Iran by illegally funnelling millions of dollars to the country". In August 2018, Turkish officials have approached the U.S. authorities and asked to "kill any investigations against Halkbank" in return for the release of Brunson. In October 2018, Brunson was released and travelled to the U.S. In July 2019, Hakan Atilla was released and travelled back to Turkey. At least 800 people were arrested in Turkey because they made news about the Halkbank case and questioned the role of Erdogan and his family in this deal between Halkbank and Iran.

To summarize, the relations between Turkey and the U.S. have been a determinant factor in the legitimization of authoritarian transformation of Erdogan's regime in the country. The Turkish-American nexus ended with mutual deals which secured the American interests in Turkey and the strengthening of authoritarian Erdogan regime. So, it was a "win-win" for both sides, but a loss for the democracy.

ⁱ <https://archive.org/details/gov.archives.arc.654133>