

## STRATEGIC INTERESTS OF THE REPUBLIC OF TURKEY IN THE REGION OF THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

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The coming to power in the Republic of Turkey of Prime Minister and later President Recep Tayyip Erdogan led to a change in the ideological foundation of the state, the rejection of the ideology of Kemalism and the transition to the ideology of neo-Ottomanism with an active foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa. The strengthening of Erdogan's power contributed to a change in Turkey's foreign policy and the development of external relations with the Islamic worlds and, first of all, with the Arab countries. The neo-Ottoman ideology has become a key element in Turkey's foreign policy strategy in the Arab region. Prerequisites for changing the foreign policy of the Republic of Turkey in the Middle East and North Africa are complex. After the political party Justice and Development came to power, it led to the desire for neo-Ottoman revanchism and the rejection of the "zero problems with neighbors" political vector. Also, through various reforms, the leader of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, managed to neutralize the political opposition and the Turkish military, who historically were the external arbiters of Turkish political life. The strengthening of Erdogan's political position inside Turkey allowed him to change the external political course of his country. After the start of a series of revolutions in the Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa, Turkey felt that it could regain in this region the lost political and economic positions that it had lost after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. After that, Turkey began to position itself as an important military, political and economic player in the region, competing with such countries as Israel, Egypt, Iran and Saudi Arabia. This vector of development of Turkey's foreign policy showed that the country no longer seeks to pursue a policy close to the interests of the United States and the European Union, and began to distance itself from the Western world, becoming the dominant political and military player in the Middle East, North Africa and other regions. This trend showed that the Republic of Turkey has already declared itself as a regional power that other political players need to reckon with.

**Key words:** Republic of Turkey, Middle East, Ottoman Empire, Levant, Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

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**Introduction.** The modern Turkish Republic, under the rule of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has set a course to restore its influence in the Middle East and North Africa. Once these territories were part of the Ottoman Empire. Today, Turkey uses various mechanisms such as politics, economics and military power to gain control over these territories.

**Analysis of recent research and publications on this topic.** This topic has been explored by scholars such as P. Carley, M. Akgun, G. Percinoglu, M. B. Altunsik, E. Y. Satanovsky, H. Kissinger, A.A. Khudoliy, R. Abdulin, D. O. Nikolaeva etc.

**The aim of scientific article** is to study of the modern policy of the Republic of Turkey in the Middle East and North Africa. Such aspects as Turkey's relations with Syria, Iraq and Libya after the Arab Spring are being explored.

**Presentation of main material of the study.** The Republic of Turkey has important strategic interests in the Levant region and Mesopotamia. These regions were part of the Ottoman Empire until 1921. The Republic of Turkey shares a 900 km border with the Syrian Arab Republic. During the Cold War, Syria, being a satellite state of the Soviet Union, claimed regional leadership. After the Arab Spring and the change in the balance of power in the Middle East, in the first decade, the conflict between Turkey and Syria acquired particular urgency and entered into a state of prolonged crisis. This conflict is based on regional rivalry between countries, Turkey's ambitions to expand its territories, the struggle for water resources,

different views on the formation of a regional security system, the issue of Syrian refugees and a number of other important problems.

After the start of the civil war in Syria in 2011 and the war with the terrorist organization ISIS, Turkish intervention in Syrian events was not significant and continued until 2016. Turkey all these years called for the departure of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, helped the Free Syrian Army (opposition), and assisted the anti-terrorist coalition led by the United States. In 2016, after a failed military coup in Turkey, Erdogan began to act more independently of his Western partners in relation to his southern neighbor. After the terrorist attack on the border of Gaziantep, Turkey launched its own military campaign against the armed forces of ISIS and the Syrian Kurds, called the Shield of the Euphrates. To start this military operation, Turkey took advantage of the fifty-first Article of the Charter of the United Nations, which gives the right to self-defense.

Operation Euphrates Shield was the desire of the Turkish political elite to solve the "Kurdish question" and regain control over the former territories of the Ottoman Empire. Despite the tripartite format of negotiations between Turkey and Syria in Astana, the Republic of Turkey continued to periodically conduct military operations in northern Syria under the pretext of providing its own bladeless one. Realizing the fact that the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran will support Syria on a permanent basis, Turkey will not be able to completely take control of its entire territory, and will be forced to concentrate its military operations in the Kurdish enclaves (Yeşiltaş and Seren and Özçelik, 2017).

The main idea pursued by Erdogan in Syria is the realization of neo-imperial ambitions related to the territorial expansion of Turkey and control over the oil-bearing provinces. For this purpose, the Turkish army carried out military operations such as: "Shield of the Euphrates" in 2016, "Olive Branch" in 2018, "Source of Peace" in 2019 and "Spring Shield" in 2020. For Turkey, an important task is to exclude a competitor for dominance in the region, which is Syria (Аватков, 2020).

