

Turkey's Erdogan tours North African capitals

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Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan last week visited the three North African capitals that have seen the ouster of longstanding regimes—Cairo, Tunis and Tripoli. His trip marks a major offensive by his right-wing nationalist government to exert Turkey's diplomatic and political influence, in line with its newfound economic weight and in pursuit of its own strategic interests in the region.

Turkish officials said that Erdogan's trip was intended to show that Ankara supported the Arab revolutions. Nothing could be further from the truth. In Tunisia and Egypt, he was engaged in diplomatic manoeuvres with regimes that have come to power with the express purpose of thwarting the revolutionary movements that led to the downfall of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak.

On September 6 Tunisia's interim Prime Minister Caid Essebsi declared that the country was in a "crisis" and that the ban on protests would be more strictly enforced against continuing unrest. Erdogan's trip to Egypt took place against a background of a new wave of strikes and protests against the US-backed military junta.

In Libya Erdogan was giving his stamp of approval to a corrupt regime, installed not by "revolution" but by the Western powers through military force—with the intention of allowing the unfettered exploitation of oil resources by the major corporations.

Erdogan primarily wants a piece of the action for Turkey through extending its commercial, political and military ties with the region's ruling elites.

He was accompanied by just six cabinet ministers but some 200 businessmen. Turkey is now the world's fastest growing economy, growing at 10.2 percent, faster even than China's 9.6 percent, in the first six months of this year.

Having more than tripled in size since 2002, when Erdogan's Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power, Turkey has become the 17th largest economy in the world and the sixth largest in Europe. In 2010, \$30 billion, or 27 percent of Turkey's exports, went to the Middle East and North Africa.

Though Turkey is considered a NATO ally, his trip set off alarm

bells. British Prime Minister David Cameron and French President Nicholas Sarkozy responded by making their own "surprise" trip to Libya just one day before the Turkish leader was due to arrive in Tripoli. They were determined to pre-empt Turkey in the fierce competition for political influence, strategic position and profits.

Erdogan began his North African trip in Egypt, the first visit by a Turkish prime minister in 15 years. It came just days after his government's public fallout with Israel, with which it has previously had close military and political relations. Erdogan has sought to raise his popularity in the region through professing opposition to Israel and support for the Palestinians. His trip took on an additional incendiary character when he announced that he intended to cross into Gaza from Egypt, a move that would antagonise both Egypt and Israel's rulers.

Erdogan has sought to broker a deal between the Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority which controls the West Bank, and Hamas, the militant Islamist group that controls Gaza, inviting Fatah's Mahmoud Abbas and Khaled Mashaal of Hamas to Istanbul.

Israel has refused to apologise or pay compensation for killing nine Turkish citizens during a murderous attack on the Turkish-flagged Mavi Marmora, part of a Gaza-bound aid flotilla in May 2010. Ankara's response was to expel Israel's ambassador to Turkey, downgrade its diplomatic ties to the lowest possible level, suspend military ties and terminate its defence contracts with Israel. Erdogan warned that Turkey would increase its naval presence in the eastern Mediterranean and intervene militarily to support any future aid flotillas bound for Gaza.

His opposition to Israel's illegal and inhuman blockade of Gaza served to highlight Egypt's role in enforcing the blockade and its decades' long support for Israel's brutal suppression of the Palestinians. While Egypt's military junta has eased some of the restrictions on its border with Gaza, it has insisted that the 1979 Camp David Accords remain the basis for its relations with Israel, despite popular opposition to the treaty and Israel's flagrant breach of the agreement.

But Egypt too, faced with rising domestic political opposition, is anxious to appear supportive of the Palestinians. Essam Sharaf,

Egypt's prime minister, told a Turkish television channel last week that the deal was "not a sacred thing and is always open to discussion." Last month, Israel's security forces crossed into Egyptian territory in pursuit of terrorists who had killed eight Israelis in three separate incidents near Eilat, and killed five Egyptian security personnel, with another dying later in hospital. Last week, angry demonstrators stormed the Israeli embassy in Cairo, demanding its closure.

