

MP-IDSA

Issue Brief

Turkiye: The Threat of the Neo-Ottoman Caliphate to Regional Security

Adil Rasheed

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S*ummary*

Turkiye is swiftly expanding its influence in a rapidly imploding Islamic world, as its 'neo-Ottoman' president is whipping up a new wave of Islamism across continents. The country is even intervening in South Asia now, by forging defence deals with Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Turkiye (recently renamed as the Republic of Turkiye) has been a major beneficiary of the recent wars in Ukraine and Gaza and appears to be sitting pretty in a conflicted neighborhood, with a weakened Russia, a beleaguered Europe, a distraught Israel and a defeated Iran. Turkiye is going full steam ahead with its ‘neo-Ottoman’ designs. Straddling two continents, Turkiye is a NATO member that wants to join the rival BRICS and SCO blocs as it thinks it holds both benefic and baneful cards in high stakes global geopolitics.

For a long time, Ankara’s neighbours had mistakenly assumed that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the so-called “neo-Ottoman” sultan or caliph, would be imminently removed from power by the secular and democratic forces within his country. That has not happened, as the septuagenarian has turned Turkiye’s parliamentary system into a near-authoritarian presidential one, and is now well entrenched to take advantage of the floundering geopolitical order in West Asia, Africa and Eurasia.

Growing Military Footprint

By stepping into the vacuum created by a rapidly imploding Muslim world, Turkiye is projecting the lore of its Ottoman past, a pan-Islamic caliphate based in Istanbul (1299–1922 CE), which lasted for over half a millennium. However, neo-Ottomanism is not just a soft power projection, as Turkiye’s military has formally shifted its supposedly defensive orientation into an openly expeditionary one.

With about 800,000 active and reservist armed forces personnel in 2011,¹ Turkish troops are today stationed in at least 11 foreign countries—namely in Syria, Iraq, Qatar, Northern Cyprus, Bosnia, Albania, Kosovo, Libya, Sudan, Somalia and Azerbaijan.² Just last year, it signed major security and military deals with four countries—Iraq,³ Somalia,⁴ Bulgaria and Romania.⁵ More importantly, Turkiye has initiated new defence deals with Pakistan⁶ and Bangladesh⁷ in January 2025 (discussed later in this brief).

In addition to boots on the ground, the country has extended its naval presence from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Caspian Sea and from the Horn of Africa to the

¹ [“Factbox: Turkiye's Armed Forces”](#), *Reuters*, 19 October 2011.

² [“Mehmetçik Serves in 12 Countries on 3 Continents”](#), *TRT Haber*, 3 January 2020.

³ [“Turkiye, Iraq Sign Accord on Military, Security, Counter-terrorism Cooperation”](#), *Reuters*, 15 August 2024.

⁴ Kiran Baez, [“Turkiye Signed Two Major Deals with Somalia. Will It be Able to Implement Them?”](#), *Atlantic Council*, 18 June 2024.

⁵ [“NATO Allies Turkiye, Romania, Bulgaria Sign Deal to Clear Black Sea Mines”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 11 January 2021.

⁶ [“Türkiye and Pakistan Establish Joint Factory for Production of KAAAN Fighter Jet”](#), *Global Defence News*, 20 January 2025.

⁷ [“Bangladesh Explores Tank Purchase from Turkiye as India Receives Request for Hasina’s Extradition”](#), *bne INTELLINEWS*, 6 January 2025.

Persian Gulf.⁸ In fact, Turkiye is also becoming one of the world’s major arms exporters, selling weapons and its vaunted Bayraktar drones from Ethiopia to Ukraine.⁹

However, Turkiye’s imperialist ambitions and the permanent foreign deployment of its armed forces are not of recent origin and can be traced back to the Cold War. Since the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus, the country has reportedly deployed 40,000 troops and 200 tanks at all times in the northern part of that island nation.¹⁰ Then in the 1990s, Turkiye deployed its military forces in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo under the NATO flag, which reportedly have remained in place there, while it has also built a naval base (Pima Liman) in Albania.¹¹

The Naming of Central Asia as ‘Turkestan’

