



Ear to Asia podcast

Title: At what cost Turkey's foreign adventurism?

Description: Turkey is increasingly intervening militarily in the territories of several of its Middle East neighbours, while relations with other regional players are souring. This is in stark contrast to their "zero problems with neighbouring countries" strategy of only a decade ago. Turkish affairs analysts Dr Tezcan Gümüş and Iain MacGillivray discuss Turkey's motives in its new foreign policy direction, and examine the economic and political costs of interventionism. Presented by Ali Moore. An Asia Institute podcast.

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Voiceover: The Ear to Asia podcast is made available on the Jakarta Post platform under agreement between The Jakarta Post and The University of Melbourne.

Ali Moore: Hello, I'm Ali Moore. This is Ear to Asia.

Tezcan Gümüş: There's always been this undercurrent in Turkish politics since the birth of the republic. It has this suspicion towards external actors in attacking its sovereignty that shapes its foreign policy reactions towards its neighbours.

I. MacGillivray: The Turkish state has become quite, more nationalistic in its approach in the region. But I think that Turkey does see itself as a regional player. It does see itself that it needs to be sat at the table when it comes to Middle-eastern politics. And that's not going to change any time even if Erdoğan goes.

Ali Moore: In this episode, the cost and calculations of Turkey's foreign adventurism.

Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialist at the University of Melbourne.

It was a little over a decade ago that the government of Turkey proclaimed an era of friction-free foreign relations with the principle of zero problems with neighbouring countries. But just 10 years on, that policy has undergone a considerable rethink. Today, Turkey finds itself intervening in the territories of several of its Middle East neighbours, to various extents and at times, with boots on the ground while relations with other players in the region are souring. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his AKP-led government have had to weather substantial changes in the region, particularly since the Arab spring of 2011.



Since then, they've chosen a more assertive stance, opting to meet perceived threats where they fester, often within the sovereign borders of other nation states. But what is the cost in economic and political terms of Turkey's new adventurism? What impact is it having and how is it playing at home where Erdoğan and his party are facing declining popularity and a faltering economy? Joining me to examine what an interventionist Turkey means for the region and domestically, a Turkish affairs researchers, Dr. Tezcan Gümüş of Asia Institute and Iain MacGillivray of the University of Melbourne School of Social and Political Sciences. Welcome back, Tez, and welcome, Iain.

I. MacGillivray: Thanks very much, Ali.

Tezcan Gümüş: Always a pleasure, Ali.

Ali Moore: Let's start with the zero problems with neighbouring countries policy of around a decade ago. It is a very different story now, but Iain, where did that motto come from and when did it start to change?

I. MacGillivray: So we see the zero problems with neighbours foreign policy grand strategy came former foreign minister and former prime minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, an academic but also a founding member of the AKP. He is been a very strong proponent of re-imagining Turkey's place within its borders and within its region. For example, the Middle East at the Balkans, and has moved away from what has been seen as a change in Turkish foreign policy to reengage with its Middle Eastern neighbours.

Ali Moore: The Arab spring of 2011. Was that the game changer?

I. MacGillivray: Yeah, so we see before the Arab spring that Turkey had very strong economic relations with its immediate neighbours in the Middle East, particularly Syria. And then when we see the revolutionary processes of the Arab spring happen, we see a shift and change in Turkish foreign policy that moves away from these economic soft power ties, these cultural ties, these economic ties to something more activist, a little bit more assertive in the region. Its funding of Islamist groups around the region, allowing Islamist fighters to go into Syria, for example, its support of Islamist groups and Islamist parties in Egypt. We can see a real shift in the dynamics of Turkish foreign policy post Arab spring.

Ali Moore: And we'll look at what that looks like on the ground in a minute, but Tez, how do you think Turkey sees its place in the region? Is it as a role model as a key regional power?