Erdogan addressed a meeting of the Arab League in Cairo and called on its members to back the Palestinian bid for statehood on the land captured by Israel in the 1967 war, at the United Nations this week. He said, "It is not a choice but an obligation".

Erdogan's other political weapon for projecting Turkey's influence abroad is his brand of Islamism as a means of securing popular support while not overly alarming the major powers. He is touting his "moderate" Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP)—a keen supporter of the capitalist free market—as a model for the opposition movements in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya.

In doing so, he also seeks to promote illusions in the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Ennadha in Tunisia in an attempt to contain the opposition to the dictatorships in the two countries. It is expected that the Islamists, as the only political forces that are well funded and organised, will do well in the promised elections in both countries.

He told Egypt's TV channel Dream, "Do not be wary of secularism. I hope there will be a secular state in Egypt," a reference to Turkey's secular constitution.

Muslim Brotherhood spokesman Dr Essam el-Erian said, "It is good for him to come here, as he is one of the most eminent leaders in the region... There is vacuum now in the region. And Turkey is playing an important role."

Erdogan pointed out that Turkish investment in Egypt had increased from \$60 million to \$1.5 billion in the last five years, with some 250 companies investing in Egypt, and said, "Turkish businessmen can make deals in Africa with the support of Egypt and Egyptian businessmen can make deals in the Balkans and Asia with the support of Turkey."

He called for "Egypt to become a part of the Nabucco project," a reference to the Turkey-Austria project, backed by the US and European Union to bring gas from Iraq, with the cooperation of Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan, to Europe, lessening Europe's dependence on Russia.

Turkey's energy minister Taner Yildiz signed a memorandum of cooperation with Egypt in the energy sector to explore for oil and gas in the eastern Mediterranean, and to work together on a plan for electricity interconnection between all the countries of the eastern and southern Mediterranean.

In Tunisia, Erdogan reiterated his anti-Israel rhetoric, saying, "Israel cannot do as it pleases in the Mediterranean", while insisting that "Islam and democracy are not contradictory." "A Muslim can run a state very successfully," he added. "The success of the electoral process in Tunisia will show the world that democracy and Islam can go together," referring to the Islamist party Ennadha.

In Tripoli, Erdogan attended Friday prayers in Martyrs' Square, where he was greeted by the chairman of the National Transitional Council and US stooge, Mustafa Abdul Jalil. Erdogan declared that "the era of repressive regimes has ended."

Turkey had initially been opposed to both sanctions and the NATO-led invasion, and only called on Muammar Gaddafi to go in May. Prior to the eruption of civil war in February, Turkish contractors were involved in 214 construction projects employing 20,000 Turkish workers and worth more than \$15 billion, which Erdogan is now keen to secure. Yildiz said that he wanted Turkey's oil and gas company TPAO to resume oil exploration and production in Libya as soon as security was re-established.

Turkey's bid for regional influence and its upending of the existing order extends to Cyprus. Ankara has challenged Cyprus' plan to explore gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean, which border Israeli waters where significant gas deposits have been discovered. It has warned that Turkey would intervene militarily if drilling goes ahead without ensuring the Turkish Cypriot bourgeoisie's share of the proceeds.

In relation to Syria, Erdogan has become increasingly hostile towards the Bashar Assad regime. He followed up Sarkozy's warning that after Libya, France's next "humanitarian mission" would be Syria, declaring that "Those who oppress the people of Syria" should realise their time was past.

In its efforts to secure the corporate interests of the Turkish bourgeoisie, Ankara does not want to jeopardise its strategic relationship with Washington or the regional powers. Hence, Erdogan did not go to Gaza, claiming in a television interview at the end of his visit that he preferred to go with Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas leader Ismail Haniya. Likewise, Turkey has agreed to host the proposed NATO nuclear shield, a project aimed against Iran, despite Ankara's closer relations with Tehran in recent years and the \$10 billion annual trade between the two countries.



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