



Erdoğan and the Last Quest for the *Greenmantle*

ICSR Insight by Saud al-Sarhan,
King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies

Following New Zealand's terrorist attack, which left 50 New Zealanders of the Muslim faith dead, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan linked the attack to the ANZAC campaign of Australians and New Zealanders under the British flag fighting against the Ottoman Empire in the First World War. In doing so, Erdoğan implied the cause of the terrorist attack lay in a 'continuation of Islamophobia' on the part of the West.

Drawing on Muslim sentiments, Erdoğan used footage of the New Zealand attack to boost his party's chances during the Turkish municipal elections. In other words, in order to legitimise his rule, Erdoğan evoked a pan-Islamic rhetoric and made extensive use of the Islamic *religion* in an attempt to increase the appeal of

Turkey's *political* stances to Muslim populations across the world. This banal tactic is mimicked by other politicians in many Muslim-majority countries, as well as by the political arms of various terrorist groups.

Such an exploitation of global Islamic sentiment on the part of the Turkish state is not new. Rather, it reveals a reversion to an older Ottoman Turkish political project that was abandoned at the foundation of the modern Turkish Republic – the project of a Turkish-led religious-nationalist pan-Islamist global movement, which essentialised and racialised 'Muslims' as a group hostile and antithetical to 'the West'.



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It is not uncommon to hear Islamists speaking nostalgically about the Ottoman Empire and its perceived global role in ‘protecting Islam’ against the ‘infidel’ Other. For many Islamists, the abolition of the caliphate marked a dark point in Islamic history. It is true that the Ottoman sultans held the title of ‘caliph,’ but they also held a litany of other titles, which mirrored their imperial history of conquests and claims to Mongol and Roman imperial legacies, such as *Padishah* (‘Emperor’), *Khagan* (‘Khan of Khans’) and even *Kayser-i Rum* (‘Caesar of Rome’).

The word caliph comes from the Arabic word *khalīfah*, meaning ‘successor’. Unlike previous dynasties that held the caliphate, such as the Umayyads, Abbasids and Fatimids, the Ottoman dynasty were not of prophetic descent or lineage. Indeed, the Ottoman rulers did not assume the caliphate as a continuation of these earlier caliphates, but by conquering the lands of the last Abbasid caliph, administered by the Mamelukes from Cairo in 1518. Even so, the title caliph was not used regularly by the Ottoman sultans. It would not be until a string of defeats in the face of European colonial empires in the later period of Ottoman history that they would begin to use the title regularly. It was only once their days of conquering lands had been checked by Europeans that the Ottomans turned to conquering souls under the pretense of pan-Islamic sentiment and the Ottoman sultan’s then-forgotten title of caliph.

This emergence of pan-Islamism was due to many factors. The decline of the Ottomans turned the empire into what the European powers coined ‘the sick man of Europe’. Territorial losses inflicted upon the Ottomans reduced the number of Ottoman Christian populations as various peoples in Ottoman



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Europe gained independence from the Turks: Greece in 1829, Romania and Serbia in 1878, and Bulgaria in 1908. Before the Balkan Wars of independence (1912–13), Christians made up over a third of the population of the Ottoman Empire. By the turn of the 20th century, Ottoman Christians represented less than a fifth of the Empire's population.

The increasingly Muslim character of the Ottoman population contributed to the racialisation of Muslims by European orientalists, social Darwinists, race scientists and eugenicists. In the 'modern' sciences and world-view of the late 19th and early 20th century, 'Muslims' became a separate, almost racial group seen as inferior to white Christian Europeans. Many Muslim thinkers accepted this racialisation yet rejected the claims of their inferiority. By engaging European orientalists, these Muslim thinkers – often referred to as Islamic modernists – attempted to refute the inferiority charge by claiming Islam as a universal religion, promoting the idea of Islamic civilisation and placing Islam in a state of conflict with 'the Christian West'.