Tezcan Gümüş: What was happening externally in terms of the Arab spring and the lack of security in the region or around its neighbours and the conflict, I think arised an

opportunity for decision makers in Ankara to make best use of it in terms of being able to maybe shift and push through, I guess, sponsor or produce changes, which were much more in line with Turkey's interests, that it saw itself as a more dominant power making use of its cultural and historical ties to the region. So naturally seeing what was happening around its borders fed into that and saw itself as more of an assertive actor to play a more dominant role in its immediate region.

Ali Moore: So Tez, would you say as much proactive as reactive?

Tezcan Gümüş: Definitely it was more proactive. If we look at what was happening in Syria, their open door policy in terms of allowing foreign fighters and also opposition fighters to come in and out of Turkey so to use Turkey as a base, but also giving them logistical, but also military support as well to try enabling them to overthrow Assad. But the other fact we need to take into consideration as well and that is, on the AKP, Turkey has become the hub for the Muslim Brotherhood. So it actually provides sanctuary. And as we know, Muslim Brotherhood has been one of the key opposition groups in Egypt, but also in Syria as well, historically against the Assad regime. So that would have influenced their policy towards proactivism in Syria against Assad as well.

Ali Moore: Iain, can we just stay with Syria? Can you give us a more detailed idea of just what Turkey is doing in Syria and why?

I. MacGillivray: So look in the post Arab spring period, we see that Turkey takes on a very proactive stance to overthrow the Assad regime. They make it one of their key foreign policy objectives and so support opposition fighters in Syria, as well as set up Turkey as a base for the Syrian opposition. This has obviously developed and changed as time has gone on. We've obviously seen different actors go into Syria, which have changed the dynamics of this, but fundamentally Turkey's first priority when it came to Syria was to overthrow the Assad regime. It's been unsuccessful in that. It's been constrained by different actors engaging in the conflict as the dynamics of the conflict have shifted and changed, but it still maintains its priority is to overthrow the Assad regime or to support those opposition fighters that are fighting against the Assad regime.

Ali Moore: And yet Erdoğan and Assad were once close, weren't they?

I. MacGillivray: Yeah. So this is going back, of course, when we're talking to the strategic depth or the zero problems with neighbours doctrine, Syria was actually seen as the crown jewel of Davutoğlu's policy. For a long time, there'd been quite enmity between Syria and Turkey, given the Assad regime's support of the PKK and of course the harbouring of Abdullah Öcalan in Syria during the 90s. So this was obviously a re-imagining of the relationship with Syria and there was a



burgeoning economic relations. There was even talk about a economic free trade zone happening between Syria and Turkey. But then of course, with the outbreak of the revolution, the opposition protests, Erdoğan thought he could use as leverage against Assad, but was very much mistaken when Assad then punished protesters that were rising up against him at the time.

Ali Moore: And Tez, if you look at what Turkey is doing in Syria, it's not just about protecting borders in terms of action, is it? There's economic aid, infrastructure, schools, hospitals. Turkey is becoming entrenched, isn't it?

Tezcan Gümüş: It has definitely, I guess, entrenched and consolidate that status quo. So I think we need to also take a historical step back a little bit and look at the reason why Turkey announced it was entering Syria, was to basically not allow and to roll back what it saw as the territory control of the PYD. So the people's protection units, which is a Kurdish, I guess, military group or a militia, or what Turks see as terrorist group, which is aligned with the PKK. And so the polemic coming out of government circles and also the media was that this is an existential threat to Turkey and we need to go in militarily to divide up and force back the Kurdish militias, "the terrorists" from our border region. So it painted this as an existential threat and there was this forced need to do this. That was back in 2016, the very first operation Euphrates Shield.

Now in Turkey has certain passages along the border. It definitely has a permanent base and now Turkish companies, construction companies are building infrastructure. Along with that, you've also got Turkey using as a showcase for its indigenous military industrial complex as well, its weaponry in terms of its drones and so forth. I guess there's two ways we can look at its presence there as well. So militarily, but also economically in terms of especially construction through Turkish companies.