Another region of strategic interest to Ankara is Iraqi Kurdistan. Relations between Iraq and Turkey in the 80s and 90s almost came to naught. On the one hand, Turkey was accumulating strength and developing its economic potential, on the other hand, Iraq, under the leadership of President Saddam Hussein, sought to take the place of a regional leader in the Middle East by military means. During this historical period, Iraq waged an eight-year bloody war with Iran, and then with Kuwait.

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003, under the pretext of destroying chemical weapons allegedly produced in the country, and its subsequent occupation until 2011, sparked a civil war in neighboring Syria. Thus, Iraq and Syria weakened and, in fact, opened the way for Turkey to lead the region. The course towards regional leadership fully corresponded to the concept of the neo-Ottoman theory of A. Davutoglu, the founder of the idea of the foreign policy revival of the Turkish Empire.

Since that moment, relations between Turkey and Iraq began to develop rapidly, especially after the withdrawal of the main military contingent of the American armed forces from Iraq.

In the nineties of the last century, Turkey used its armed forces to fight against the "Kurdish Workers' Party", which was based in northern Iraq. The Turkish elite believe that the Kurds pose a threat to the integrity of Turkey.

After the Justice and Development Party came to power in Turkey, the country's leadership began to use soft power in relation to Iraq and to Iraqi Kurdistan, in particular. Turkey's influence on Iraq in recent years has become more significant than the influence of the US and Iran on this country. For example, the rivalry between Turkey and Iran in terms of exports of industrial goods, technical services and participation in investment projects to Iraq is on Turkey's side.

In 2020, at a joint press conference with the Prime Minister of Iraq, Turkish President Erdogan noted that: *"We regard all... the Iraqi people as our brothers regardless of creed or ethnicity, and we are able to achieve the goal of increasing bilateral trade to 20 billion dollars a year... By repairing the pipeline that destroyed ISIS, we hope to pump more Kirkuk oil to world markets... The water issue should be a cause for cooperation, not a cause for conflict."* He also added that Iraq and Turkey have the same enemies, they are different terrorist and separatist organizations such as PKK and ISIS. It was also noted that Turkey is showing interest in the Kirkuk-Ceyhan oil pipeline, which supplies oil to Turkey (Alhas and Sevencan, 2020).

The manifestation of soft and hard forces in the promotion of the geopolitical foreign policy of the Republic of Turkey is part of the country's regional strategy.

Turkey is interested in neighboring Iraq from the point of view of an importer of Turkish goods and an exporter of energy resources, which are sorely lacking in Turkey. With the help of Iraq, as well as Azerbaijan, Turkey ensures its energy security. Ankara and Baghdad are finding common ground on the issue of Iraqi Kurdistan, which is an autonomy within Iraq. In this regard, Turkey is interested in resolving the Kurdish issue and wants to get free access to gas fields in northern Iraq. It also seeks to broker Iraqi oil and gas supplies to the European Union, which needs alternative energy exporters to reduce its dependence on Russian gas and oil. The implementation of energy transportation projects to Europe will allow Turkey to gain leverage over the European Union.

As part of Turkey's political expansion towards Iraq, Turkey has helped form and unify a significant number of Iraqi political entities.

In 1995, Turkey created the Turkmen Bloc party in the city of Erbil from the Turkmen minority to oppose Kurdish political parties in northern Iraq. Since then, the Turkmen Bloc party has been used by Turkey to politically fight the Kurdish parties in Iraqi Kurdistan. Also, in 2015, Turkey, without the consent of Baghdad and Washington, under the pretext of fighting ISIS, created armed detachments of Iraqi Sunnis in the city of Bashika, located on the Ninivei plain. In reality, these units carried out punitive operations against the Iraqi Kurds. After the political purges of the Iraqi government in 2003, and the removal of the Sunnis after 20 years of government, Erdogan was able to unite the Sunnis under his banner. Today, the Sunni bloc, which is in the Iraqi parliament, is completely controlled by Turkey (Isamel, 2022).

All these factors indicate that Turkey's influence in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan, in particular, will only increase, primarily due to the lack of unity in the Arab world. In this sense, Turkey is interested in taking on the role of leader of the Islamic world.

A series of coups d'état under the general name "Arab Spring", followed by political and economic crises and civil wars, changed the balance of power in the Middle East and North Africa. Political upheavals in the region have created a power vacuum in many Arab countries. Separately, from the crisis of the "Arab Spring", Libya stands out, for which the consequences of the uprisings of ethnic groups in the struggle for power, the violent overthrow and assassination of the country's president, Colonel Gaddafi, led the once successful unitary country into a state of political and economic chaos and tribal fragmentation.