Within southern Europe, Turkiye has been extending its influence and has recently signed agreements with Romania and Bulgaria (once part of the Ottoman empire) to clear mines floating in the Black Sea as a result of the war in Ukraine.¹² Turkiye has also rapidly increased its economic, commercial and military influence across Central Asia, after aligning with Azerbaijan in its victorious war with Armenia over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region in 2021. At the expense of Moscow’s protective CIS umbrella, Ankara has thus gained greater access to the so-called Turkic states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan and is involved in developing the Middle Corridor from China to Europe.¹³

In fact, Turkiye has started calling the entire Central Asian region ‘Turkestan’ in its history curriculum,¹⁴ thereby exposing its unstated irredentism under the cover of reviving linguistic and cultural affiliations. According to *The Economist* magazine, the Turkiye-led Organization of Turkic States (OTS) is fast becoming a counterweight to Russia.¹⁵ With a poor showing in Ukraine, Armenia and now in Syria, Russian dominance over Central Asian states appears to be declining, as the region now seeks to diversify and reduce its economic and military dependence on Moscow.

⁸ [“Turkiye’s Interventions in its Near Abroad: The Case of Libya”](#), Clingendael, September 2021.

⁹ [“Turkish Drone Magnate Baykar Begins to Build Plant in Ukraine”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 11 January 2024.

¹⁰ Ulvi Keser, *Turkish-Greek Hurricane on Cyprus (1940 – 1950 – 1960 – 1970)*, 528. sayfa, Boğaziçi Yayınları, 2006.

¹¹ [“Brief History of the Turkish Armed Forces”](#), Ministry of Defence, Republic of Turkiye.

¹² Ali Kucukgocmen and Huseyin Hayatsever, [“Turkiye, Romania, Bulgaria Sign Deal to Clear Floating Black Sea Mines”](#), *Reuters*, 11 January 2024.

¹³ Felix K. Chang, [“Central Asia’s Middle Corridor Expansion”](#), Foreign Policy Research Institute, 16 January 2024.

¹⁴ [“Turkiye Replaces 'Central Asia' with 'Turkestan' in History Curriculum”](#), *Daryo*, 11 October 2024.

¹⁵ [“Turkiye and Central Asia are Riding Together Again”](#), *The Economist*, 26 September 2024.

Taking advantage, Turkish bilateral trade with Uzbekistan today exceeds US\$ 3 billion,¹⁶ while the country presently has a US\$ 6 billion bilateral trade target with Kazakhstan and eyes a US\$ 15 billion bilateral trade in the near future.¹⁷ In the defence sector, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have bought Turkish UAVs and are expected to sign more arms and energy deals with the NATO member.¹⁸ In the new Sunni militant regime in Damascus, Turkiye has arguably found an ally to threaten Central Asian states with. It is disconcerting to note that the new Syrian transitional government has promoted several dissident jihadist leaders from Central Asia to high ranks in its new military.¹⁹

Turkiye’s ‘Nuisance Value’ and Anti-Israel Grandstanding

This is not to say that Turkiye enjoys the West’s assent in its overtures towards Central Asia, or plans to open a southern front with Russia at the instance of NATO. In fact, Turkiye has for many years been in the business of threatening countries, including the West, with what Burak Bekdil says is its supposed “nuisance value”. Thus, the transcontinental state has often warned the West that if Turkiye implodes, it will turn into “a loose cannon, a dangerous failed state in the EU’s backyard”.²⁰

For its part, the West has for now decided to get along with the maverick Erdogan and is reportedly backtracking on its punitive measures against Ankara’s deployment of Russian-made S-400 system,²¹ its supply of weapons to both Ukraine and Russia during the war,²² its attacks on Kurdish autonomous regions in Syria and Iraq²³ and Erdogan’s warning to Europe about “opening the gates and sending 3.6 million (Syrian) refugees your way”.²⁴

It is noteworthy that a few days before assuming office, Donald Trump blamed Turkiye for its “unfriendly takeover” in Syria.²⁵ In fact, he took a dig at Ankara for

¹⁶ [“Turkish Ministers, Intel Chief to Attend Summit in Uzbekistan as Ties Deepen”](#), *Daily Sabah*, 11 September 2024.