Ali Moore: Would you call it stabilisation or would you call it occupation?

Tezcan Gümüş: Well, it depends, I guess. Turks would call it normalisation, providing security for local communities there, but of course, there's other locals definitely have been critical and seeing it as Turkey's occupation or invasion. It really matters which side of the fence that you sit.

I. MacGillivray: So if I just follow on from Tez's point there, I think this is really interesting when we look at what happened in Northern Syria, particularly the breaking up of the Kurdish cantons and Turkish military presence there, is that we're actually seeing that Turkey's been sponsoring oppositional Islamist fighters in there to do most of the work when it comes to the breaking up of these cantons and its military operations. And this is an interesting thing we see because we don't really see this with Turkey's engagement in other regions where there's soft

power engagement. We're now seeing this with Libya where it's actually sponsoring these oppositional fighters and shipping them over to engage in the conflict of Libya. So it is becoming a strategy of Turkish foreign policy starting with, of course, the Kurdish cantons and the existential threat they pose. But now supplementing that and pushing it out into the wider region as a military foreign policy strategy.

Ali Moore: If that's an emboldening, and we'll look in more detail at Libya in a minute, if that's an emboldening, it still comes from what has been fundamentally an unsuccessful foray into Syria, hasn't it, Iain, if you go back to that primary goal of removing Assad?

I. MacGillivray: As I mentioned before, the primary goal in the initial stage of the Syrian conflict was about the overthrow of the Assad regime, and mainly probably placing in a more Turkey-friendly Muslim Brother-oriented style government, but as the conflict and the dynamics have shifted, from 2014 onwards, we see this emergence of the Kurdish cantons on there, which become a existential threat. Amongst the bigger, larger geopolitical issue, Turkey's concerns about the Assad regime were overshadowed by what was the coalition, NATO and US is focused on ISIS, the fight against ISIS, which happens in the post 2014 period. So, Turkey obviously then sees the Syrian conflict more and more through a domestic lens and the existential threat that the Kurdish cantons pose to its own borders and of course to its own rest of the Kurdish population within there.

Tezcan Gümüş: That's a really good point because when the US supported the Kurdish fighters in Syria against ISIS, Turkey saw this as a massive betrayal by one of its key allies, given that it was basically termed as sponsoring terrorism against Turkey by arming the PYD in Northern Syria. So this really caused them to take a much more, I guess, a belligerent stance against US policy in Syria, but also to conduct these operations independently now because given that we're not seeing any help from our so-called ally.

Ali Moore: So Tez, what's the end game for Turkey in Syria if it wants a seat at the table, what could a settlement look like that would give Turkey comfort?

Tezcan Gümüş: I think Turkey realises that Assad will stay or has to stay given Russia's support for him, Iran's involvement and support for him. Turkey knows that this status quo is not going to change. And we have seen Assad make great gains in Syria and pretty much consolidate his holding in a lot of territory in Syria itself at this point. So I think Turkey sees that is basically reality that faces it although it hasn't come out and officially announced that.

I. MacGillivray: There's also, of course, the economic ability of being able to stay in this conflict and having a seat at the table. There will be large reconstruction efforts that will

happen within Syria once a ceasefire is made and if Turkey has the opportunity to have a seat at the table, it also has a seat in terms of what reconstruction efforts can be built. And we've already seen this in Northern Syria already. Turkish companies are obviously now engaging in reconstruction efforts within Northern Syria and building schools, building hospitals, building these infrastructure and the possibilities of engaging even more, it would be a boon for the Turkish economy, which is also really struggling at the moment.

Ali Moore: So what does the Syrian regime think of Turkey's actions? How do they view them? And is it maybe less about the Assad regime and more about Russia, Iain?

