The autocracy promotion of Turkey in Northern Africa, Middle East, and Caucasus

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La promozione dell'autocrazia della Turchia in Nord Africa, Medio Oriente e Caucaso

Abstract

The foreign policy of Turkey has been analyzed, focusing on Erdogan governments and his relations with five countries of North Africa, Middle East, and Caucasus. Turkey has implemented different instruments of autocracy promotion in his relations with Syria, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Libya, and Egypt. The empirical evidence shows that Turkish diplomacy has been very flexible. On one hand, Erdogan used both hard and soft power; on the other hand, he negotiated with both authoritarian and hybrid regimes. Thus, autocracy promotion led to military interventions, together with a combination of blackmails and rewards; instead, the role of inertial emulation has been lower. The cases of Egypt and Libya were subject of a more specific analysis, which hypothesizes the existence of Erdogan's project aimed at creating a coalition of Sunni parties, guided by the AKP; in such diplomacy, the starting point would be the values (rather than interests). This study proposes a two-stage division of Erdogan's promotion of authoritarianism, thanks to a learning process that would have followed the negative experience in Egypt, which would result in a reconsideration of the higher weight given to interests in a later stage. For

example, in Artsakh and Libya Erdogan solved conflicts through a territorial compromise.

Keywords

Autocracy promotion, Turkey, Foreign policy, conflicts, Middle East

Resumo

La politica estera della Turchia di Erdogan è stata analizzata nelle relazioni con cinque paesi di Nord Africa, Medio Oriente e Caucaso. La Turchia ha applicato diversi strumenti di *autocracy promotion* nelle sue relazioni con la Siria, l'Azerbaigian, l'Iraq, la Libia e l'Egitto. L'evidenza empirica ha mostrato che la diplomazia turca è stata molto flessibile. Da un lato, Erdogan ha usato sia l'*hard* che il *soft power*; dall'altro egli ha negoziato sia con regimi autoritari che ibridi. In tal modo, l'*autocracy promotion* turca ha portato a interventi militari, insieme ad una combinazione di premi e punizioni; mentre il ruolo dell'emulazione inerziale è stato inferiore. I casi di Egitto e Libia sono stati approfonditi, ed è emerso il progetto iniziale di Erdogan finalizzato a favorire la formazione di una coalizione di partiti sunniti, guidati dall'AKP. In tale diplomazia, il punto di partenza è stato quello dei valori (piuttosto che degli interessi). Questa ricerca ha proposto una divisione in due fasi dell'*autocracy promotion* di Erdogan, grazie ad un processo di apprendimento della esperienza negativa in Egitto, che ha portato a una riconsiderazione del (maggior) peso dato agli interessi nella seconda fase diplomatica. Ad esempio, in Artsakh e in Libia, Erdogan ha promosso una risoluzione del conflitto basata sul compromesso territoriale.

Parole chiave

Promozione dell'autoritarismo, Turchia, Politica estera, conflitti, Medio Oriente.

Introduction

Global politics today is characterized by greater interdependence between the domestic political sphere, of individual states, and the external sphere, of international relations. While from 1989

the main area of studies has been the promotion of democracy, over the last decade the studies are focusing on the opposite trend, which is the promotion of autocracy. It should be emphasized that the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) area, i.e. the one that will be analyzed in this article, despite having faced (especially since 2011) several uprisings, has lowly benefited from the promotion of Western democracy, thus leaving more room for action to the promoters of authoritarianism[1]. As a result, the willingness of external actors to influence a country in the sense of facilitating, on the one hand, or inhibiting, on the other, democratic changes assumes significance. This discussion analyzes the foreign policy (FP) of Turkey, more specifically that implemented by Erdogan, trying to differentiate between mere economic, political, military, or cultural support actions and those related to autocracy promotion.

Turkey benefits from such a geographic location that has allowed it to be recognized as a bridge between Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East, and this is central to understand the roles that can be played by the latter at the geo-political level. Its strategic position, however, results in an innate ongoing involvement in the dynamics of surrounding countries, which are reflected in international balances, and the situation is then complicated by considering the conflicts on its borders (i.e., the civil was in Syria, the unstable situation in Kurdistan, the contentious relations with Greece, etc.). Exactly these conflicts will go into the body of the analysis, starting from the moment Ankara did not remain helpless in the light of them, but took clear positions, intervening through various channels of action.

In addition, another essential premise is the type of regime currently recognized in Turkey, inclined toward a personalistic authoritarian regime[2]. According to the annual report "*Freedom in the Wolrd*" compiled by *Freedom House* in 2021, Turkey falls into the category of "not free" countries by achieving a score of 5.5. This result is derived from average levels of political rights and civil liberties within the country: with the score of 32 out of 100 in 2021 (counting 16 points out of a total of 40, and 16 out of a total of 60, respectively).

[1] Ayfer (2019) gives the case of Egypt as an example for this statement. Bicchi (2009) has analyzed the policies of democratic assistance of the European Union in the Mediterranean; for its evolution after the Arab Spring, see: Bicchi, Voltolini (2015). 2 For a typology on the different statuses of foreign policy (low profile, small, medium, great and super powers), see: Fossati (2008).

[2] The label of personalistic regimes has been used by Brooker (1999). Bratton and Van der Walle (1994) had elaborated the model of neo-patrimonial regimes. According to Fossati (2018), neo-patrimonial regimes can be both personalistic (like in most of African states) and federal (for example in post-2003 Iraq). Fossati criticized the label of 'sultanistic' regimes, that could lead to conceptual stretching.

Turkey's institutional evolution

Since the fall of the Ottoman empire, Turkey was born as an authoritarian regime, under the personal rule of Kemal Ataturk, who promoted the modernization of his country. Despite this, the Turkish political-institutional path did not follow a constant line but was rather characterized by an alternation of mostly hybrid and authoritarian regimes. In fact, in only two periods we can refer to a democratic regime: the first between 1946 and 1949, and the second between 1975 and 1980. The periods of direct military rule were those of 1960-65 and 1971-74. In all the other years, Turkey has been characterized as a hybrid regime, often protected by the armed forces. All those governments, moreover, have found their legitimacy and legal basis since the new constitution adopted in 1982.

