



TURKEY'S POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Annotation

The rule of the Islamist Justice and Development Party in Turkey led to a change in the ideological foundation of the state and to the gradual abandonment of the ideas of Atatürk, on which the country's domestic and foreign policy was based. Turkish leader R. Erdogan, through a constitutional referendum, managed to neutralize the political influence of the army, including with the help of the Gülenist movement, which he later defeated. The strengthening of Erdogan's domestic positions also led to a change in foreign policy priorities: orientation to the West gave way to strengthening ties with the Islamic world. Under the influence of the ideas of neo-Ottomanism, the ruling circles of Turkey enthusiastically greeted the revolutions of the "Arab Spring"; however, these ideas did not receive support in the Arab world. Continuing the course of fighting the PKK inside Turkey, Ankara began a fight with the Syrian Kurds in order to prevent the creation of Kurdish autonomy in Syria. Russian intervention prevented the Turkish occupation of northern Syria. In Libya, Turkey supported the government of F. Saraj and the Islamists associated with it and is trying to take control of part of the Mediterranean shelf.

Keywords: Justice and Development Party, R. Erdogan, F. Gulen, Kurds, PKK, A. Ocalan, Syria, Afrin, Rojava, Iraq, Mosul, Muslim Brotherhood, Libya, Democratic Union Party
Domestic political agenda during the reign of R. Erdogan

Introduction

The rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) as a result of the election victory in 2002 led to a change in such traditional Turkish priorities as orientation to the West, cooperation with the US and NATO, and the desire to join the European Union. The preaching of "moderate Islamism" in domestic politics and the subsequent approval of a new course required a restructuring of the ideological foundations on which the country's domestic and foreign policy was built. Step by step, the supporters of the new course abandoned the Kemalist principles of building the Turkish state, primarily secularism. In the economic sphere, the rejection of state dominance began in the early 1980s, and Erdogan and his supporters only completed this process.

However, the army, which played the role of the main guarantor of the preservation of the secular nature of the Republic of Turkey, stood in the way of the "creeping Islamization"





of the country. The union of Erdogan and other leaders of the AKP with Fethullah Gülen, a well-known throughout the Islamic world, a preacher and modern interpreter of Islamic postulates, was initially directed against the army elite and its control over the political life of the country. It was the help of Gülen and the movement of his supporters-Gülenists that allowed Erdogan to neutralize the political influence of the army by organizing high-profile trials of key figures in the army leadership (the Ergenekon and Balyoz cases) and holding a constitutional referendum in 2012. Significantly, this happened with actual approval from the European Union.

However, after the removal of the military from participation in the political life of the country, Erdogan and his party no longer needed the help of F. Gülen and his Hizmet movement. In addition, the active penetration of the Gülenists into all spheres of the country's public life, his obvious attempts to influence the internal political life of Turkey and the constant teachings of Gülen caused Erdogan more and more irritation.

From the point of view of a traditional Eastern politician, there should not have been two ideological leaders in the country. It is not surprising that after Erdogan gained sufficient domestic political weight, the conflict that had been smoldering for several years turned into a decisive attack by the presidential authorities on the positions of Gülen supporters, whom Erdogan's supporters called the "parallel state". Numerous educational institutions controlled by the Gülenists were closed. Besides,

Turkish ideological "perestroika", the strengthening of Erdogan's domestic political positions, the final victory over the army "front" and the "deep state" took place in parallel with the revision of foreign policy (2013). The removal of Morsi caused an extremely negative reaction from the Turkish leadership and adherents of moderate Islamism. For example, Prime Minister Erdogan has sharply criticized Western countries for not calling the overthrow of Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi a "coup d'état." According to Erdogan, "The European Parliament ignores its own values. It was a test of sincerity, and the West failed it."¹

As part of its new political course in the East, Turkey has gone to the aggravation of relations with Israel and the tactical alliance with Russia. The course towards solidarity with the Arab-Muslim countries of the region was clearly marked by the Turkish reaction to the decision of the Trump administration to move the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, announced on December 6, 2017 and implemented on May 14, 2018. President Erdogan said: "We believe that the decision to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem is extremely wrong, especially when it comes to its execution. We once again reject the decision."² An even harsher response came after Israeli soldiers opened fire on protesters in the Gaza Strip in May 2018, killing 61 people and injuring at least 3,100, according to local sources.³



Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim made a sharp statement to the Israeli authorities, and Turkish Ambassador to the United States Serdar Kılıç was urgently recalled to his homeland.