I. MacGillivray: Assad and the Syrian regime are in a very delicate position where yes, they are winning the conflict, but it is because of the support of other actors, such as Iran and Russia. So the Assad regime does not have a positive view of Turkish responses to the Syrian crisis. There is a lot of enmity between the two powers, but fundamentally when it comes to this conflict, Russia seems to be the kingmaker. What we've seen with the incursions of Turkey going into Northern Syria against Kurdish groups has mainly been because they've got the green light from Russia to do so, but then again, we also see Turkish-backed forces fighting against Syrian and Russian-backed forces in Idlib Province, for example. So it's a very intricate game of chess that's going on at the moment. But again, Assad's hands are tied a little bit because of the help that he's got from Russia and of course by other actors like Iran.

Tezcan Gümüş: To feed off that a little bit more, the Astana agreements, these tripartite meetings that Russia, Turkey, and Iran have, Assad or Syria's never represented at this table. Russia mainly speaks on behalf of the Assad regime, just to give you an ideal illustration of what Iain's saying and how Assad's hands are tied and basically is beholden to the patronage of Russia in particular.

Ali Moore: Tez, what about domestically in Turkey, how does the incursion into Syria play with the Turkish audience?

Tezcan Gümüş: It has overwhelming support and majority of Turks see PYD as an existential threat, a terrorist group that basically has a natural affinity with PKK. And we have to understand Turkey has been in a local civil war for 40 years with the PKK, and which is even ongoing to this day. Large portions of Turkey society, majority of Turkey society see this as a must and as a way to alleviate these existential threats held by the PYD or Kurdish forces in Northern Syria. So it has very much bipartisan support politically as well amongst the elites and parties.

I. MacGillivray: So if I could follow on from Tez there, I think also that brings the issue of why Turkey's operations in Northern Syria against Kurdish group haven't really found any international legitimacy whatsoever. Turkey seems to, when it comes to the



Kurdish issue, really frames this through a domestic lens, through a domestic politics lens. But what comes from that obviously is that Turkey's unable to translate these domestic concerns to a more regional and, of course, international audience. And that's where we see these splits that are happening between, of course, with the US in support of the SDF and the YPG units, and of course, the inability of Turkey to get legitimacy for what is seen as unilateral actions in Northern Syria.

Ali Moore: And what about Northern Iraq, how different is what Turkey is doing in Northern Iraq, and Iain, can you tell us a little bit about what did lead Turkey to cross the border?

I. MacGillivray: Turkey's engagement in Northern Iraq has been an ongoing thing since the 80s and 90s. So what we see now is pretty much an extension of this, particularly against what is seen as PKK bases in Sinjar. We see this with operation Claw Tiger. The attacks have extended up to 200 Ks (km) inside the border because they see that PKK fighters are being harboured inside the Kurdish autonomous region in Northern Iraq. So for them, it, again, this translate into what is fundamentally a domestic security issue going across borders for their own existential anxiety against what they see as an existential threat presented by PKK fighters in Sinjar and in other parts of Northern Iraq. It's very clear that we also have to understand that Turkey does have a very strong relationship with the Kurdistan regional government within there. So it is not just about the Kurdish issue in general, but it is, of course, this more focus on fighting against what, to them, has been a longstanding and historical battle against the PKK and its ideas of political mobilisation, insurgency within Northern Iraq and within Turkey and of course now within Syria.

Ali Moore: You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. And just a reminder to listeners about Asia Institute's recently launched online publication on Asia and its societies, politics and cultures, it's called the Melbourne Asia Review. It's free to read and it's open access at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. You'll find articles by some of our regular Ear to Asia guests and by many others. Plus you can catch recent episodes of Ear to Asia at the Melbourne Asia Review website, which again, you can find at melbourneasiareview.edu.au.