In the world economy, Libya is of interest as a region with large reserves of oil and gas resources, and its geopolitical position deserves attention as a strategic point between Europe and Africa. Under these conditions, the United States, Russia and Turkey began to actively show interest in Libya. Turkey has shown particular interest in Libya.

At the moment, Turkey, led by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, claims to be the leader of the Islamic world. The power vacuum in Libya and the weakening of some Arab states that survived the Arab Spring, and the civil wars that followed, became a condition for the active use of economic and military potential in the implementation of the neo-Ottomanism concept, that is, the restoration of Turkish influence in the regions of the Arab East.

In the spring of 2019, hostilities resumed in Libya. The commander of the Libyan National Army, Caliph Haftar launched an offensive against the capital Tripoli. In this situation, Turkey stepped up its military-political actions and, already on November 27 of the same year, Ankara and Tripoli signed a memorandum on the demarcation of maritime borders and military cooperation between the two countries. This document opened a corridor of 16 nautical miles from southwest Turkey to northeast Libya, declaring them the exclusive economic zone of these countries. In return, Turkey committed itself to protecting the interests of Tripoli. Greek rights to these maritime territories were ignored.

Thus, an operation was launched with the main tactical goal – to put an end to the eight-month attack on Tripoli by the opposition General Caliph Haftar (Saleh, 2019).

By the end of spring 2020, Turkish-backed forces joined the Tripoli government and pushed Haftar's main brigades out of northwest Libya (Harchaoui, 2020).

The main tasks pursued by Ankara in Libya are similar to its actions in Syria and Iraq. Access to energy resources and the establishment of a loyal regime in the interests of one's country should be considered elements of the implementation of the concept of neo-Ottomanism.

**Conclusion.** Today, the ideology of neo-Ottomanism serves as a narrative for the unification and mobilization of Turkish society. With its foreign policy, Turkey intends to solve several important tasks. The first task is to try to take the place of the leader of the Islamic world due to the Islamization of the country. The second task is the organization of the country's energy security, as an essential condition for the stability and development of the Turkish economy. The solution of these tasks Turkey conducts military operations in Libya, Syria and Iraq, that is, in places where there are oil and gas fields. In addition, Turkey is actively developing cooperation with Baku to gain access to the oil fields of Azerbaijan. The third task is to build a security system in the region after a series of civil wars in the Arab countries.

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## **Петряєв О. Стратегічні інтереси Турецької Республіки в регіоні Близького Сходу та Північної Африки**

Прихід до влади в Турецькій Республіці прем'єр міністра, а пізніше президента Реджепа Тайіпа Ердогана, призвело до зміни ідеологічного фундаменту держави, відмови від ідеології кемалізму та перехід до ідеології неоосманізму з активною зовнішньою політикою на Близькому Сході та Північній Африці. Посилення влади Ердогана сприяло зміні зовнішньої політики Туреччини та

розвитку зовнішніх відносин з ісламським світом і в першу чергу з арабськими країнами. Ідеологія неоосманізму стала ключовим елементом у стратегії зовнішньої політики Туреччини в арабському регіоні. Передумови зміни зовнішньої політики Турецької республіки на Близькому сході і Північній Африці носить комплексний характер. Після приходу до влади політичної партії Справедливість та Розвиток призвело до бажання неоосманського реваншизму та відмови від політичного вектора "нуль проблем із сусідами". Також шляхом різних реформ, лідеру Туреччини, Реджепу Ердогану вдалося нейтралізувати політичну опозицію та турецьких військових, які історично були зовнішніми арбітрами турецького політичного життя. Зміцнення політичної позиції Ердогана всередині Туреччини дозволило йому змінити зовнішній політичний курс своєї країни. Після початку низки революцій в арабських країнах Близького Сходу та Північної Африки, Туреччина відчула, що може повернути в цьому регіоні втрачені політичні та економічні позиції, які вона втратила після падіння Османської імперії. Після цього Туреччина стала позиціонувати себе як важливого військового, політичного та економічного гравця в регіоні, суперничаючи з такими країнами як Ізраїль, Єгипет, Іран та Саудівська Аравія. Такий вектор розвитку зовнішньої політики Туреччини показав, що країна вже не прагне вести політику близьку до інтересів США та Європейського Союзу, і стала дистанціюватися від західного світу, стаючи домінуючим політичним та військовим гравцем на Близькому Сході, Північній Африці та інших регіонах. Ця тенденція показала, що Турецька Республіка вже заявила про себе як про регіональну державу, з якою іншим політичним гравцям слід рахуватися.

**Ключові слова:** Турецька Республіка, Близький схід, Османська імперія, Левант, Реджеп Тайїп Ердоган.

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