¹⁷ [“Kazakhstan, Türkiye to Boost Bilateral Trade to \\$15 Billion”](#), *The Astana Times*, 13 November 2024.

¹⁸ [“Turkiye Continues Exporting Drones to Central Asia”](#), *Novastan*, 21 April 2023.

¹⁹ Timour Azhari and John Irish, [“Exclusive: Western Powers Warn Syria Over Foreign Jihadists in Army, Sources Say”](#), *Reuters*, 10 January 2025.

²⁰ Burak Bekdil, [“Turkiye’s Nuisance Value”](#), *BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1*, 322, 25 October 2019.

²¹ [“Turkish Defense Minister Claims Agreement Reached with US on Storage of Russian S-400 Missiles, Will Remain Inactive”](#), *Nordic Monitor*, 29 November 2024.

²² Elçin Poyrazlar, [“Turkiye Carves Its Own Course in Nato”](#), *Politico*, 8 July 2024.

²³ [“Turkiye Launches Air Attacks Against Kurdish Rebels in Iraq and Syria”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 13 January 2024.

²⁴ [“Turkiye’s Erdogan Threatens to Send Syrian Refugees to Europe”](#), *Reuters*, 10 October 2019.

²⁵ Caitlin Doornbos, [“Trump Claims Turkiye’s Erdogan Directed Rebels Behind ‘Unfriendly Takeover’ of Syria”](#), *New York Post*, 17 December 2024.

aiding the jihadist Hayat Tahrir Al Sham (HTS) coalition in toppling Al-Assad regime in Damascus, even though Turkiye had officially designated the group as a terrorist organisation. However, Trump then sought to make amends by calling the Turkish President a “friend” and “someone I respect”.²⁶

The volte face was truly in order as Turkiye remains a key member of NATO, holding the second-largest standing military force within the alliance and hosts vital US military bases on its soil.²⁷ In fact, Erdogan even threatened to close down these bases a few years ago and rescind the special US–Turkiye treaty that allows the presence of US forces and nuclear warheads at Incirlik, along with early warning radars stationed at the Malatya base—linked to the US Aegis system, deployed in the Mediterranean.²⁸

Turkiye has also upped its “nuisance value” against its old Kemalist ally Israel, with Erdogan frequently championing pro-Palestinian and Islamist causes. In spite of not supporting Islamist Iran and “backstabbing” its so-called Axis of Resistance against Israel,²⁹ the Turkish leader continues to make incendiary speeches against Israel. In his speech commemorating the Palestinian *Nakhba* (The ‘Great Catastrophe of 1948’) in May 2024, President Erdogan attacked the Netanyahu government and said that even the Nazi leader Adolf Hitler was not as bold as Israel’s present leaders, in that he did not publicise the inhuman Holocaust.³⁰

Such grandstanding has naturally won Erdogan the support of the Arab street and even some Sunni Arab states have started welcoming the prospect of the neo-Ottoman caliph lording over them all over again. Thus writing for the London-based *Arab Weekly*, columnist Haitham El-Zobaidi has praised the “different Erdogan” of today, who heads

an economically strong, politically calm country in harmony with rest of the region. It is the Turkiye which the Middle East needs in the face of Iranian arrogance, Israeli crimes and Western indifference. With a rational Turkiye, the region can work, coordinate actions and invest.³¹

²⁶ Servit Gunerigok, [“Trump Calls Turkish President Erdogan ‘Friend’, Says He Respects Him”](#), *Anadalous Agency*, 7 January 2025.

²⁷ Natasha Turak, [“Turkiye is Back in From the Cold with NATO and F-16 Moves, But Thorny Issues Remain”](#), *CNBC*, 21 February 2024.

²⁸ [“Turkiye May Close Incirlik, Kurecik Bases 'If Necessary'”](#), *TRT World*, December 2019.

²⁹ [“A Bitter Rivalry is Emerging in the Middle East Between Two Old Adversaries Over the Future of Syria”](#), *UWA News*, The University of Western Australia, 18 December 2024.