I'm Ali Moore and I'm joined by Turkish affairs specialists, Iain MacGillivray and Dr. Tezcan Gümüş, both of the University of Melbourne. We're talking about Turkey's increasingly interventionist stance in the Middle East and how that's viewed both at home and abroad. Our third example of Turkey's more assertive position is probably the one where I think adventurism seems the most appropriate label, especially if you look at a map and I'm talking about Libya, which we did touch on earlier. Turkey supports the UN-backed Government of



National Accord, but that pits it against many countries, which support the rival forces of General Khalifa Haftar. What is at stake for Turkey in Libya, Iain?

I. MacGillivray: So the Libyan conflict and Turkey's engagement in it really demonstrates what, as you pointed out correctly, Ali, this new foreign policy adventurism that seems to be shaping Turkish foreign policy more recently. Turkey has obviously backed up the GNA government, who have close ties within their government with the Muslim Brotherhood. They control a certain section of Western Libya, but of course, with their support and the GNA also has the support of Qatar as well, Turkey is finding itself more regionally and internationally isolated because of its stance in Libya. It's engaged with Libya and signed up maritime treaties with the government there to extend its maritime borders. Of course, this is also about hydrocarbon resources and Turkey's ability to have access to these.

So there is, of course, different things going in play and Turkey has found itself competing against other powers. For example, Russia, France, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and other players in the region who have a greater say in what the future of Libya should be. It's a very interesting conflict, and it's very interesting to see Turkey, particularly Erdoğan, taking a gamble in Libya because of the costs and the sunk costs that could come from going into Libya, like they've seen what's happened in Syria.

Ali Moore: That's economic and political costs.

I. MacGillivray: Yeah. We can see that Turkey's adventurism in the region isn't winning it any friends. It is becoming more and more regionally isolated. It's losing its ability to translate what it sees as its own interests within the region. We can see this now obviously with Libya plays into, of course, its strategy within the Eastern Mediterranean, where we're seeing a lot more bellicosity by Turkey in its naval projections in the Eastern Mediterranean. And I think it's interesting as well and we were talking about oppositional fighters, Libya, the Libyan theatre of war is where we're actually seeing Syrian oppositional fighters that was backed by Turkey, being transplanted into Libya to help support the GNA government and the forces within there. Again, this is a very interesting development in Turkish foreign policy, demonstrating a new direction in the way that Turkey is engaging with the region using these non-state actors, rather than engaging militarily, as we've seen it do in other conflicts.

Ali Moore: Tez, how do you think Turkey weighs up its interests in Libya?

Tezcan Gümüş: I think Turkey, in terms of arriving at this maritime agreement to extend its boundaries and create this corridor in Eastern Mediterranean, where it runs from the shores of Libya across up to the Mediterranean shores of Turkey, it feels that it was forced in terms of undertaking this agreement because it feels

naturally its maritime borders have been unjustly drawn up to maximise Greece and Cyprus's economic exclusion zones as well. And like Iain said, it has a lot to do with the very recent gas explorations and gas fields that have been, I guess, detected in Eastern Mediterranean, which Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, along with French and Italian companies basically sat down at the table and come to an agreement on creating this pipeline from Israel into Europe by bypassing Turkey.

Turkey originally felt that once had this plan with Israel through Israel up along Turkey and deliver gas into Europe through its own territories. When this happened very recently, it's been left out, marginalised. And I think it was used its agreement to extend its maritime borders with Libya to counter that on what it saw as through legal counteraction. And with that extension of those borders, is basically legitimised its own gas exploration and its own naval strategy in that region because it feels that it is only adhering to those international laws.

I. MacGillivray:

So if I could follow on from Tez there, like we can also see that this bellicosity that Turkey is engaging with in the Eastern Mediterranean and this maritime border is also a consequence of what has been a longstanding failure in Turkish foreign policy to engage with its neighbours. We can see that its relationship with Israel has not been very good since 2009, with the Mavi Marmara crisis, the constant domestic use of Israel within the AKP and for its support of its own domestic voters. We also see its inability with the EU to come to an agreement on the Cyprus issue, like Northern Cyprus, the Turkish-controlled Northern Cyprus does not have international legitimacy outside of Turkey. And of course, Greece, it continues to have border disputes, a very somewhat irredentist attitude towards Greek islands that are on the borders of Turkey.

