

How Erdogan rewrote the history of the Great Arab Revolt

Sami Moubayed

Beirut

This month marks the 100th anniversary of the self-proclaimed Great Arab Revolt of 1916, launched against Ottoman rule from the Arabian desert by Sharif Hussein, emir of Mecca. Thanks to a systematic decade-long campaign orchestrated by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the event will pass almost unnoticed in most Arab cities and media outlets.

The revolt, once a cornerstone of Arab nationalism, lasted from the summer of 1916 until autumn 1918 and, with Britain's military support, ended 400 years of Ottoman rule in the Arab world.

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Generations grew up eulogising Hussein's Arab rebels. Movies were made in their honour. Books and poems showered them with praise. The subject was mandatory in state-run schools from Cairo and Baghdad to Damascus, Amman and Beirut.

That began to change when Erdogan became Turkey's prime minister in 2003, positioning himself as a friend of the Arabs and a "Muslim hero". People were encouraged to remember Ottoman influence on the Arabic language, heritage, music and cuisine.

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Erdogan was proud of Turkey's Ottoman past and insisted on re-branding and reinventing Ottoman rule in the Arab world, politically, culturally, intellectually and economically.

He knew that for decades after the collapse of the empire, especially when Arab republics were in their infancy, the Ottomans were blamed for most of the difficulties that crippled Arab provinces of the empire, especially Ottoman Syria.



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, accompanied by his wife Emine Erdogan, greets supporters during a rally to mark the 53rd anniversary of the conquest of the city by Ottoman Turks, in Istanbul, on May 29th.

He insisted on telling the world that Ottoman-Arab relations were never as bad or as autocratic as Arab history books depicted them to be after the first world war.

Pro-Erdogan intellectuals cheered this public relations strategy and contributed abundantly to it in Turkey and the Arab world. Syria's state-run television went so far as to cut an interview with a Syrian historian who noted that the Ottomans had executed 21 Arab nationalists in Beirut and Damascus in 1916.

The reference to the executions – a well-documented fact celebrated officially as "Martyrs' Day" in Syria and Lebanon – was too much for the show's host to tolerate. He cut that part of the programme, saying: "We don't want to upset Erdogan. Let's just say they were killed, without mentioning who killed them."

A systematic effort was launched to shed light on Sultan Abdul Hamid II's refusal to sell land to the Zionists in Palestine and his refusal

to meet Mizray Qrasow, the Jewish banker who had offered to pay off the empire's debts and build a navy in exchange for the right to buy land in Palestine.

Once seen as the source of all things evil, the Ottoman sultans were suddenly revamped as far-sighted rulers who invested time, money and education in the Arab world.

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Shortly before the outbreak of the "Arab spring", Syria, Iraq and Egypt produced a TV mega-drama about the life of Abdul Hamid II, one of Erdogan's Ottoman icons – a far cry from an Arab show of the 1990s that focused on the hardships, famine, torture and executions blamed on the Ottoman Turks.

Abdul Hamid was now seen by

millions of Arabs as a warm, firm, charming and dedicated Muslim nationalist who cared tremendously for his subjects, be they Turks or Arabs. Turkish soap operas, all dubbed into Arabic, started invading Arabic television networks, shattering decades-old Arab stereotypes of their Turkish neighbours.

Turkey championed the Palestinian cause, so dear to the heart of the Arabs, and severed ties with Israel in 2010. Erdogan invested heavily in economic cooperation and trade, lifting visa requirements with six Arab countries: Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

If history tells us anything, it is that powerful empires are usually unhappy about being unceremoniously ejected from their far-flung provinces, which is what the Great Arab Revolt did to the Ottomans in 1916.

It seems that when an opportunity arises, empires almost always try to return – one way or another.

Witness Russian President Vladimir Putin, who still feeds off Soviet ambitions that crystallised in Ukraine, especially Crimea, two years ago.

The same applies to Erdogan, who, despite stirring huge controversy in the Arab world, still has some support among Arabs because of his embrace of the Syrian opposition and for the Islamic character he has revealed since 2011.