³⁰ [“Erdogan Says ‘Rogue State’ of Israel Will Target Anatolia with Its Delusions of Promised Land”](#), *Middle East Monitor*, 16 May 2024.

³¹ Haitham El-Zobaidi, [“The New Erdogan is More Useful for the Region”](#), *The Arab Weekly*, 28 May 2024.

Turkiye’s Trans-Continental ‘Neo-Ottoman’ Project

Erdogan’s policies are fraught with the risk of falling between the proverbial stools, but towards the fag-end of one’s rather successful political career, the prospect of becoming a populist “neo-Ottoman” leader in the Muslim world seems too tempting to resist. Interestingly, Turkiye’s imperialist ‘neo-Ottoman’ ideology (though vehemently denied and disowned by the Turkish state) is not the brainchild of Erdogan per se, but is said to have emerged with the collapse of the Soviet Union and has since developed diverse strands.

In the early 1990s, this Western neologism was first associated with Cenghiz Candar, the foreign policy advisor of then president Turgut Ozal. Candar sought to revive Turkiye's historical ethnic and religious identities, in contrast to the hardbound secularism of the Kemalist republic.³² Thereafter, this term took a pronounced, though moderate Islamic turn under Fethullah Gullen, who sought a gradual and benign Islamic social and political transformation.³³

But the Turkish zeitgeist, with which the term neo-Ottomanism is presently associated, was fully enunciated by Erdogan’s strategic protégé and former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu (2014–16). Although, Davutoglu himself rejected the term ‘neo-Ottomanism’ and preferred to call his policy an “axis shift”,³⁴ which pivoted Turkiye away from the secular EU, following its unsuccessful bid to gain the bloc’s membership, towards becoming an influential player in Ottoman regions—the Balkans, Caucasia and West Asia.

However, the underlying philosophy that impelled the rise of the incumbent Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002, with Erdogan at its helm, has been the religious, cultural and political revival of Turkish glory as achieved under the Ottoman caliphate. In fact, the AKP has brazenly used slogans such as “Osmanli torunu” (grandsons of the Ottoman) for Erdogan and cohorts during election campaigns.³⁵

Turkiye–Qatar Subversion of Secular Arab Nationalism

However, this neo-Ottomanism has not been well-received in West Asia, as the Arab collective memory still bears the scars of the Ottoman rule and the many oppressive acts of Turkish racism, which eventually gave rise to Arab nationalist revolt and the

³² Murinson, Alexander, *Turkiye's Entente with Israel and Azerbaijan: State Identity and Security in the Middle East and Caucasus*, Routledge Studies in Middle Eastern Politics, December 2009, p. 119.

³³ [“Fethullah Gulen”](#), Religious Literacy Project, Glossary, Harvard Divinity School.

³⁴ [“I Am Not a Neo-Ottoman, Davutoglu Says”](#), *Today's Zaman*, 25 November 2009.

³⁵ [“The ‘Ottoman Grandson’ Crisis in the New Welfare Party: Our Vote is for Erdoğan”](#), *10 Haber*, 21 March 2023.

dissolution of the Ottoman caliphate in 1922.³⁶ In spite of this unfavourable West Asian response, Turkiye received support from an unusual quarter, i.e., the pan-Islamist and anti-Westphalian opposition forces of the region, like Muslim Brotherhood,³⁷ as well as from newly emerging economic power centres like Qatar, which felt slighted in big regional forums like the Arab League and the GCC.³⁸

From the late 2000s onwards, Turkiye grew closer to Qatar as well as to populist Islamist groups like Muslim Brotherhood and its jihadist offshoots. Even some well-meaning liberals, who desired genuine political change in West Asia, were cultivated and given the megaphone by the Doha-based Al-Jazeera television channel.³⁹ This resulted in the Arab Spring revolts of 2011, which predictably turned violent with the entry of radical Salafi-jihadist groups into the fray. However, the ensuing state clampdowns and the removal of the newly appointed Islamist president Moursi from power in Egypt came as a big shock to the Islamists and their Turkish patrons, for their carefully calibrated project had come to an abrupt end.⁴⁰