Entering the political scene in the early 2000s, Erdogan initially promoted democratic and liberal projects that allowed the county to position itself somewhere between a hybrid and a democratic regime (with a score of 3, considering *Freedom House*). Soon after, however, when the Justice and Development Party (AKP) gained the majority in parliamentary elections, Erdogan introduced direct election of the head of State and began to distance himself from democratic lines in favor of more authoritarian positions. Such a change was the result of Erdogan's ability to use the democratic reforms adopted in previous years to oust the Kemalist bureaucracy and army, resulting in a gradual move away from the pro-Western regime, in favor of an involution in an authoritarian direction aimed at the scenarios of the Arab world. The most relevant date, however, is that of 2017, when with the successful outcome of the constitutional referendum Turkey became an authoritarian regime, with Erdogan's personal rule.

REGIMES	Democratic (1 – 2.5)	Hybrid (2.5 – 5.5)	Authoritarian (5.5 – 7)
1923 – 1945			Personalistic (Ataturk)
1946 – 1949	Democratic		
1950 – 1959		Limited	

REGIMES	Democratic (1 – 2.5)	Hybrid (2.5 – 5.5)	Authoritarian (5.5 – 7)
1960 - 1965			Military
1966 - 1970		Limited	
1971 - 1974			Military
1975 - 1980	Democratic 2.5		
1981 - 1985		Armed forces - protected 4.5	
1986 - 1992		Limited 3	
1993 - 2001		Armed forces - protected 4.5	
2002 - 2015		Limited 3/3.5	
2016		Head of state - protected 4.5	
From 2017			Personalistic (Erdogan) 5.5

The government's system has followed an evolution from the birth of the parliamentary republic to the so-called "hyper-presidential system" since 2017. The parliamentary system was stable for almost 60 years, until the early 1980s. With Erdogan, this type of government was subjected to changes, with effective but limited results in the mid-2000s, and then more incisive in 2017. Firstly, Erdogan succeeded in establishing a presidential system in 2007, thanks to the positive result of the referendum to amend the Constitution, which allowed the introduction of direct election of the Head of the State. Finally, Erdogan imposed a hyper–presidential system, where the role of the president assumes total centrality. Through a referendum, which proposed 18 amendments to 72 articles of the Constitution, he succeeded in obtaining, for example: the deprivation of the parliamentary vote of confidence in the president, the deprivation of the possibility of parliamentary interpellation, the limitation to the term of office of the President to 10 years, but with the possibility of extending the term if this is not completed, etc.

The electoral system has been corrected proportionalism since 1961 (with the 10% barrier threshold), allowing a few parties to enter parliament, except for the application of a majoritarian system from the late 1940s to the 1960s. Since 2002, first there has been a predominant party system; then, in 2007, a hegemonic one. Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) gradually assumed that role, starting with the election victory in 2002,

when the party won an absolute majority, then in 2007 it got 46 percent of the vote, in 2011 49.8 percent, in 2015 49.5 percent, and in 2018 52 percent.

The conflict with the Kurds

Kurds are an Iranian population whose place of origin is recognized in the Kurdistan region, which was formerly part of the Ottoman Empire and was later divided among Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. The conflict already began in 1923; with the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne Turkey annulled the previous treaty, the Treaty of Sevres, in which Kurds' right to autonomy had been recognized. From the birth of the Republic until the early 2000s, conflict has been resolved with Turkish domination In 1965 the Turkish intelligence (MIT) was established, effectively constituting a repressive body of the State in order to arrest both Kurds and leftist sympathizers (a fear was in fact also recognized in socialism); at the same time Ankara supported military interventions in Kurdistan in order to stop nationalist outbreaks; martial law was adopted several times, etc. The only exception was a one-month ceasefire in 1993 achieved thanks to Özal, which was followed by further Turkish military intervention.

For about ten years then, starting in 2002, the foreign pressure of the European Union led Turkey to implement asymmetric integration, with the guarantee of administrative autonomy. Erdogan, after abolishing the state emergency in place against Kurds since 1987, initiated a settlement process in favor of them in 2009. Erdogan began to promote an idea of brotherhood that would include all Muslims, regardless of nationality; the PKK (Kurdish Communist Party) confirmed the ceasefire and in return obtained some pro-Kurdish reforms, such as recognition of the Kurdish language. Finally, in 2014, this seemingly inclusive policy was reversed by a return to the dynamics that had always driven the conflict with the Kurds in the past: hostile and adverse position against the Kurds. The new aggressive policy line was justified as a preventive action against national security, and immediately took the form of bombings, military operations…: thus, a return to Turkish domination[3]. However, the Kurds continue to struggle for federalism (symmetric integration) and recognition of pluralistic citizenship (Fisher, 2016).

[3] As Gasparetto (2018) argued, "since the founding of the Republic, the Turkish establishment has always regarded the Kurdish conflict as an internal problem, rather than a FP problem, promoting nationalism with a strongly assimilationist stamp, denying one of the world's most populous 'stateless nations' any claim to identity autonomy".

Turkey's foreign policy

The guiding principle adopted by Kemal (*"peace at home, peace in the world"*) concealed the recognition of a central role for domestic policy, eclipsing the foreign policy (FP). As a result, although Turkey sought to maintain both positive relations with the West and a domestic *status quo,* what resulted from such diplomacy was a certain isolation in foreign policy. Therefore, this period does not denote a clear preponderance toward the West or the East, but rather hints at the endemic "bridging role" that Turkey will play in the years to come between the two. In conclusion, it can be argued that FP was guided by Ataturk's pragmatism, resulting in a 'small power' status. The absence of obvious contradictions in FP is due precisely to the application of non-intervention principle and the recognition of the East as a privileged area of intervention (non-aggression pact with Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan in 1937).