Background of Turkish Operations Against the Kurds

The failure of the truce concluded by Ankara with the Kurdistan Workers' Party in Turkey (PKK) in 2015 led to an escalation of armed confrontation between the PKK units, on the one hand, and the Turkish army and gendarmerie, on the other. This time the army did not limit itself to operations in the mountains and attacks on Kurdish villages. Turkish aircraft bombed and shelled the outskirts of cities in Turkish Kurdistan. Dozens of elected mayors of Kurdish cities have been ousted and arrested on charges of supporting the PKK. However, mass military operations in Turkey itself were not enough, and the Turkish authorities attempted to destroy partisan bases in neighboring states.

Turkish armed forces crossed the border into Syria on August 24, 2016,⁴ providing fire and tactical support to the Free Syrian Army. Victorious reports followed about the destruction of the militants of the Islamic State (IS), which, however, did not put up fierce resistance to the Turkish forces. The goals of Operation Euphrates Shield officially included not only clearing the border areas from IS militants, but also preventing the unification of the territories of the autonomous Kurdish cantons in northern Syria and the emergence of a semblance of autonomy and even a Kurdish quasi-state in Rojava.

Erdogan's ambitions, however, were not limited to these goals. Turkey's relations with Iraq have an agenda similar to the Syrian operation: Ankara has been striving for years to suppress the resistance of the PKK, which has many bases and camps in northern Iraq, and to prevent the union of Iraqi and Syrian Kurds, which, however, have not yet observed a special friendship between them.

The goals pursued by Ankara also had their own "double bottom". In accordance with the "National Pledge", adopted by the last parliament of the Ottoman Empire on January 28, 1920, Iraqi Mosul was designated as Turkish territory. No wonder Erdogan said that accusations of the illegality of the actions of the Turkish armed forces in the liberation of Mosul are groundless, since "Turkey has a common history with the city of Mosul."⁵ Another goal of the Turkish invasion of Iraq was to protect the Iraqi Turkomans from ISIS.^{*} It is not surprising that Iraq was categorically against Turkish intervention, seeing in Ankara's actions, among other things, the desire to take control of the region's oil resources.

Thus, having strengthened his positions within the country, Erdogan in 2016 set about establishing control over the adjacent territories of neighboring countries.



Turkish Operations Against the Kurds in Syria

An extremely difficult situation has developed in Syrian Kurdistan, connected both with the autonomist aspirations of the Kurds and with the consequences of external interference. The attitude of the Turkish authorities and, above all, Erdogan himself towards the political organizations and military formations of the Syrian Kurds is extremely negative. Both in the official statements of the Turkish authorities and Erdogan himself, and in the Turkish press, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are positioned as terrorists, although this organization has not committed a single terrorist attack. As of spring 2016, the SDF had about 25,000 Kurdish militias and about 5,000 Arabs.⁶ The accusations against the SDF are based on the fact that the 65,000-strong Kurdish YPG and the 7,000-10,000-strong Women's Guards (YPJ) are part of the Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party, which has been waging guerrilla warfare in Turkey since 1984. Kurdistan for the autonomy of local Kurds. The Turkish authorities officially consider the PKK a terrorist organization, in which they were supported by the United States and, at a certain stage, the EU. Russia does not consider the PKK a terrorist organization. However, contrary to Turkish claims, in reality, the political and military organizations of the Syrian Kurds are not organizationally part of the PKK. At the same time, the Syrian Kurds consider the leader of the Turkish Kurds, A. Ocalan, who received a life sentence, as their ideological leader. Öcalan is a symbol of the Kurdish resistance in general and is seen by the Syrian Kurds as more of a spiritual leader of the mass movement than a real party leader. Since the PKK abandoned the role of "vanguard" in the early 2000s, it does not really play any leadership role in the Kurdish regions.