Unsurprisingly, Erdogan sharply criticised the Egyptian army’s removal of the Moursi government from power in 2013, and claimed that he would never recognise or meet General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi as Egypt’s legitimate leader.⁴¹ The fact that he eventually invited El-Sisi, as the President of Egypt to Ankara last year, is another story.⁴² Notwithstanding these setbacks, Turkiye continued to promote radical Islamists across West Asia, even against his then personal friend President Bashar Al-Assad of Syria.⁴³

Following the rise of ISIS in 2013–14, many reputed international news agencies (like Foreign Policy,⁴⁴ Guardian,⁴⁵ Business Insider,⁴⁶ Salon, etc.) alleged that Turkiye had supported that group in its initial years and had even established a so-called “jihadi highway” on the Syria–Turkiye border, which let in about 30,000 foreign militants in

³⁶ Talal Al-Torifi, “[Turkiye Repeating Ottoman Empire’s Crimes Against Arabs](#)”, *Arab News*, 21 July 2020.

³⁷ “[Muslim Brotherhood in Turkiye](#)”, Counter-Extremism Project, Counter-Point Briefs and Blogs,

³⁸ Giorgio Cafiero and Daniel Wagner, “[Turkiye and Qatar’s Burgeoning Strategic Alliance](#)”, Middle East Institute, 8 June 2016.

³⁹ “[Seizing a Moment, Al Jazeera Galvanises Arab Frustration](#)”, *The New York Times*, 27 January 2011.

⁴⁰ Paul Schemm, “[Egypt Overthrow Shakes Mideast Islamists](#)”, *The Times of Israel*, 8 July 2013.

⁴¹ “[Erdogan Won’t Meet Sisi, Even If He Pardons Morsi](#)”, *Middle East Monitor*, 8 February 2016.

⁴² Eduard Cousin, “[‘Better Together’: Presidents of Egypt, Turkiye Seek Common Ground in Ankara](#)”, *Al Jazeera*, 5 September 2024.

⁴³ Andrew Wilks, “[Erdogan and Assad: A Former Friendship Damaged Beyond Repair?](#)”, *Al Jazeera*, 27 January 2019.

⁴⁴ Ahmet S. Yayla and Colin P. Clark, “[Turkiye’s Double ISIS Standard](#)”, *Foreign Policy*, 12 April 2018.

⁴⁵ “[ISIS Launches Attack on Kobani from Inside Turkiye for First Time](#)”, *The Guardian*, 29 November 2014.

⁴⁶ Natasha Bertrand, “[Senior Western Official: Links Between Turkiye and ISIS are Now Undeniable](#)”, *Business Insider*, 29 July 2015.

2013 to join the terror group.⁴⁷ In fact, when in 2014, a joint communiqué was issued by the United States and 10 Arab countries for an end to the migration of extremists into ISIS-held territories, Turkiye refused to sign the document despite the presence of its representatives at the meeting.⁴⁸

In spite of such serious charges, Turkiye has always denied having ties with ISIS. In its defence, Ankara points out that ISIS had kidnapped over 40 of its own diplomats in Mosul in 2014 (later released that year),⁴⁹ and had even threatened to destroy the tomb of Suleiman Shah, father of founder of the Ottoman empire (Osman 1).⁵⁰

However, it was only in 2016 that Turkiye launched its first anti-ISIS campaign (Operation Euphrates Shield) that sought to drive away the so-called seed caliphate from its borders, and with it Syrian Kurdish forces from the area.⁵¹ In this endeavour, Turkiye backed the now Syrian National Army (SNA), which is a nationalist Syrian force, but has a large number of ethnic Turkmen and jihadist factions. In fact, Turkiye supports the SNA mainly to fight secular Kurdish forces in Syria’s northwest, principally the SDF.⁵²

Coincidentally, Turkiye and Qatar signed a military cooperation agreement in 2014 and a few years later, Turkiye got a military base on Qatari territory, despite the presence of the mighty US Al-Udeid airbase in that country.⁵³ By 2017, the Arab quartet of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt grew so suspicious of Turkish-Qatar geopolitical designs that they imposed a blockade on Qatar from 2017 to 2021. However, this only increased Turkish military presence in Qatar.