So this is obviously a consequence of what is this increasing regional and international isolation by Turkey and it's taken more drastic measures and more activist measures to make sure that people hear what it's wanting and what its regional ambitions are and what its regional interests are. And this consequence we see with Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean, the outcome of what is a deteriorating, regional isolation and international isolation.

Ali Moore:

And Tez, when you look at those regional ambitions, and often in the reporting of this, you see the terms such as Neo-Ottoman, is there a grand strategy? Does Turkey have Neo-Ottoman ambitions? Is that a fair description?

Tezcan Gümüş:

No, I think it's a very reductionist way of viewing Turkish foreign policy. And there's an element of Orientalism in terms of the connotations in the West Ottoman historically it creates in one's mind. I don't think there is this overwhelming strategy to colonise and attain or regain territories that were lost in the Ottoman empire. Yes, there is a very romanticised view on the AKP,



especially and pop culture that we see during that time through these Turkey series, this romanticization, the glorious past of the Ottoman era. But I definitely don't think there is this overwhelming philosophy that drives its foreign policy. I think it is more to do with in reaction to what's going on.

I. MacGillivray:

It's got to be made clear that nobody within the AKP and in Turkish foreign policy or in Turkish policy circles have ever used the word Neo-Ottomanist. Of course, as Tez pointed out correctly, it has these Orientalist notions to it, but it also gives us indication of Imperialism as well, which AKP does not really want to give to the region. What we can see now is obviously there is no grand strategy. What's happening is actually being dictated by hubris and polemics and reactionary foreign policy rather than grand strategy. As I was mentioning before, as Tez mentioned, we see with the East Mediterranean, this is a reaction to what it's seen as other powers not listening to Turkey's interests in the region. And of course, the developing of the Blue Homeland strategy, which is this projection of Turkish regional power within the Mediterranean. This Neo-Ottomanist is a very reductionist way of looking at it. It's the byword for what everybody uses at the moment when they're looking at Turkey. But of course, we can't envision Turkish foreign policy as this re-imagining of the Ottoman empire. It's very historically incorrect.

Ali Moore:

Tez, how much of a strain is all this adventurism and activity putting on resources in Turkey? Because we knew well before the pandemic even, that the economy of Turkey was in very deep trouble.

Tezcan Gümüş:

Massively. I don't have the figures in front of me, but given it's involved in military operations, occupations in Syria, in Northern Iraq, now in Libya, and also its constant aggressive manoeuvres through its navy in the Mediterranean, Aegean to counter Greek and Cypriot claims in those waters, are a massive burden on its economy. And we know at the same time what's been happening is Turkey's economy has been faltering for well before the coronavirus hit. I think we could trace it back to 2016, 17, and it's been incrementally dropping back then. So these are massive, massive burdens on society.

But the other thing we've touched upon is the trade off the AKPs, especially in terms of construction in Syria because it's due to its patron client relationships with AKP government and these large construction firms, is it has a lot to benefit by undertaking these operations, especially in Libya. It's been said that construction will be worth about \$50 billion for Turkish companies. So you can see this would be a massive pull for the AKP to maintain these operations in Libya, but also I'm guessing in Syria as well in terms of rebuilding the country postwar or having a foot at the table where these contracts are divided up postwar in Syria.