In order to develop Kurdish autonomy in Syria, the Movement for a Democratic Society was created. The Syrian Kurds are striving to create a new society based on the principles of social justice, internationalism and statelessness. This system of power is based on Alan's concept "democratic confederalism", which assumes building structures of self-government in the cantons (as the Syrian Kurds call their enclaves)⁷ on the principle of "bottom-up" from communes and councils. According to this theory, the Kurds created councils at the level of villages, rural areas, urban areas, cities and entire regions. Gradually, local self-government should take over part of the state functions: legal proceedings, tax collection, etc. Thus, "there is a slow squeezing and splitting of the state through the creation of structures of democratic autonomy".⁸ The future will show how viable the system of power built by the Kurds is, but, apparently, in the course of arranging post-war Syria, one way or another, the Syrian government will have to take into account the left-wing sentiments and administrative practices of local Kurds. By January 2018, SDF units controlled two vast territories around the cities of Manbij and Afrin in northwestern Syria and the entire territory along the left bank of the Euphrates to the border with Iraq.



As a result of the Turkish operation "Euphrates Shield" completed in March 2017, the territory between these cities was captured by Turkey, which constantly threatened to launch an offensive against Afrin and Manbij. Turkey managed to take control of about 2000 square meters. km. Syrian territory, securing for itself this part of the border with Syria, and managed to prevent the creation of a single Kurdish space that would unite the three Kurdish cantons. Clashes between Turks and Kurds were avoided after the introduction of units of the government Syrian Arab Army (SAA) into the Manbij area, as well as Russian and American special forces (the latter settled 7 km from Russian positions). As a result, the assault on the city of Rakka, which was announced by the Turkish command, did not take place. Ankara had no choice but to announce the end of Operation Euphrates Shield. At the same time, tensions persisted in the de-escalation zone in the Afrin region, where Russian police were stationed. The Turks brought artillery and tanks into the neighboring Turkish province of Hatay, continuing to threaten the Kurds of Afrin. Despite the socialist beliefs of the Syrian Kurds (on whose side not only Arabs are fighting, but also units of Christian Arabs, Assyrians, Armenians, Yezidis and even Turkish communists), the United States, based on its own interests, supported the SDS, providing them with weapons and military instructors. One of the reasons why the United States supported the Syrian Kurds was the latter's role as the most combat-ready organization in the armed confrontation with ISIS. As a result, the Kurds drove the jihadists out of the "capital" of ISIS, Raqqa, and deprived them of control over the main part of the Syrian oil fields. At the same time, the Syrian Kurds were also looking for support in Russia: their representative office was even opened in Moscow. After President Vladimir Putin visited Syria in December 2017 and announced the victory over ISIS and the withdrawal of the main part of the Russian contingent, the United States launched a new operation designed to justify its illegal presence on Syrian territory. On January 13, 2018, it was announced that an international coalition (that is, in fact, the United States) formed border security units (BSF) based on parts of the SDF, which were supposed to protect Kurdish-controlled territories in Syria. The first group of 230 fighters was trained already in January 2018. It was assumed that the total number of BSF was to be 30,000 people, whose functions were to include guarding the border with Turkey in northern Syria, with Iraq in the east of the country, as well as the border along the valley of the Euphrates River. An exception was made for the Kurdish enclave in Afrin, as the US-led coalition did not conduct military operations there.¹⁰

The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) is a terrorist organization banned in the Russian Federation (hereinafter referred to as everywhere).