He has marketed himself as patron of the Muslim Brotherhood and as a "Sunni leader" for the Arabs and Muslims. For lack of a better alternative, many have turned to him since 2011.

With the exception of Damascus and Baghdad, which have an ax to grind with him, and Amman, whose king is the great-grandson of Sharif Hussein, all major Arab cities have been mute about the Great Arab Revolt on its 100th anniversary – testimony to the fact that, like it or not, Erdogan has succeeded in changing Turkey's image in the Arab world.

Turkey's foreign policy setbacks

Viewpoint



Yavuz Baydar

Recent signs indicate that, at least on regional level, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is trying to reset Turkish foreign policy.

Increasingly alienated on the world stage, Erdogan seems to have returned to search mode, testing the ground to mend fences with two countries with which he has long waged a diplomatic cold war: Israel, to which he has extended an olive branch, and Russia.

What raised eyebrows was a letter he sent to his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, congratulating him on the Russian national holiday on June 12th.

"Dear Mr President, I express my wish that relations between Russia and Turkey would reach a distinguished level in the near future," the message said.

It was known that Ankara was seeking to restore rela-

tions with Moscow but the surprise element was, as opposed to the discreet steps taken towards Israel in recent months, the letter came as an unobvious move, with the Turkish leader set for a U-turn from a confrontational policy with his northern neighbour.

Erdogan is apparently aware that the downing of the Russian Su-24 bomber jet on Turkey's southern tip last November, triggering an unprecedented crisis between the two countries, caused immense damage to his country's economic and strategic interests.

Russia reacted with rage, imposing trade sanctions, terminating its tourist flow to Turkey and using the crisis as a pretext to advance its presence in Syria.

Rebuffing earlier moves by Erdogan to discuss the issue, Putin stiffly demanded that Turkey apologise publicly for the incident, compensate for damages and bring to justice those responsible for the death of the Russian pilot.

The letter falls short of meeting any of those demands. In a follow-up comment, Turkish Economy Minister Nihat Zeybekci said that "though the incident was grievous, Turkey is not in a position to offer an apology".

Asked whether there would

be compensation, he responded bluntly: "No."

The Russian side responded to Erdogan's gesture with a shrug, emboldened to have been handed the upper hand. According to Russian news agency Interfax, a Kremlin spokesman indicated that "it is a protocol letter" for which no response is called for, adding that the message contained "no other significant points".

The Turkish overtures will continue. It is clear that both sides suffered as a result of the crisis but, given the overall series of failures and backlashes in its regional policy, Ankara seems to have come to the realisation that the impasse in the relations is unsustainable.

Turkey is to a great deal dependent on Russian oil and gas. The crisis brought the trade, which was heading towards \$101 billion by the end of the decade, to a standstill, leaving Turkish agriculture and food exports in convulsions.

Anti-Turkish sentiments among the Russians and the official "discouragement" for holidays in Turkey led to a boycott. About 4 million tourists chose other destinations, bringing the Turkish tourism industry, damaged by persistent acts of terror in the country, to its knees.

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The setbacks for Ankara on the diplomatic front appear to have reached the level of despair. The downing of the Russian jet led to Russian military advances in Syria, cut off sharply Turkish ones from the theatre, brought Moscow and Washington closer in battling the Islamic State, emboldened Kurdish aspirations for self-rule and, in the big picture, took Turkey almost entirely out of the political chess game on the future of the region.

Bogged down in one setback after another, Turkey's "zero-problem neighbourhood" doctrine, once launched assertively by Ahmet Davutoglu, who was forced to resign by Erdogan as prime minister, has collapsed. Earlier fallouts with Israel and Egypt that led to the ejection of Ankara as a key player on the Palestinian issue and the rising self-esteem of Iran all help explain Erdogan's strategic despair on a wider scale.

Yet, it is unclear whether Erdogan has realised the value of the wisdom in any diplomacy, hidden in the expression "go farther and fare worse".

Yavuz Baydar is a journalist based in Istanbul. He has been reporting on Turkey and journalism issues since 1980.

Turkey's 'zero-problem neighbourhood' doctrine has now collapsed.