Ankara’s Transmutation of Salafi-Jihad

In spite of the ISIS blowback, Turkiye again dallied with jihadist groups in Syria, an issue raised even in the European parliament.⁵⁴ Thus, it grew close to the HTS jihadist coalition in 2017, when the latter accepted the Turkish demand to patrol North-West Syrian borders as part of a ceasefire brokered through the Astana

⁴⁷ Kadri Gürsel, “[Turkiye Paying Price for Jihadist Highway on the Border](#)”, *Al-Monitor*, 12 June 2015.

⁴⁸ “[Kerry Seeks Arab Consensus in Campaign against ISIS](#)”, *Al-Monitor*, 12 June 2014.

⁴⁹ Burak Akinci, “[Criticism Mounts on Erdogan Over ISIL Kidnapping of Turkiye Hostages](#)”, *Middle East Eye*, 12 February 2015.

⁵⁰ “[Turkiye Enters Syria to Remove Precious Suleyman Shah Tomb](#)”, *BBC*, 22 February 2015.

⁵¹ “[Turkiye Can Start New Operation If Necessary as Euphrates Shield Ends: PM](#)”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 30 March 2017.

⁵² Aaron Lund, “[Syrian War: Understanding Syrian Rebel Factions](#)”, *The New Humanitarian*, 3 September 2018.

⁵³ “[Qatar Signs Turkiye Naval Military Base Agreement](#)”, *Middle East Monitor*, 14 March 2018.

⁵⁴ “[Turkiye is Attacking Kurds and Training Jihadists for War in Artsakh](#)”, European Parliament, Parliamentary question - P-005911/2020, 29 October 2020.

negotiations.⁵⁵ Unlike hardcore Salafi-jihadists like ISIS, Turkish influence eventually prevailed upon the Salafi-jihadist HTS, as the latter swore allegiance to the more moderate Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) in Idlib in 2017.

This transformation in a Salafi-jihadist group was truly remarkable, as the SSG’s High Council of Fatwa even included theologians from Asharite and Sufi traditions.⁵⁶ Thus, the hybridisation of Salafi-Ashari forces made them more pliant to the Turkish brand of Islamism, which follows the Ashari creed like most Sunni populations in the Caucasus, Central Asia and South Asia.

This intra-Sunni alliance eventually helped in the overthrow of the Shia Alawite regime of Bashar Al-Assad in Damascus, and this Turko-engineered Islamist hybrid now has the potential to become a more acceptable form of Sharia-compliant governance in the larger Muslim world.⁵⁷ For instance, the absence of a moral police force in the HTS-run Idlib was welcomed by the majority Ashari Sunni community of the enclave, and even a Syrian feminist reportedly stated that “the pressure to wear the full veil (niqab) has also diminished”.⁵⁸

Moreover, Ankara’s influence is evident in the HTS-led regime’s new Syrian cabinet, with important ministerial appointments going to Turkiye-linked officials. Thus, the new Foreign Minister of Syria, Asaad Hassan al Shibani is pursuing his PhD at Istanbul’s Sabahattin Zaim University, while the new defence minister Muhraf Abu Qasra is said to have strong linkages with Turkiye. On his recent visit to Ankara, Shibani expectedly took Turkish position as opposed to an independent Syrian stand. Thus, he said:

The new administration will not allow Syrian territory to be used as a launchpad to threaten Turkiye and the Turkish people. We will work on removing these threats.⁵⁹

Here, Al-Shibani was referring to the presence of the Kurdish SDF in northeastern Syria, which the West sees as an important force for eliminating jihadists, but which Ankara regards as a security threat, given SDF’s alleged links with Kurdish separatists in Turkiye, notably the PKK.

⁵⁵ Engin Yuksel, “Key Characteristics of Turkish Use of Syrian Armed Proxies”, Chapter IV, [*Strategies of Turkish Proxy Warfare in Northern Syria*](#), Clingendael Institute, Netherlands, November 2019.

⁵⁶ Jerome Drevon and Patrick Haenni, “II: The Political Deprogramming of the Radical Emirate”, in [*How Global Jihad Relocalises and Where it Leads: The Case of HTS, the Former AQ Franchise in Syria*](#)”, Working Paper RSC 2021/08, European University Institute, 2021, pp. 12–20.