All of the developments mentioned above led to the emergence of a pan-Islamic consciousness on the part of the Ottoman ruling elite, who sought to adopt pan-Islamist positions in order to reverse the deteriorating state of their empire. Their objective was to use Islam to regain recognition from the global imperial powers of the day – a definitively non-spiritual goal.

Technological development, such as the spread of train lines, newspapers, telegraphic communication and the steamship, enabled Muslims to communicate with each other across the globe. The Ottomans attempted to position themselves as the centre of Islam, despite the fact they governed less than 10 per cent of the world's then adherents to the Islamic faith.



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Shortly before the First World War, the Ottoman government began more actively using pan-Islamic discourse to urge Muslims outside the Ottoman Empire to be loyal not to their local (often colonial) rulers, but to the Ottoman Empire. It chose to side with the Germans during the war and declared *jihad* ('Holy War') against the Allies. Germany, then, sought to use Ottoman Pan-Islamism to undermine the Allies (mainly the British), who ruled the majority of the world's Muslim population in Africa and South East Asia.

Yet the endeavour was a damp squib. Both the Germans and the Ottoman Turks failed to realise the little sympathy Arab and other Muslims of the Ottoman Empire felt for the state, due to the Ottoman government's increasing Turkification policies in the early 20th centuries. A secret British intelligence report, before the end of the First World War stated:

The hostility of the Arabs to the Turks has become increased to a degree which renders reconciliation of the former to the rule of latter unthinkable; whence the chance of a Pan-Islamic combination against Europe seems to have been reduced to zero. And indeed, however the war may end, it is not easy to see how this particular result can be altered.

After the First World War and the abolition of the caliphate in 1924, pan-Islamist thought was resurrected by groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Caliphate League in India and the Muslim World Congress in Palestine, due in large parts to figures like Abul A'Ala Maududi in British India, Rashid Rida in Egypt, and Haj Amin al-Husseini in Mandatory Palestine. Relying on funding and transnational bodies active in British India, al-Husseini facilitated the organisation of the Muslim World Congress in



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Jerusalem with the aim of uniting Muslims across the world against Zionism. During the 1936 revolt in Palestine, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt organised philanthropic funds for the Congress, thus setting a transnational trajectory that the group has maintained ever since.

During the Second World War, many pan-Islamic adherents cooperated with Nazi Germany in the hope that the imagined 'Muslim World' would rise up and topple their colonial masters, the Allies; after all, Britain, France, Russia, China and the Netherlands in the mid-20th century still ruled over the majority of the world's Muslim populations. Though the attempt – again – failed to achieve its goals, pan-Islamist groups incorporated beliefs, including virulent anti-Semitism, from the Nazis and other fascist ideologues.

After the Second World War, the pan-Islamist parties increased their political engagement and figures such as Sayyid Qutb in Egypt helped to create a radical faction within Islamism. Pan-Islamism boosted itself in the 1980s and 1990s following secular Arab nationalist regimes' failure to solve the Palestinian problem, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union left little support for Soviet-aligned secular governments in various parts of the Arab world. This process enabled pan-Islamist parties to gain power in places such as Iran (Khomeinism), Iraq (Dawa Party), Gaza (Hamas) and Egypt (the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party). Meanwhile extremist groups promoting global 'jihad' groups against non-Muslims, as well as against Muslims and Muslim regimes who rejected Islamism, proliferated.

When his Turkish Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) reached power in 2003, Erdoğan sought to liberalise the Turkish republic's institutions



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to standards that would allow for Turkish ascension to the European Union. This placed him in an internal conflict with the Kemalist institutions in the country, mainly the military and the judicial system. However, the failure of the AKP to qualify Turkey for membership in the EU has since resulted in a pivot in Erdoğan's external politics toward the adoption, once again, of a more pan-Islamic outlook.

Thus Erdoğan began openly [supporting the Muslim Brotherhood](#) in Egypt and positioned himself as the chief rival of a new regional order in the Arab world that was being crafted by Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, who pursued policies aimed at finally ridding the region of Islamists once and for all. Erdoğan turned Turkey itself into a safe haven for Islamists from where they broadcast Islamist propaganda and ideology through satellite channels and radio stations.