- I. MacGillivray: Yeah. So, as you rightly pointed out, Tez, this is obviously a big gamble for the AKP to secure what is now being seen as an economic crisis, to be part of reconstruction efforts in Syria and Libya, provided with the much needed resources it needs to maintain its patron client relationships that have started to fracture since the 2019 municipal election, where we see the opposition actually take Istanbul, Ankara and several other key cities. AKP domestically is waning in its support and the economy is a big issue. And this foreign policy adventurism is and can be seen through a domestic lens. It is about regional power projection, but fundamentally, it is also about domestic stability and legitimacy. The AKP has, for most of its reign, promoted the idea that it is an economically legitimate actor and provides economic security for its citizens. And these rash actions that we're seeing in Libya and of course in the East Med, demonstrate that it is trying to find resources and ways of fixing what are some really endemic problems in Turkish society.
- Tezcan Gümüş: At the same time, it enables them to distract attention to what's going on at home economically by being involved in these military operations.
- Ali Moore: Does that imply though that people don't make a connection between hip pocket and these incursions and that the potential benefit, which is only its potential at the moment, these huge reconstruction programmes, they're not actual, that the promise of that is enough for people to see through the pain the country is feeling at the moment?
- Tezcan Gümüş: What's happening in Syria, I think overwhelmingly people see that as a necessity. So they're happy to support, I guess, economic stress in terms of the financial outlay the government is syphoning off to these military operations in Syria because they feel that this is a given that this needs to happen for the security of the state as well for the benefit of the state. Now what's happening in Libya is of course, has definitely not had bipartisan support. A lot of the opposition have tried to block legislation passing through that hand the powers to Erdoğan to make decisions in terms of military operations in Libya. So it's been a completely different picture in Libya because a lot of the people, the opposition in particular, have overwhelmingly been against military operations in Libya itself.
- So people realise that Syria, we understand what's happening, but in Libya, we do not understand why this outlay of our military support in Libya and sending of troops and loss of potential lost life, but also economic outlay while the country is suffering so heavily, citizens suffering so heavily. So there is definitely, we need to break up between the views of constituents on Syria, what's happening in only Syria as opposed to Libya. So there is definitely differences there.



I. MacGillivray: Obviously, the Syrian crisis is much more of a domestic priority because we also see that whatever happens in Syria is also about the issues that are happening domestically within there. For example, the refugee crisis, the Syrian War has been going on since 2011. Turkey is based to, I think it's around now, correct me if I'm wrong, Tez, around four million refugees.

Tezcan Gümüş: Yeah, four million.

I. MacGillivray: And people are upset because of this large, what is seen is perceived as support for this refugee community during economic times. And it's causing a lot of grumblings within Turkish society. So engagement in Syria allows the AKP to shift the blame and potentially resettle large portions of these refugee communities to alleviate that domestic concern there, which is really undermining their voter base.

Tezcan Gümüş: What we're seeing, especially in the 2019 municipal elections, one of the key reasons the AKP identified that they had lost these major cities was the animosity towards the number of refugees in Turkey itself. A large proportion of Turkish society views that the refugees have to go now, that there's seven, eight years since 2011, that they've done their bit in being hospitable neighbours and hosts, that refugees are now a massive burden on Turkish society, given that the economy's going badly as well. So they see that once they could create these stability or arrive at normalising Syria, then it will give the opportunity to basically shift refugees back into Syria itself. Whereas in Libya, of course, as Iain was alluding to, it's definitely a completely different scenario in terms of domestic politics and audiences.

Ali Moore: And how much of what we've just been talking about, how much of that is Erdoğan himself, how much would change if there was a different government in Turkey?

Tezcan Gümüş: Definitely, we need to look at Erdoğan's agency in this, but Erdoğan's not the only person that fosters these aggressive policies. And we've seen this in 2016 when there was a coup attempt in Turkey that Erdoğan was able to purge a lot of military personnel and a lot of high-ranking officers too. But in terms of removing these elements, it left a vacuum within the state institutions. In terms of military, we realised that he wasn't able to get any sympathy because we know the initial reactions by the West in terms of NATO allies was very slow-coming. So Erdoğan realised he was isolated with his allies, and he also felt that there was this vacuum that he needed the support of people within the state. So what he did was he filled this vacuum up with very nationalistic actors.