⁵⁷ Engin Yuksel, “Key Characteristics of Turkish Use of Syrian Armed Proxies”, Chapter IV, [*Strategies of Turkish Proxy Warfare in Northern Syria*](#), Clingendael Institute, Netherlands, November 2019.

⁵⁸ Jerome Drevon and Patrick Haenni, “II: The Political Deprogramming of the Radical Emirate”, no. 57, p. 16.

⁵⁹ Engin Yuksel, “Key Characteristics of Turkish Use of Syrian Armed Proxies”, Chapter IV of CRU Report, [*Strategies of Turkish Proxy Warfare in Northern Syria*](#)”, Netherlands, November 2019.

Indeed, Turkiye’s hosting of nearly 3.7 million Syrian refugees in the aftermath of the Arab Spring revolts in Syria is now paying it rich political dividends. In the words of Galip Dalay, a senior consulting fellow at Chatham House:

Now you have millions of Syrians that speak Turkish, that will have direct access to Turkish culture, Turkish politics, Turkish institutional links.⁶⁰

Thus, Turkiye seems to have profoundly altered the character of the Sunni jihadist movement, and has played a major role in mainstreaming its erstwhile adherents. With US, Russia, Israel and Iran out of the equation, Turkiye will also reap a financial windfall by gaining contracts for nearly all the reconstruction projects of a devastated Syrian nation. In addition, Ankara has also signed a new security agreement with Baghdad against Kurdish nationalists, which has raised concerns about Iran’s diminishing influence over Iraq.⁶¹ Turkiye has also forged a preliminary agreement with Iraq, Qatar and UAE for developing a multi-billion dollar ‘Development Road’ project, which will connect the Persian Gulf to Europe.⁶²

The Afro-Eurasian Neologism

It is remarkable that Turkiye’s Islamist outreach does not end at West Asia, but extends even to the African continent. In fact, analysts note that

Ankara’s recent announcement of a potential Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) agreement with Syria’s new government mirrors its 2019 maritime pact with Libya’s (Islamist) Government of National Accord (GNA).⁶³

Erdogan’s outreach to Africa goes back to 2005, when Turkiye gained an observer status with the African Union. Since then, it has increased its embassies in that continent from 12 to 44, and its airline connections from zero to 59 destinations. To win the support of African nations, Erdogan has even described Turkiye as an “Afro-Eurasian country”, a neologism that reeks of neo-Ottomanism.

With its message of Islamic solidarity, Turkiye is said to be gaining ground against European states like France and Russia, particularly in eastern Africa, the Sahel region and the Arab Maghreb. In fact, Turkiye’s presence has increased after a spate of coups in northern Africa, namely in Mali, Chad, Sudan, Guinea, Burkina Faso,

⁶⁰ Berra Ince, [“What Damascus’s New Cabinet Reveals About Turkiye’s Soft Power in Syria”](#), *TRT World*, 22 December 2024.

⁶¹ Binar FK, [“Will a Turkiye-Iraq Security Agreement Diminish Iran’s Hold Over Iraq”](#), *Stimson*, 11 September 2024.

⁶² [“Iraq, Turkiye, Qatar, UAE Sign Preliminary Deal to Cooperate on Development Road Project”](#), *Reuters*, 22 April 2024.

⁶³ Emadeddin Badi and Abdullah Al-Jabassini, [“Turkiye’s Syria and Libya’s Strategies Add Up To a Mediterranean Power Play”](#), *Atlantic Council*, 13 January 2025.

Niger and Gabon. Back in 2020, French President Emmanuel Macron had blamed Turkiye for turning African public opinion against Paris by playing on “post-colonial resentment”.

