

Erdogan tries to boost Islamic credentials by meeting with Pope Francis over Jerusalem

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Washington

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has teamed up with an unusual partner as he pursues his campaign to condemn the US decision to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and boost his image as the unofficial leader of the Muslim world ahead of key elections: Pope Francis.

During a February 5 visit to the Vatican, the first by a Turkish head of state since 1959, Erdogan repeated his criticism of the US Jerusalem decision. Francis agreed with him, Erdogan said after meeting the leader of the world's 1.2 billion Roman Catholics.

"I saw that Pope Francis is determined on this issue," Erdogan said. Just like Turkey, the pope was in favour of keeping Jerusalem's status as a city that is holy to Jews, Muslims and Christians alike, the president added. "He also says the step taken by the United States was wrong."

Following US President Donald Trump's Jerusalem proclamation in December, Pope Francis joined an international chorus of criticism and threw his weight behind a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

A statement released by the Vatican after the pope's meeting with Erdogan confirmed that Francis and the Turkish president talked about "the situation in the Middle East, with particular reference to the status of Jerusalem, highlighting the need to promote peace and stability in the region through

dialogue and negotiation, with respect for human rights and international law."

In an apparent bid to boost his standing in the Muslim world, Erdogan drew attention to Turkey's role as holder of the rotating presidency of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), a group of 57 Muslim countries.

"I told him: 'You are the spiritual leader of the Catholic world with its 1.2 billion people, and I am the term president of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation with 1.7 billion people. We must work together to preserve the status of Jerusalem,'" Erdogan said about his discussions with Francis.

Erdogan said the pope should remind Catholics of the importance of the Jerusalem question and made it clear that he would press the issue on the international stage. "I think it is important that the issue is kept alive in Turkey and other places with international meetings," he said.

A week after Trump's Jerusalem statement on December 6, Erdogan led a special OIC summit in Istanbul that rejected the US move and called on countries to recognise the eastern part of Jerusalem as the "occupied capital" of the Palestinians. The summit declaration has not been followed up by concrete action, however.

The Turkish leader, whose voter base includes millions of conservative Sunnis, has been an outspoken critic of Israel, although he has been careful to avoid a breakdown of diplomatic and military relations with the Jewish state. Erdogan also criticised the Vatican sharply in recent years, especially after Francis in 2016 called the massacres against the Armenians



Ottoman aspirations. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (L) and his wife meet Pope Francis at the Vatican, on February 5. (AP)

in the Ottoman Empire during the first world war a genocide.

The Armenian issue did not cloud Erdogan's first meeting with the pope in the Vatican. The visit came as Turkey prepares for municipal, parliamentary and presidential elections next year. There is speculation Erdogan could pull the parliamentary and presidential vote forward to this summer to make use of a surge in nationalism triggered by Turkey's military intervention against a Kurdish militia in neighbouring Syria.

Erdogan has not mentioned the election campaign in connection with his Rome visit but it is clear his meeting with the pope was important to him: While Erdogan cancelled a visit to South America because of the military campaign in Syria, he stuck with his 1-day trip to Rome.

Lisel Hintz, an assistant professor of International Relations and European Studies at Johns Hopkins University in the United

States, said the Turkish president was keen to show off his image as a fighter for Muslim rights.

"Erdogan's meeting with the pope, much like his outburst against Israeli President Shimon Peres at the 2009 Davos World Economic Forum, enables him to portray Turkey – and, by extension, himself – as the rightful leader of the (Sunni) Muslim world and therefore the rightful protector of Palestinians and holy Muslim sites," Hintz said via e-mail.

Given the polarisation in Turkish society, with the electorate seemingly evenly split between Erdogan voters and detractors, mobilising his support base is of high importance for the president as the election season draws near. In a referendum on the introduction of a presidential system in Turkey last year, Erdogan won by a close vote amid reports of manipulation.

"Gambits in the international arena that appear to demonstrate power and piety may win him electoral support back home," Hintz wrote about Erdogan. Referring to the "razor-thin margin" of victory in the referendum last year and "the unprecedented electoral manipulation that was necessary to facilitate that victory," Hintz pointed out that Erdogan cannot be sure of the result of the coming elections. "Turkey's president needs to do all he can on the domestic and international fronts to secure support."