From World War II onward, the FP line adopted by Kemal was no longer pursuable. Ankara sided against Berlin, also to favor a future participation in the United Nations (member since 1945). While during the 1920s and 1930s Turkish diplomacy tend towards the East, during the following twenty years relations with the West prevailed. Turkey officially joined the Atlantic Pact in 1952, benefited from USsponsored economic aid, and in 1959 signed a comprehensive security agreement with the US. What resulted from Turkey's entry into NATO was a setback in relations with Arab countries, evident from the recognition of Israel in 1949[4] and the absence of relations between Ankara and radical Arab countries.

The independence gained by Cyprus in 1959 led to Turkish conflict with Greece, caused by the defense of the mutual communities that inhabit the island. In 1974, the Greek government supported a *coup d'état* that resulted in the union of the island of Cyprus with Greece, and which was followed by direct Turkish intervention and occupation of about a third of the island (Operation Attila). From then on, despite diplomatic efforts supported even by the U.N. to find an agreement between the two sides, this has never been found and the island remains divided between the Republic of Cyprus (which is part of the EU) and the Republic of Northern Cyprus (not recognized by major powers). Thanks to

[4] Even though two years earlier Turkey united with Arab countries against the UN resolution for the partition of the Palestine.

the peacekeeping mission of the United Nations, conflict was frozen, and a territorial compromise was reached, that led the Greeks to settle in the south, leaving the north to the Turkish population.

From the 1980s, foreign policy was directed by Özal, which led to greater openness toward both the West and the former territories of the Ottoman empire. Despite opening to free trade with Saudi Arabia, Libya, Iraq… neutral position regarding the wars in the Middle East was maintained. Greater closeness on the part of military regimes toward the West, and on the part of hybrid regimes toward the East was emphasized [5]. However, a final "one sided" position (pro-West/pro-East) was not taken, but a balance was always sought so as not to adversely affect the internal Turkish conflict[6].

With Erbakan (in 1996-97), it was then evident that there was a desire to reestablish ties with the Arab countries on the one hand, and to break those with NATO and Europe on the other. While the former had some (apparent) achievements, the latter was not actually taken into consideration, and in doing so it detracted from the goals achieved on the other side by creating strong contradictions in the Turkish FP. One of the greatest evidence can be found in the recognition of the Palestine Liberalization Organization, coupled with a parallel and opposite improvement in relations with Israel. Although this was a short-term diplomacy, it is interesting to highlight how Erbakan attempted to give a greater role to the value component in FP (focusing on religion), as this experience is (in part) comparable to Erdogan's initial experience, which will be analyzed below.

Before Erdogan, Turkey maintained a steady line in FP, remaining tied to a small power status. The determinants that had the strongest influence on diplomacy were first the legacies of the lines adopted by Atatürk in FP (focused on maintaining internal stability), and then the opposing positions expressed by the military on the one hand, and by the hybrid regimes on the other, which resulted in the maintenance of a pro-West and pro-East line, albeit in a limited way for the latter and never in support of radical regimes. These premises led indirectly to the establishment of a balance of Turkish relations between West and East, confirming the bridging role between the latter two, especially

[5] It can be confirmed, e.g., by the application for EU membership deposed during the presidency of Evren, or by the openness to Arab countries brought by Özal.

[6] In fact, during periods when the military were not in power, an excessive imbalance toward Arab countries would undoubtedly have led to a reaction from them, which is probably why "tacit" limits have been respecte

consequent to Turkey's entry into NATO in the 1950's, which led to a downsizing of relations toward the East.

Erdogan can be recognised as the proponent of a rigid, defined, and wider line in foreign policy, opening to the Middle East, Caucasus, and North Africa. The AKP's first FP line was devised by Davatoglu since 2009, who rediscovered the country's central role during the imperial period, starting with a crucial common denominator in regional politics: Islam. That project aimed to transform Turkey from a peripheral country to a central player in the regional context first, and in the global context after.

Donelli (2019) identifies three phases in Erdogan's FP, starting in 2002 and ending in 2015 (when the third and final phase would begin). The first phase, lasting 7 years, was characterized by a proactive orientation implemented through regional soft power, in the dimension that frames Turkey as a middle bridge between Asia and Europe, and which was based on the principle of "zero problems with neighbors". During the second phase (2010 – 2014), on the other hand, soft power was also combined with hard power in order to elevate the position the county held internationally from a "bridge" to a center between East and West, determining a shift toward an approach dictated by "zero neighbors with problems" (Özdambar, Halistroprak and Sula, 2014). Furthermore, the second phase coincided with the advent of the Arab Spring in several countries, a period during which the necessary conditions for the emergence of parties linked to political Islam, similar to Erdogan's, arose. The AKP began to prepare an action plan aimed at supporting internal regime changes in other countries, which would become central to Turkish diplomacy in the years to come. Finally, behind the interventionism aimed at overhauling the regional system and obtaining a new geopolitical role was a further goal, namely the creation of a coalition of Sunni religious parties: Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood party and Libya's Justice and Development Party. The support deployed toward Libya and Egypt is evidence of an important step, namely the extension of support not only to authoritarian regimes (such as Syria) bus also to hybrid *regimes*. The third phase, which began in 2015 and stretches to the present day, differs from the previous two by an interventionism focused mainly on hard power, and led by the leader's personal line, now more selective and rational.

Erdogan's autocracy promotion Turkish - Syrian relations

Relations between Turkey and Syria have always been complex. The first breaking point was reached in 1995 (this because the latter was supporting the PKK), but only 3 years after the situation changed with Syria deployment against PKK. Nevertheless, their relations kept being unstable and for a better analysis a division into two different periods is proposed: the first one, from 2004 to 2014, and the second one from 2015 to the present day[7].