And this was especially in the military where these vacant positions were given to more adventurous-minded or more aggressive-minded offices, illustrated as

being key reasons for this dramatic shift, especially in the Mediterranean and also in Syria itself because the argument is, until 2016, even though the AKP wanted to go into Northern Syria, it was held back because of officers, senior ranking offices who were against interventionism. And once the coup happened, it was a reason to get rid of these anti-interventionist offices, fill them in with people that were more aligned with more aggressive foreign policy. And this has enabled Erdoğan to undertake these new changes in foreign policy that we see from 2016 onwards, which what we would call is more adventurous, more aggressive.

I. MacGillivray:

Yeah. Just following on from Tez there, I think it's really dangerous and quite reductionist to make it seem that Erdoğan is the be-all and end-all of Turkey when it comes to these aggressive foreign policy moves. Yes, of course he has a lot of agency when it comes to this. And of course this is shaped by his concentration of power that's been happening systematically since probably about 2011 onwards, 2013, and then with the 2016 coup attempt. But also the Turkish state has become quite more nationalistic in its approach in the region. It has been historically quite a reactive actor when it comes to its own position and interests.

And Turkey, even without Erdoğan, we'd still see these same elements competing for Turkish leadership in the region. It may of course take a different form. It may not be as bellicose as it is at the moment, but I think that Turkey does see itself as a regional player. It does see itself that it needs to be sat at the table when it comes to Middle Eastern politics. And that's not going to change any time, even if Erdoğan goes. There is still this very strong current within Turkish foreign policy that it should be listened to in both regional and international politics.

Ali Moore:

So Tez, more, not less adventurism if we look into the future?

Tezcan Gümüş:

I wouldn't say more adventurism if you're talking about a post-Erdoğan Turkey. No. But I think Iain is correct in the sense that there's always been this undercurrent in Turkish politics in aggressive foreign policy. It's not new. When we look back to the 90s, Turkey nearly went to war over uninhabited islands of the Aegean with Greece. Nearly went to war in 92 with Armenia and nearly invaded in 98, Syria, as Iain alluded to, because of Assad regime sponsorship of PKK housing the head of PKK. And we've also seen very much constant dog fights over the Aegean between Turkish and Greece air forces. So this aggressive foreign policy is always been there and Turkey's going back to its history, the creation Republic really has entrenched this political ideology of the sanctity of the state has to be maintained at all costs because of this division of the Ottoman lands by European empires.



And also that it has this suspicion towards external actors in attacking its sovereignty. So there's always been this undercurrent in Turkish politics since the birth of the Republic due to those experiences that shapes its foreign policy reactions towards its neighbours, which we see now as more of extreme version, but it has not happened in a vacuum. So I can definitely see more of this going on, even post-Erdoğan, maybe not to this extreme case, but yes, this will still sustain. What's happening today is nothing that unique and that out of the ordinary because there's precedence for it in Turkey's history.

Ali Moore: Well, it may not be unique, but it's foreign policy that is absolutely fascinating to watch. Thank you so much for being so generous with your insights. Thank you, Tez. And thank you, Iain.

I. MacGillivray: Thanks very much, Ali.

Tezcan Gümüş: Ali, always a pleasure. Thank you for having us.

Ali Moore: Our guests have been Turkish affairs researchers, Dr. Tez Gümüş of Asia Institute and Iain MacGillivray of the University of Melbourne School of Social and Political Sciences. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne, Australia. You can find more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia by following us on the Apple podcast app, Stitcher, Spotify, or SoundCloud. If you like the show, please rate and review it on Apple podcast. Every positive review helps new listeners find the show. And of course, let your friends know about us on social media. This episode was recorded on the 20th of August, 2020. Producers were Eric van Bommel and Kelvin Param of profactual.com. Ear to Asia is licenced under creative commons copyright 2020, the University of Melbourne. I'm Ali Moore. Thanks for your company.