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Tensions rise between Egypt and Turkey over eastern Mediterranean resources

Ahmed Megahid

Cairo

Cairo warned Turkey against breaching Egyptian sovereignty in the eastern Mediterranean and vowed to defend its maritime border and interests in the region.

Egyptian Foreign Ministry spokesman Ahmed Abu Zeid, in a statement February 7, said Egypt would not tolerate violations of its sovereignty over its economic zone in the eastern Mediterranean.

His warning was made two days after Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said Ankara planned to explore oil and gas in the region. In an interview with the Greek newspaper Kathimerini, Cavusoglu said Ankara did not recognise a maritime boundary demarcation agreement between Egypt and Cyprus, which allowed Egypt to explore oil and gas in its territorial waters.

Cyprus has been divided between Turkish and Greek residents since 1974. Turkey does not formally recognise the Cypriot government, which is backed by Greece, which instead recognises the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.

Egypt signed the deal in 2013, allowing Cyprus and Egypt to explore for oil and gas in their economic zones. Italian company Eni in 2015 discovered what was described as the eastern Mediterranean's largest gas field off Egypt's coast. The Zohr gas field was officially inaugurated in January and



Fanning the flames. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu speaks at a news conference in Istanbul, on January 25. (AFP)

is expected to produce 2.7 billion cubic feet of gas a day by the end of 2019.

The discovery revitalised the foundering Egypt's energy sector, with hopes that the country will move towards energy self-sufficiency and possibly restore its position as a gas exporter.

Egypt imports almost 1.2 billion cubic feet of gas every day at a cost of \$2 billion a year so the Zohr gas field is considered essential for the cash-strapped, resource-poor country.

Turkey's declaration that it did not recognise Egyptian sovereignty in the eastern Mediterranean raised already high tensions between Cairo and Ankara.

"This is tantamount to a declaration of war," said Yehia Kidwani, a member of Egypt's parliament

Defence and National Security Committee. "Egypt is more than capable of defending its own rights in the Mediterranean."

Relations between Cairo and Ankara moved from amity to enmity in July 2013 after the Egyptian military-backed a popular uprising against Islamist President Muhammad Morsi.

Egypt accused Turkey of meddling in its affairs, including providing support for members of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood movement. Several Muslim Brotherhood officials are known to have sought refuge in Turkey and Cairo has demanded their return. In 2014, Egypt declared the Turkish ambassador in Cairo persona non grata and withdrew its ambassador from Ankara.

However, the latest controversy

over sovereignty in the eastern Mediterranean is more than an ideological difference of opinion, with analysts warning it could lead to war over vital resources.

"This is also about Turkey's attempts to create new realities in the region," said Saad al-Zunt, the head of Egypt's Political and Strategic Studies Centre. "An analysis of the latest Turkish moves in the region clearly shows this."

Egypt expressed concerns towards what it perceives as attempts by Turkey to increase its presence and influence in the region, particularly in neighbouring Libya and Sudan.

The Libyan National Army, which is backed by Egypt, accuses Turkey of helping terrorists fleeing Syria and Iraq join the battlefield in Libya. Turkey has also secured a presence in the southern entrance of the Red Sea after an agreement with Sudan to take administrative control of the Sudanese island of Suakin, 400km from Egypt's border.

Cavusoglu's statements were made the same day that Iran confirmed that Turkey would have to pay for gas exports, having already received 800 billion cubic metres

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of gas for free, in light of a 2012 international arbitration case.

Turkey's objection to the Egypt-Cyprus deal rests on its refusal to recognise the government of Cyprus and any agreement signed by it. However, because all other countries in the world recognise the Nicosia government, few believe Turkey will take legal action.

Abu Zeid confirmed that Cairo had ratified the Cyprus deal with several international organisations, including the United Nations.

"No party can dispute the legality of the deal, which goes hand in hand with international law," he said.

Turkey is not party to the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas of 1982. It refused to ratify the convention, mainly because of an Aegean Sea boundary conflict with Greece.

The United States, Venezuela and Israel also refused to ratify the convention, each for different reasons.

This, however, does not rule out the possibility of further tensions and conflict over resources in the eastern Mediterranean region, with additional huge gas and oil reserves expected to be discovered in the area, petroleum experts said.

"Zohr watered the mouths of countries in the region," said Ramadan Abul Ela, a professor of petroleum engineering at the Suez Canal University. "The Zohr gas field can be the first of many to be discovered in the region."

Ahmed Megahid is an Egyptian reporter in Cairo.