There is some merit to these accusations, as Turkiye always presents itself as a well-meaning, non-colonial, Muslim power to African states. Former Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu wrote way back in 2014, that

Turkiye has never been in a colonial position or relationship with the Continent (Africa). On the contrary, African nations looked for help from Ottomans in their struggle against colonial oppressors.⁶⁴

In this case, the Turkish leader was probably referring to Ottoman ties with the Somali Ajuran empire and Adal Sultanate that fought against Portuguese sea traders in the Horn of Africa in the late medieval times. Today, Turkiye is cashing on in its historical relations with Somalia, a strategically important state in the Horn of Africa. In fact, it has its largest overseas military base in Mogadishu to train officers and military personnel of the Somali Armed Forces.⁶⁵ Last December, Turkiye even brokered an agreement between Somalia and Ethiopia to end their bitter dispute over Addis Ababa's plans to build a port in the breakaway republic of Somaliland.⁶⁶

Turkish Threat to South Asian Security

It is with this pan-Islamist and expansionist intent that Turkiye has also started intervening in the internal affairs of South Asia, hoping to exploit internal differences between states to carve a space for its neo-imperialist project. Bangladesh is entertaining Turkish officials who in early January 2025 brazenly spoke of “replacing India” as its key trading partner.⁶⁷

It is also disconcerting to note that Bangladesh has already become the fourth largest market for Turkish military goods and is inducting the Bayraktar TB2 UCAVs, which has mostly been sold to war-torn countries like Ukraine, Syria, Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, Mali and Azerbaijan.⁶⁸ In addition, the country has also inducted Turkish Otokar Kobra II infantry mobility vehicles (IMVs), mine-resistant ambush-protected (MRAP) vehicles, Otokar Kobra I light armored fighting vehicles (AFVs), RN-94

⁶⁴ Nosmot Gbadamosi, “[How Turkiye Became Africa’s Mediator](#)”, *Foreign Policy*, 15 January 2025.

⁶⁵ Abdirahman Hussein and Orhan Coskun, “[Turkiye Opens Military Base in Mogadishu to Train Somali Soldiers](#)”, *Reuters*, 1 October 2017.

⁶⁶ Kalkidan Yibeltal in Addis Ababa and Basillioh Rukanga in Nairobi, “[Ethiopia and Somalia Agree to End Bitter Somaliland Port Feud](#)”, *BBC*, 12 December 2024.

⁶⁷ “[Turkiye Can Replace India, Others as Bangladesh’s Key Trade Partner](#)”, *TRT World*, 10 January 2025.

⁶⁸ Ashish Dangwal, “[‘We Can Replace India’- After Drones & Possibly Tanks, Turkiye Says We Can Take Over Delhi’s Role in Bangladesh’s Imports](#)”, *The Eurasian Times*, 11 January 2025.

armored ambulances, TRG-300 Tiger MLRS and TRG-230 surface-to-surface missiles (SSMs).⁶⁹ The purchase of such weaponry and equipment raises questions about the intentions of this new Islamist benefactor of Bangladesh as well as its long-term designs for the security and stability of South Asia.

India has been well aware of Turkiye’s close relations with Pakistan for several decades as well as its anti-India rhetoric on Kashmir at international fora, which was recently refurbished by Turkiye becoming one of the very few countries in the world to openly criticise the revocation of Article 370. However, India was quick to provide humanitarian relief and conduct search and rescue operations in the wake of the 2023 Turkiye–Syria earthquake, on purely humanitarian grounds and without any expectations from the Turkish side.⁷⁰

Still, it is curious to note that Turkiye has just announced the creation of a joint factory for producing the KAAN fighter jets in Pakistan.⁷¹ It is remarkable that alongside India, it is the unrecognised Taliban regime in Afghanistan which has understood the questionable intent of Ankara and has thus far resisted Turkiye’s bid to infiltrate Afghanistan’s economic and defence sectors.

In conclusion, Turkiye’s over-ambitious foreign policy based on medieval revisionism in today’s globalised world can hurt its still struggling economy at the expense of several fissiparous forces operating within its boundaries.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ “[Earthquake Relief Assistance to Turkiye and Syria \[Operation Dost\]](#)”, Press Release, Permanent Mission of India to the UN, New York.

⁷¹ “[Türkiye and Pakistan Establish Joint Factory for Production of KAAN Fighter Jet](#)”, *Defence News Army*, 25 January 2025.

About the Author



Dr. Adil Rasheed is Research Fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

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