2004 – 2014: Turkish ability to use soft power against Syria was initially denoted through a variety of means such as trade agreements (e.g., the 2004 free trade agreement), diplomatic mediation (in Syria's relations with Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, etc.) and cultural exchanges. Nonetheless, with the outbreak of the Arab Spring and the ensuing protest against Assad, the positive line sustained by Ankara could no longer be pursued. As a result, the soft power was gradually replaced by hard power, notably with Ankara's deployment with anti-regime forces in 2012. This was firstly followed by Ankara's support for the creation of the Syrian National Council (SNC, potential alternative government close to the Muslim Brotherhood) and the Free Syrian Army (FSA), and then by the adoption of economic sanctions against Damascus. The two main reasons behind the evolution of Turkish diplomacy are: first, the opportunity represented by a possible regime change in Syria (within the coalition of Sunni party's framework); second, because of the impact of the People's Defense Unit (YPG, Syrian militia linked to the Turkish PKK) on the perception of Turkish national security. A third motivation can be added, namely United States' support to the Kurds, which resulted in the acquisition of several territories and the establishment of Rojava[8] in 2014. Considering the birth of Rojava, the conquest of territories also by ISIS (which Ankara supported for a short period), and the growth of PYD, Turkey was "forced" to adopt a more aggressive and interventionist foreign policy. This was (initially) demonstrated by the deployment of troops, the transfer of weapons, logistical support, and economic assistance.

[7]) Syria is a non-democratic regime, with an average of 7 since 2011, as reported by Freedom House data.

[8]) Autonomous region considered by the Kurds to be part of Kurdistan, but not recognised by Damascus

2015 – nowadays: From 2016 to 2019, Turkey opted for three military operations[9] in Syria, having the ethnic cleansing of the Kurdish people as primary purpose, later joined by a secondary objective, namely the creation of a "safe zone" on the border between the two countries. These three operations are evidence of a clear recourse to hard power, also derived from several events that took place in 2015 (including the siding of Russia and Iran with Assad, the declaration of Rojava as a federal and democratic entity, etc.). The Turkish armed forces sided with the FSA against the YPG, while the Syrian Democratic Forces agreed with the Syrian government. Thanks to negotiations initiated by Russia, a cease-fire was reached, and Ankara was left with control of a residual area (Afrin, Abyad, Jarablus and Astana).

Turkish-Azerbaijani relations

Since the 1990s, Azerbaijan has been an authoritarian regime that has been also justified because of the Armenian territorial occupation in Nagorno Karabakh. Although the territory just mentioned falls withing Azerbaijani borders, most of the population is Armenian. The Azerbaijani – Armenian conflict stems precisely from this and is aggravated by the constant attempt to "azerize" the Armenian population.

This conflict also led to a deployment of Turkey, which, considering the strategic advantage represented by Azerbaijan (thanks to its outlet to the Caspian Sea and the oil and gas production), joined the latter since the 1990s. Turkish diplomacy resorted to soft powers tools during the war of the 1990s, that was won by Armenia, that occupied all the area of Nagorno-Karabakh and the Lachin corridor. First, Turkey aimed at stabilizing an economic interdependence (e.g., 2016 Baku – Tbilisi – Ceyhan pipeline) with Azerbaijan (Frappi e Valigi, 2016); second these economic relations were functional to Turkey's desire to extend its policy to the regional level and are complemented by support in the military sphere[10].

In 2020, the Azerbaijani president caused the outbreak of war with Armenia by announcing that he wanted to liberate Nagorno Karabakh from Armenia. Turkey confirmed its support,

providing full diplomatic and military support (granting both the influx of Syrian and Libyan militiamen and drones). Azerbaijan regained a third of Nagorno Karabakh, while Ankara obtained the joint monitoring of the ceasefire with Russia in Azerbaijan (with the deployment of 45 soldiers and the use of drones).

Turkish-Iraqi relations

Having been ruled by Saddam Hussein for 20 consecutive years, Iraq has fallen into an authoritarian, Sunni and personalistic regime[11]. It was during this period that the coflict with the Kurds deepened, due to the use of violent repression and the (sought-after) imposition of domination over both Kurds and Shiites. Even though the conflict was resolved[12] internally in 2003 (through symmetrical integration based on federalism), this did not occur outside Iraqi borders. In fact, the Turkish government did not end the violent conflict with the Iraqi Kurds (as well as Turkish), as proven by the 14 military operations carried out since 1992 in the Kurdistan area.

Ankara's target has always been the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), except for the period when the Kurds were repressed under Hussein's directives. For this reason, the Turkish-Iraqi relations were positive from the 1990s until 2003, but as a result of the Kurds gaining political and administrative power, there was a net change of policy. In particular since 2008, Turkey has developed a dual diplomacy in Iraq: on the one hand, Ankara aimed to improve political and economic relations with Baghdad (the Iraqi central government), on the other hand it carried out several military incursions towards Erbil (the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan). For instance, a High-Level Cooperation Council was established between Baghdad and Ankara, as well as a memorandum of understanding on military training and technical and scientific cooperation[13]. In addition, a third level of Turkish diplomacy can be highlighted, represented by the relations established with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Turkey is, as a matter of fact, the KRG's largest investor, and has obtained the latter's support in the conflict against the PKK. To conclude, in April 2022, the operation *Claw-Lock* (air strikes, drones, artillery…) was launched by Ankara, with KRG support and Baghdad disapproval. Considering what has been reported, Ankara resorts to

11) Iraq can be classified as an authoritarian country according to Freedom House data from 2021 (with an average of 5.5).

12) This occurred through British and American military interventions.

13) SIPRI reported that Iraq has ordered eight drones from Turkey in 2021.

instruments of hard power, that is to say military operations in the territory of another sovereign State.

Erdogan's relations with North African countries

Turkish relations with Libya and Egypt represent two peculiar cases in the foreign policy devised by Erdogan. The relations with both (Libya and Egypt) were developed with the same end goal, and therefore reveal commonalities, but at the same time there are important differences that can only be seen by observing the evolution of the relations. The main communalities are represented by the type of regime that marks Libya and Egypt, by the role played by the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in these two countries, and by the climate of riots that arose as a result of the Arab Spring leaving room for possible internal regime changes.