Not unlike Abdulhamid II, who relied on religious organisations and modern technology, such as railways and journal publications, to curry loyalty among extranational Muslims to his state based on pan-Islamism, Erdoğan relies on a network of Muslim Brotherhood sympathisers across Muslim countries who enjoy full Turkish support, to revive Turkish engagement at home and abroad, under the guise of 'Islamic solidarity'.

In the same fashion as Sheikh Abu'l-Huda al-Sayyadi, who attempted to legitimise Sultan Abdulhamid II to Arab audiences, Muslim Brotherhood sympathisers, such as Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, promote Erdoğan to the Arab masses by [claiming he is divinely selected](#), just as the caliphs were. Erdoğan has begun to promote the idea that Turkey '[with its cultural wealth,](#)



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accretion of history and geographical location ... is the only country that can lead the Muslim World'. Like Haj Amin al-Husseini, Erdoğan believes that the solution of the Israel–Palestine conflict can be resolved through Islamic unity – and a healthy dose of fascist anti-Semitism.

Just as the early 20th century Ottoman government used pan-Islamism as a tool to support the Ottoman economy, Erdoğan's appeals to pan-Islamism encourage Muslims beyond Turkey to invest in the country, in support of the Turkish lira, which has taken a plunge in recent years due to poor management of the Turkish economy by the AKP and the controversial economic theories that Erdoğan has endorsed. For instance, several Muslim Brotherhood sympathisers in the Gulf have mobilised Islamists to invest in Turkey in order to save the Turkish currency from deteriorating further. A former Kuwaiti MP, Faisal al-Muslim, explained Turkey's economic difficulties are the result of 'economic war against Turkey' and asked Muslims to support Turkey because it is a Muslim nation. The Kuwaiti Islamist Hamid al-Ali even claimed that supporting Turkey's economy is a religious duty for Muslims. In addition, a former Al Jazeera journalist and a well-known Muslim Brotherhood sympathiser Saber Mashhour stated that Turkey is 'the last Islamic citadel which defends us, [this is why] Turkey is our country where we can defend Islam ... for this we ought to support Turkey and the Turkish lira.' Thus, the Islamists attempted to use pan-Islamic rhetoric to save the Turkish economy from recession. The same story repeated itself in other parts of the 'Muslim world'. In Pakistan, campaigns by Islamist groups, such as Jamaat-e-Islami, were made in order to support the purchase the Turkish lira. In Malaysia, calls for supporting the Turkish lira generated strong support



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across social media. This is not dissimilar from the pan-Islamic support that the Turks sought in the early decades of the 20th century, including the reliance of Sultan Abdulhamid II on Muslims to finance the Hejaz railway, or the massive donations gathered during the Balkan Wars. Erdoğan and pan-Islamists attribute the rapidly declining Turkish economy to a Western conspiracy, not unlike the anti-Western nationalist conspiracies of the Young Turks, who brought about the collapse of the Ottoman Empire by allying with imperial Germany against the Allies.

Unlike Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the secular Turkish Republic built on the ashes of the Ottoman Empire in Anatolia, who attempted to separate Turkey from its Ottoman past, Erdoğan believes that the modern Turkish Republic is nothing but '[a continuation of the Ottomans](#)'.

Erdoğan's pan-Islamist turn is not dissimilar to that of the Ottoman Empire in its final stage. Both Erdoğan and Abdulhamid II resorted to a guise of 'Islamic internationalism' to rally foreign Muslim populations around them, with the real purpose of securing a major place for Turkey on the world stage.

The Turkish pivot to the East is nothing but an attempt by the AKP to preserve power at home. Just as the Ottoman Empire failed to preserve the loyalty of its Arab provinces, current Turkish foreign policy is facing strong regional criticism from Turkish people who voted for the opposition parties in larger numbers against the AKP than before. Even members of the AKP have positioned themselves in opposition to Erdoğan's conduct. His extraterritorial ambitions are equally challenged by the growing economic woes of the Turkish people who have begun to look for alternatives to the AKP.