The new American initiative caused a strong reaction in Turkey, and was also criticized by the Russian Federation and Iran. From the Russian point of view, the creation of such border forces was contrary to the national interests of Syria and threatened the disintegration of the country. "Even if we take into account that ISIS is not completely destroyed, the actions that we are witnessing show that the United States does not want to preserve the territorial integrity of Syria," said Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at the time.¹⁰ R. Erdogan reacted much more harshly to the American plans: "Now America is creating a terrorist army near our borders, which threatens the security of Turkey. Our task is to strangle this army before it is born. If the United States wants to establish cooperation with these wild creatures, this is their business. But we won't allow that."¹¹ Erdogan noted that Ankara had completed preparations for a new "anti-terrorist operation" and expressed confidence that the Turkish armed forces would "quickly close the issue of Afrin and Manbij" - cities under the control of Kurdish military detachments in the north of Aleppo province.¹²

Iran also reacted negatively to American plans, whose authorities categorically reject the idea of Kurdish autonomy, not to mention the creation of an independent state in any of the territories densely populated by Kurds. The then Commander of the Quds Forces of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, Brigadier General Qasem Soleimani¹³ sent a verbal message through Russia to the commander-in-chief of the US military forces in Syria, advising him to withdraw all the US military to the last soldier, "or the gates of hell will open." "My message to the US military command is: when the battle against ISIS is over, we will not tolerate a single American soldier in Syria," Soleimani told a Russian officer.¹⁴

It should also be noted that Turkey was categorically against the participation of the Syrian Kurds in any negotiations on the future of Syria between representatives of the government and the opposition as part of the Astana process,¹⁵ and in the Syrian National Dialogue Congress held in Sochi in January 2018. About a month before the event, Alexander Lavrentiev, the special representative of the Russian President for Syria, announced that the Kurds from the Democratic Union Party (PYD) would not take part in the congress.¹⁶ Noting that there are "a lot of Kurds" in the preliminary list of participants in the congress, A. Lavrentiev said that "We tried to make sure that the Kurds were represented as much as possible, but at the same time this did not cause rejection on the part of Turkish colleagues." Thus, Russia went to meet Ankara's demands in order not to aggravate the situation. However, the armed opposition also refused to participate in the congress, 40 organizations of which issued a joint statement, motivating their refusal by the fact that "Russia did nothing to alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people and did not push the regime, of which it considers itself the guarantor, onto the path of peaceful



solutions".¹⁷This position was developed with the participation of the Saudi sponsors of the Syrian opposition and reflected the intention of Riyadh to block any settlement options.

It is understandable that the Syrian government did not expect much success from the upcoming negotiations. Hence the desire of Damascus to suppress the opposition forces in the Idlib region, which, according to Ankara, violated the agreement on de-escalation zones and the corresponding agreements with Turkey and Iran as part of the Astana process.

III. Conclusion

In ideological terms, Turkish policy in the Middle East at the beginning of the 21st century is based both on moderate Islamism (support for ideologically related Islamist organizations and groups) and on the unofficially promoted ideas of "neo-Ottomanism" (including claims to Turkish leadership throughout the territory of the former Ottoman Empire). Ankara does not forget about the traditional ideas of pan-Turkism, although they are more characteristic of Turkish policy in the Central Asian region, including both the former republics of the USSR and other countries where Turkic-speaking peoples live. At the same time, Turkey is guided not only by ideological interests, but also, to an increasing extent, by economic benefits. The country's resources are, of course, limited, and the coronavirus pandemic has already severely damaged the Turkish economy. Such an important sector of the country's economy as tourism will inevitably suffer huge losses in 2020. If more than 31 million foreign tourists visited Turkey during the period from January to August 2019³⁶ (including a record number of tourists from Russia - 7 million 17 thousand people),³⁷ then in 2020 this number will inevitably decrease sharply due to the introduction of worldwide restrictions. We should expect a drop in demand, and, accordingly, production in other sectors of the economy.

At the same time, R. Erdogan looks at the current situation quite optimistically. The role of Turkey in world politics, in his opinion, will undoubtedly increase. He is sure that in view of the fact that developed countries have faced severe problems due to the crisis caused by the pandemic, all previous forecasts of global development will have to be revised, which will raise the question of restructuring the entire world order. According to Erdogan, Turkey "for the first time since the Second World War had the opportunity to take part in the restructuring of the world order."³⁸ Such a forecast can only be confirmed or refuted by the future.



Notes

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