Regarding the first element mentioned, both Libya and Egypt were hybrid regimes (respectively with an average of 4.5 and 5, considering *Freedom House* data) during the years of the Arab Spring, and have then worsened their political and civil rights performances, being now recognised as authoritarian regimes (respectively with an average of 6.5 and 6, according to *Freedom House* data). Secondly, the role recognised to the MB, as a transnational Sunni Islamist movement aiming to implement *sharia* law under a global caliphate (as reported by *Counter Extremism Project*), should be considered. Merley (2011) argues that Turkey's relations with the MB date back to 1970s, but Erbakan already founded the Turkish MBs a few years earlier. Evidence can be found, for instance, in the ties between Erdogan and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY, MBs-related organization), and in those between Ankara and the IHH (NGO linked to MBs), which is funded both by some AKP businessman, and by the MÜSIÅD (Turkish association connected to MBs and to the AKP). Thirdly, Turkey took advantage of antigovernment protests to settle into the vacuum created and sponsor the MB, with the broader goal of creating a coalition of Sunni religious parties. The pillars of such a coalition would be the Libyan Justice and Development Party and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood

(moderate fundamentalist). In an even wider perspective, the additional goal of preserving Turkish influence in this area should be included. In this view, on the one hand, Erdogan implements political, economic, and military incentives (as well as influencing through a passive form of emulation) towards the two parties mentioned above; on the other hand, he adopts sanctions against Al-Sisi (Egypt) and Haftar (Libya)[14].

[14]) Mazis (2021) claims that Turkey's geostrategic choice would be to instrumentalize the MB, especially thanks to the MB's role as Sunni platform.

Erdogan's autocracy promotion in Egypt

Although Egypt and Turkey share a mutual historical heritage, and have strong cultural, religious, and economic ties, their diplomatic relations have never been easy. As Sánchez (2020) underlines, the two countries have often competed to obtain the leadership of the Sunni world. For more than forty years (until 2011) Egypt has been governed by Mubarak, which led to the establishment of a personalistic authoritarian regime (with an average of 5, according to *Freedom House*). During this period, Turkish – Egyptian relations did not grow, and only experienced an initial development beginning with the military's seizure of power. Between 2011 and 2012 there were several riots against Mubarak regime, which led to a favorable climate for Turkish ambitions, in fact, parallel and inversely to the regime's loss of legitimacy, support for religious parties, including the MB, had increased. Ankara not only increased cooperation with Egypt, including encouraging MB during the elections, but was also given a certain "role" by the Egyptian Islamic parties themselves, who took the AKP as an example to emulate.

Electoral results in 2012 led to the victory of Egypt's first democratically elected president, Morsi, member of the MB, at the head of the Freedom and Justice party (FJP). The FJP obtained support from the MB and the AKP, in particular the latter trained its members, both before and after the elections, for instance sending AKP experts to explain the Turkish party model. Between 2012 and 2013, Turkish – Egyptian relations reached (probably) their peak, by encompassing every sphere: concerning diplomatic support, Turkey supported the FJP during the election campaign, but also organized high-level strategic council meetings and invited Morsi at the annual AKP congress; with regard

to the economic support, the aid was defined in concrete terms with a USD 2 billion loan to Egypt, and by the signing of 27 protocols; finally, at the military level, joint military exercises were organized and there was the purchase of three Turkish patrol boats by Egypt (SIPRI).

The direct consequence of an economic crisis, violence, and Morsi's successful attempt to transfer all the powers into the hands of the President (Futák – Campbell and Sauvage Nolting, 2022), was a popular uprising at the end of June 2013. Morsi's place was overturned by the soldiers, leaded by the head of the government's armed forces and the minister of the defense, Al-Sisi. The new government obtained the backing of the Gulf monarchies (economic and military support), while the MB's party was removed from power, thus creating the basis of a new conflict between Egypt and Turkey.

Nevertheless, Turkish – Egyptian relations can be analyzed in two opposite lines: on the one hand, some links between the AKP and the Egyptian MB were maintained and somehow also deepened; on the other hand, relations on an institutional level have completely collapsed, from the diplomatic crisis, until the cancellation of various agreements (both economic and military). In the first case, we refer, for instance, to Erdogan's pressure on Western countries to impose sanctions on the Egyptian authorities, or Ankara's vast opportunities for Egyptian members in terms of obtaining citizenship or opening up television stations, newspapers, schools, etc. For what concerns the second point, first there has been the expulsion from both Turkish and Egyptian territory of the respective ambassadors, and then the cancellation of naval exercises and economic. In addition, Erdogan stressed his position with respect to the event at public level, defining the coup as a massacre, and launching public accusations against the military. ISPI also reports how the worsening of bilateral relations between the two countries has contributed to regional polarization: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (also finding the support of Cyprus, Greece, and Israel) began to cooperate in opposition to the MB, and therefore also to its two main supporters, namely Turkey and Qatar.

Concluding, after Morsi's death in 2019, what can be described as the last phase of Turkish – Egyptian relations will be-

gin. From 2021, in fact, Turkish officials began to soften their rhetoric toward Egypt, allowing a gradual opening up in their relations: in the same year, for the first time since 2013, Ankara admitted that it had resumed diplomatic contacts with Egypt at the intelligence and foreign Minister level (there were two "rounds" of "exploratory talks"). Initially, Cairo maintained a more rigid position, advancing premises for the establishment of bilateral relations, such as stop granting Turkish nationality to Egyptians, do not interfere in Egyptian internal and regional affairs, etc. The first evidence of openness given by Ankara was the order given to FM – affiliated TV channels to stop criticism of Cairo. However, one of the decisive steps concerned foreign policy, namely the alignment of Tukey and Egypt on the policy to be pursued in Libya (as reported by *Crisis Group*, both supported the GNU).

The motivations behind the Turkish change of perspective refer primarily to the adoption of a certain pragmatism in foreign policy. Turkey faced an increasingly united regional alignment both in maritime borders and energy routes, and in opposition to the MB. In order to counter isolation, Ankara changed rhetoric first toward the UAE and Israel, and then also Egypt, in the ambition to isolate Athens, weaken the alliance between Egypt, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, and protect long-term interests in Libya. On the Egyptian side, one could rather see the possibility of reducing Turkey's guaranteed support for the MB. Finally, the key element still concerns relations with Libya, due to the constant Turkish presence within the country's borders and the establishment of relations with Lybian prime minister Bashagha.

Erdogan's autocracy promotion in Libya

Libya lived under the authoritarian personalistic regime of Gaddafi for more than 40 years, until 2011 when he was murdered. Despite the elections and the establishment of a new Islamic – influenced parliament (led by the *National Forces Alliance,* NFA) in Tripoli, two years later the conflict materialized with the opposition of a parallel parliament in Tobruk. While the former was led by the *Justice and Construction Party* (JCP), close to the MB and the Islamic forces, the latter opposed them, behind Haftar's mil-

itary leadership and Al Sisi's support. Finally, the situation worsened with the creation of the GNA, the UN-backed, JCP-dominated Government of National Accord led by Fayez Al Serraj.

Turkish–Libyan relations resumed after years of silence in the 2000s, when Gaddafi stopped supporting the Kurds, and then with the onset of Libya civil war, Ankara's involvement only increased. In fact, the latter supported the creation of the GNA (Telci, 2020), ranked as the first country to welcome Al Serraj in 2016, and station troops on Libyan territory. Mazis (2021) refers to a coordinated strategy of the MB with Turkey (namely the relations between JCP, AKP and MB), the main pillar of which would be the increase of Turkish soft power in the Middle East.

In 2019 no agreement related to the GNA had yet been reached by Al Serraj and Haftar, so the latter decided to proceed on the concrete level by authorizing the advance toward Tripoli. This caused Turkish military intervention in January 2020 in support of the GNA, flanked the dispatch of advisers, Syrian mercenaries, and concrete resources such as naval equipment, armaments (Hokayem, 2020) and UAV drones. The reasons behind the Turkish intervention are related to the political-strategic, economic, and regional geopolitical spheres. First, the fact that Libya constituted the last country in which MB (with Al Serraj) still boasted "considerable power" (Hokayem, 2020). As a result, the country also represented the rivalry between Turkey, as a supporter of the MB, and the union of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, as anti Islamic countries, that is the key to the escalation of the conflict. Second, a defeat of the GNA would have translated for Ankara both into isolationism, a direct threat to Turkish ambitions to dominate the eastern Mediterranean, and into exclusion from any oil and gas pipeline projects, etc. The Turkish stance on the side of the GNA was instrumental in turning the tide of the conflict and corresponded to the beginning of the withdrawal of Haftar's militia. Moreover, the effects were also seen on the level of Turkish-Libyan relations: a memorandum of understanding was finalized, restoring validity to the contracts prior the outbreak of war; Turkey held talks with Libya's National Oil Company (NOC) along with the GNA; Erdogan pledged to seek the support of other international actors and provided for the organization of joint military exercises.

Despite Turkey's excellent achievements, the latter granted an opening for dialogue aimed at a ceasefire, which was reached in October 2020. Kardas (2020), aiming to introduce the reasons that motivated Ankara to move both towards de-escalation and the opening of the diplomatic channel, writes that "the evolution of the nature of Turkish involvement is directly related to changes in the domain escalation". More specifically, the reference can be found in the combination of a greater commitment by Haftar's militia, Russian involvement, and Egyptian army engagement, which would have required counterbalancing dynamics to be undertaken at the regional level by Turkey (that is to say, the deployment of superior military capabilities), in order to maintain dominance over the escalation. In addition, a temporary national unity government was approved by the Parliament, in March 2021, with Dabaiba as the Prime Minister, and both governments expressed tacit consent, not only by confirming the handover of power but also constituting an unexpected development in the conflict. According to Ramani (2021) the institution of the GNU allowed Turkey to expand its engagement in the intra-Libyan dialogue to include secular factions, based on a pragmatic balancing act that considers the meager support base the MB enjoyed at that point, which would not guarantee an election victory.

To conclude, the United Nations promoted the "Libyan Political Dialogue Forum" for conflict resolution, held in Tunisia in 2020, where elections were set for December 2021. Nevertheless, elections were postponed until a date to be determined, and meanwhile on March 1, 2022, the Tobruk Parliament approved a new government led by Bashagha, provoking Dabaiba opposition. The capital, in fact, made a counter proposal directed toward both parliamentary and presidential elections called for June, effectively concretizing what was a new internal polarization. *Crisis Group* argues that the reactions of external powers would decisively influence the future, so it is useful to understand their positions: Russia stands by Tobruk's positions, while Ankara supports recourse to new elections, taking Dabaiba's side.

The empirical evidence on Turkish autocracy promotion

By analyzing the relations sustained in FP by Erdogan's Turkey, the aim is to demonstrate the existence of variables peculiar to the promotion of authoritarianism. In fact, all the cases considered refer to ties developed by Ankara with non democratic regimes (both hybrid and authoritarian), whose persistence is also due to Turkish influence on the governments themselves. Turkish influence took the form of incentives and/or sanctions respectively aimed at favoring the permanence of authoritarian leaders, or averting regime change. In addition, spontaneous emulation resulting from independent action by third countries, should also be considered. In order to draw considerations, it is now necessary to combine the analysis of the type of support Ankara has resorted to (political, economic, military or cultural), with the theoretical concepts related to the distinction between flexible and rigid autocracy promotion (referring to intervention in hybrid or non democratic countries, respectively), as well as with the distinction between hard and soft power (considering the use of direct action, or not), hence the typology presented by Fossati (2022).

Hard	Flexible	**AUTOCRACY PROMOTION** Rigid
	Turkey à Libya; Iraq	*Turkey à Syria*
POWER		
Soft	*Turkey à Egypt*	*Turkey à Azerbaijan*

Employing a multiplicity of channels of action, Erdogan pursued all the proposed approaches: regarding the combination of hard power and rigid promotion, there is the relation with Syria (authoritarian regime), marked by direct military intervention against the Kurds; if, on the other hand, promotion is flexible, the reference is both to Libya, where the Turkish leader intervened directly (hard power) but in support of the hybrid regime (more specifically to the JCP), and to Iraq, whose regime was

hybrid at the time of the Turkish intervention (from 2018 to the present, according to *Freedom House*, Iraq has remained stable at a score of 5.5.); several incentives for Egypt's hybrid regime should be considered in the case of soft power (more specifically to the FJP), distinctive therefore of a flexible autocracy promotion; finally, hard promotion combined with soft power results from the case of Azerbaijan, where there has been indirect assistance toward an authoritarian regime.

Arguing that the relations taken under analysis are evidence of the autocracy promotion pursued by Turkey, it is now appropriate to assess their effectiveness. On the one hand, a partial victory in Syria, but also in Azerbaijan (with the Artsakh agreement); on the other hand, Erdogan's project regarding the coalition of Sunni parties (related to the specific cases of Libya and Egypt) should also be noted, resulting in greater success in Libya, and failure in Egypt. In the specific case of Libya, however, it should be emphasized that the continue postponement of elections allows the conflict to remain frozen, and thus allows also a certain balance that would risk notwithstanding the victory of one side over the other.

Concluding, it can be pointed out that the project related to the religious factor, thus to a coalition of third parties with the AKP on the common basis of both Sunnism and linkage with the MB, at the overall level has not been successful. Nevertheless, Mazis (2021) reports that the MB have proven to be "an *ipso facto* strategic weapon" for Turkey, both in terms of soft power (media, propaganda, etc.) and hard power (allowing Ankara to recruit militias to deploy in Syria, Iraq, and Libya).

The channels used to influence regimes, hybrid and/or authoritarian, are also differentiated. In each conflict there has been greater or lesser employment of tools characteristic of autocracy promotion, related to different arenas: military, political, economic or cultural. Ankara opted for direct military interventions in 3 out of the 5 cases reported in the typology, namely Syria, Iraq and Libya, thus giving a central role to the military arena and hard power. In any case, the promotion of authoritarianism was not limited to the channel of military intervention but extended to other arenas as well. In the case of Syria, there was a prevalence of soft power in the first period, using both blackmail and incentives, while in the second period there was an evolution toward

hard power due to various direct military intervention. Differently evolved the conflict in Iraq, where the employment of hard power could be described as an endemic element of Turkish–Iraqi relations (Ankara conducted 14 military operations within Iraqi borders, starting in 1992 and ending in 2022). Regarding the Libyan conflict, Turkish support was initially limited to the sphere of soft power (political–diplomatic support) but following Haftar's advance in 2019 there was a gradual progression toward hard power; in 2020 Ankara approved direct military intervention.

As for the last two remaining cases in the proposed typology, namely Egypt and Azerbaijan, there was no direct military operation, and thus the pivotal element of hard power was excluded, consequently leaving more space for soft power elements. In Egypt, the promotion of authoritarianism can be distinguished into two periods. The first characterized by political support, cultural, economic, and military incentives, and the influence of the AKP on Egyptian parties; and in the second period, although the dynamics remain characteristic of soft power, there has been a reversal from incentives to blackmail (due to regime change), confirmed by the ensuing Turkish-Egyptian diplomatic crisis. Conflict never turned into war, allowing Turkey to employ only elements of soft and never hard power. In Azerbaijan, although there was open support on both military and diplomatic levels, direct military intervention was avoided. In sum, there was a high differentiation of tools used: some direct military interventions (hard power), but also blackmails and rewards (soft power). Instead, the role of inertial emulation was limited.

Flexible diplomacy: a balancing of interests and values

Considerations can be drawn regarding the FP pursued by Erdogan, both in relation to the changes he has made compared to his predecessors and in relation to the specific type of diplomacy he has adopted. First, the element that differentiates Erdogan's diplomacy from that of his predecessors is the central role he accorded to values in foreign policy. In fact, in the past the val-

ues only achieved relevance under Erbakan's leadership for a short period. Erbakan would, however, probably have given a central role to values in foreign policy, thereby eclipsing interests. Differently, Erdogan demonstrates an ability to balance both interests and values (causes) and risks and benefits (consequences) before opting for the intervention channel. In this "balancing ability" lies the second innovative element of Erdogan's diplomacy, leading to a more rational and conscious diplomacy. Erdogan's diplomacy would, therefore, be framed in what is called a "flexible diplomacy", meaning the openness to the possibility of dialogue by Ankara with both hybrid and authoritarian regimes, as well as the employment of both soft and hard power, depending on the specific dynamics of each conflict.

To confirm the thesis of flexible diplomacy, it is necessary to find evidence of the theorized balancing of interests and values, in order to rule out the prevalence of one or the other (in this case it would be a rigid diplomacy). To better understand the reasons supporting the hypothesis of flexible diplomacy, one can start with a reverse reasoning: what behaviors would be distinctive of a rigid diplomacy tied to values (more radical) or interests (more cynical), and what would result? In the case of values (radical diplomacy), e.g., Erdogan would, first, aim exclusively at supporting religious parties, without counterbalancing them with any other interests, and second, he would also be willing to enter into deep conflicts with opposing forces in order to defend values. This means that in the absence of a pragmatic approach, the cause (i.e., the exclusive promotion of values) would prevail over both the possible consequences (e.g., a war) and over any interest that would be affected (economic, political, etc.). Therefore, it would be plausible to argue that, in that case, Erdogan would not have accepted the freezing of the conflict in Libya, or even given hope for a reopening of relations with Egypt, etc. Then, by clarifying why Turkey's case is not attributable to rigid diplomacy, the answer to the previous question indirectly confirms that Turkey's FP results from a balancing of values and interests. In conclusion, Erdogan would seem to be able to curb his own ambitions (linked to values), in favor of concrete interests, thus promoting flexible diplomacy. What emerges is an approach closer to a *"real politik"*, capable of compromise and linked to the apparent search for

some balance of power in the Middle East (also considering other forces with interests in the area, such as Russia, for example).

Evidence of the search for a certain balance of power can be found, with regard to the conflicts analyzed, especially in Artsakh and Libya. In the first case, Ankara came to terms with Moscow in order to resolve the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Despite the advantageous position obtained in the conflict, Erdogan nevertheless proved open to dialogue with Russia, with which he signed an agreement. The latter, along with its clauses, are evidence that Ankara seeks to avoid deepening the conflict with Russia. On the other hand, in the case of Libya, there is a fairly stable (albeit precarious) situation, due to the achievement of a truce that has allowed the conflict to freeze. In addition to pragmatism and the balancing of values and interests, therefore, the Turkish leader's ability to employ the diplomatic channel, as well as the military channel (coming to agreements, or opting for direct intervention/support for military operations) in an appropriate way should also be denoted.

Finally, it is appropriate to present a more focused observation on the role that interests, and values played in the specific cases of Egypt and Libya, considering the promotion of Turkish authoritarianism connected with the ambition to create a coalition of Sunni parties.

Egypt is both the case of initial success and conclusive failure. From 2012 to 2013, Morsi led the FJP and the country, supported by the MB and Ankara. Then, due to a probable inability to manage and counterbalance interests and values, making the latter prevail, Morsi lost control of the situation. Initially, Erdogan engaged diplomatically to try to save the Egyptian experience by supporting the party ousted from government; later, he had to adapt to reality and, thus, to the presidency of Al Sisi. There was no formal recognition or acceptance, but rather a gradual Turkish "adjustment" to internal Egyptian dynamics and, thus, a shift from defending Ankara's upheld values in favor of interests. Erdogan revaluated Turkish–Egyptian relations, which had deteriorated since the fall of the FJP, due to several considerations, mostly related to interests and no longer to values. The final account thus considers both the fall of the Egyptian government and the reopening of relations today, confirming the failure of

the Turkish project related to religious cleavage in Egypt (leaving room for a more pragmatic diplomacy).

In Libya, it is clearer how support for the MB is not only related to strengthening the latter, but rather how it is part of a larger picture related to advancing the regional geo-political agenda that Ankara set for itself, which included the instrumentalization of its influence on the MB and other Islamic parties close to the AKP. A direct consequence of this statement is the priority given to values in Turkish diplomacy toward Libya, which can be seen clearly in the motivations for Turkish intervention in the Libyan conflict (Tripoli played an important role within the axis of Sunni counties, as the MB still possessed considerable power within the country). In any case, although Erdogan succeeded in obtaining Haftar's retreat, he did not opt to impose the rule of the Tripoli government over the Tobruk government, and thus to obtain full powers along the lines of what happened in Cairo. Instead, Erdogan agreed not only to sing the ceasefire, but also entered into relations with the new government (GNU) led by Dabaiba. It is thus clear that the starting point of Turkish diplomacy were values, which were then gradually balanced with other interests as well. Ankara began to consider the extent to which it was appropriate to defend and sustain its rigid, pro-values diplomacy, recognizing that the resulting consequences could include an amplification of the conflict with Russia and Egypt, a greater likelihood of condemning Turkey to isolationism, and different consequences on the economic field.

Certainly, the starting point of Erdogan's diplomacy toward Libya and Egypt were the values, related to the Sunni–Shiite cleavage, as well as secondly it can also be said that the leader was adept at adapting and intervening effectively immediately after (or already during) the period of popular protests related to the Arab Spring, "exploiting" them in ways favorable to its regional ambitions. On the other hand, it should be emphasized that values were not the only determining variable during the evolution of the two conflicts, but that interests also played a certain role, albeit from a later date.

Finally, comparing the approaches taken by Ankara in the Egyptian and Libyan conflicts, and more specifically toward religiously affiliated parties, differences can be denoted, on which

both time and space affected. In the first place, the channels of intervention used were chosen considering the peculiarities of specific conflicts; in Egypt, for example, there has been a great deal of political–diplomatic engagement relative to the election campaign, while in Libya the military instrument prevailed. In the second place, Turkey's experience in Egypt, and thus both the victory and failure of Morsi, being prior to the intervention in Libya, would have had consequences for the Libyan conflict. The Egyptian experience would have made Erdogan more aware with respect to the capabilities and limitations, not only of his own but also of the figures he relied on in third countries (Morsi and Al Serraj), and thus more generally of religious parties. In this sense, while initially Erdogan focused exclusively on the power takeover by the Sunni FJP party, in view also of the favorable Egyptian climate, in the Libyan conflict he rather opted for a more moderate JCP approach. Although there was a massive military commitment, on the political level Turkish (and therefore JCP) ambitions were scaled down. Moreover, from the moment Ankara accepted both the ceasefire and the establishment of the GNU, it demonstrated that it was taking a decidedly more pragmatic approach, also due to the realization that the MB would not easily be able to obtain valid results in the elections. It would seem that Erdogan is willing to accept a more marginal, but nonetheless effective, position of the Sunni parties in Libya, rather than aspiring to more power, risking not only fueling the conflict, but also losing what little power the Sunni party has recognized.

To date, it can be argued that this learning process internalized by the Turkish leader following the conflict in Egypt had led to results, if not positive, at least not negative. The ability to combine values with interests was greatest in Libya, while the failure of the experiment sought by the leader occurred in Egypt, where he operated without having yet developed such considerations regarding the weight to be placed on both values and interests. The same considerations can also be applied to the Syrian, Iraqi, and Artsakh conflicts in the light of Erdogan's demonstrated ability to negotiate with Assad, Iraqi leaders, and Putin, respectively, thus, bringing more evidence for this thesis. Nonetheless, although Erdogan has been more open to dialogue and willing to reconsider his positions in the Libyan conflict, to date he would appear not to fully accept the freezing of the

conflict. In fact, one of the most awaited events in Libya are the upcoming elections (those wanted by the government in Tripoli), which would most likely subvert the current and apparent stability, and to which Erdogan looks favorably.

It can be argued that Erdogan's capabilities in his flexible FP probably crystalized a 'medium power' status in FP, because Turkey is playing a key role in the Mediterranean. Evidence of a strong will to grow towards middle power status is firstly, the Sunni alliance project, i.e. the selection of a privileged area of interest (North Africa and Middle East), towards which a specific diplomacy has been adopted, and secondly, the effective use of the combination of soft and hard power. However, it is the success recorder by the intervention in various conflicts that plays a decisive role, even if with different degrees of compliance in each country: higher in Syria and Iraq, intermediate in Nagorno-Karabakh and Libya, lower in Egypt. Nevertheless, it would be more appropriate to call it an "almost" middle power. In conclusion, a diplomacy as articulate as that developed by Erdogan would therefore need more empirical research (for example in Central Asia) to test Turkish middle power ambitions.

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