



By Nigar Göksel, Project Director, Turkey

Turkey's Siege Mentality

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is shaping a narrative of a country under siege, a victim of Western powers both in history and in today's Syrian war. While this rhetoric is popular, a broader platform is needed to bridge sharp divisions in society and mend relations with longstanding Euro-Atlantic allies.

The streets of the Dardanelles port of Çanakkale were packed with people in a jubilant mood. Beyond the centuries-old forts guarding the strait, Turkish warships rode at anchor on the horizon. Turkish flags of every shape and size waved madly in a wind so strong that the naval manoeuvres and air force fly-bys had to be cancelled.

It was 18 March, Çanakkale Victory and Martyrs Day, when Turkey celebrates the anniversary of the British and French navies' defeat in their 1915 attempt to force their way to Istanbul, then capital of the Ottoman Empire. On the same day, Turkey also honours the Ottoman soldiers who lost their lives as they beat back Allied forces in the Gallipoli campaign that began on 25 April 1915.

A previous generation used 18 March mainly to celebrate the memory of Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the republic who made his name as an Ottoman officer defending the heights overlooking the strait. But in today's Turkey, everything, especially history, is now pressed into the cause of popular support for the policies of the hour. President Recep Tayyip

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Erdoğan himself appeared in Çanakkale to underline the message of a nation under siege.

On all television channels and social media, he could be seen and heard announcing a new victory, this time the capture of the Syrian town of Afrin, taken over by the Free Syrian Army (FSA) with the support of the Turkish military. Images showed bearded FSA men entering Afrin's centre and residents – among whom men of fighting age were notably absent – tossing rice from roofs and balconies. In the footage, Afrin's people cheered the removal of banners of Syrian affiliates of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), an insurgent group with which Turkey has been engaged in a three-decade long struggle.

“What happened in Çanakkale is happening in Afrin. Just like we defeated those who were poised to celebrate their victory in Çanakkale, so have we defeated those who thought they were establishing a corridor of terror on our borders”, President Erdoğan told the crowds. “The wave of terror against Turkey is nothing other than an effort to revive the Çanakkale campaign a century later”.

By “wave of terror”, the president meant not just the PKK and its affiliates – but something else as well. Into his narrative of a country under attack Erdoğan wove the failed coup attempt against him in July 2016, apparently mounted by loyalists of Islamist preacher and



President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan places cloths during a ceremony at Canakkale Martyrs' Memorial in Gallipoli Peninsula to mark the 103rd anniversary of the Canakkale Land Battles in Canakkale, Turkey, on 18 March 2018. Source: Anadolu Agency/Kayhan Ozer.

former ally of the ruling AK Party, Fethullah Gülen, based in the U.S. and labelled “FETO” by Ankara. “Turkish people who rose against the coup forces to protect their country acted in a similar spirit as their forebears did a century earlier”, the president said.

In the park and on the waterfront in Çanakkale, the multitudes rejoiced. They recited the anthems they have known by heart since primary school, sometimes swapping Erdoğan’s name for Atatürk’s and Afrin for Çanakkale.

The overarching narrative the government has persuaded society to adopt is straightforward. Just as the states that won World War I were stymied by the Turkish war of independence, those same Western powers, the PKK and “FETO” will be foiled by the “new Turkey” that Erdoğan says he is building. And perhaps because this siege mentality was present under Erdoğan’s predecessors, the secularist parties that ruled Turkey, no one seems to notice the logical disconnect: these supposedly perfidious Western powers are Turkey’s allies in the North

Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), as well as being its leading economic partners.

President Erdoğan is not alone in promoting this picture of an outside world ranged against Turkey. It was fully endorsed by the head of the right-wing Nationalist Action Party (MHP), Devlet Bahçeli, who was re-elected chairman at a party congress not coincidentally held on 18 March. It was Bahçeli who after the June 2015 parliamentary elections called for repeat elections rather than form a coalition with the secularist main opposition party, the Republican People’s Party (CHP), and the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), which had done surprisingly well at the polls. The MHP head told the congress he approves of the greatly enhanced executive powers that Erdoğan won in the referendum in April 2017: “Tayyip Erdoğan was globally encircled, and we could not escape responsibility”.

The apparent unity leaves out large segments of society, however. The MHP welcomed members of other parties, but did not invite

HDP, CHP or conservative secularist İyi Parti representatives to the congress, breaking with a Turkish tradition whereby opponents are welcome at such events. Together, these three parties represent up to 40 percent of the population. The mayor of Çanakkale, a CHP member, did not attend the grand Çanakkale ceremony on 18 March because Erdoğan had ordered that he be barred from speaking. Notably, this mayor had won 54.5 percent of the vote in the 2014 local elections.

When I asked passersby in Çanakkale about Erdoğan's intertwining of party politics, the Afrin operation and past martial triumphs, few really answered me. Some basked in his rhetoric of national pride. Others were reluctant to say anything. After all, courts have jailed more than 70 journalists in Turkey, and police have started judicial proceedings against hundreds of social media users who posted criticism of the Turkish campaign in Syria. I recalled the words of a journalist friend told me last week when she returned from Hatay across the border from Afrin: "People are now even scared of commenting about the price of tomatoes". Still,

some in Çanakkale told me they cringed while watching television coverage of the behaviour of FSA fighters in Afrin because they were "shooting in the air like thugs", or "looking like jihadists" as they chanted "Allahu akbar" ("God is great"). "Our glorious army should not be in the same ranks as these people", one person said.

Whether ideologically aligned with the ruling elite or not, nearly everyone is pleased by the leaps forward in infrastructure that have been the strong suit of Erdoğan's party. On 18 March 2017, Erdoğan held a signing ceremony for what will be the longest suspension bridge in the world, the Çanakkale 1915 Bridge across the Dardanelles Strait. This year on 18 March he announced that construction would be finished eighteen months ahead of schedule, on 18 March 2022, a year before the centennial of the Republic of Turkey. This bridge is one of many improvements that shorten distances for those headed from Istanbul to Turkey's Aegean and Mediterranean towns.

The happy crowds that gathered in Çanakkale to celebrate the heroic victory of 1915 are a



Young people on the Dardanelles Strait seafront celebrate Turkey's First World War victory over the British and French navies on 18 March 1915. Turkish Navy ships can be seen in the background. Çanakkale, Turkey, 18 March 2018. CRISIS GROUP/Nigar Göksel

reminder that many Turks are content enough with the current state of affairs, be it for material or ideological reasons. Indeed, Erdoğan seems unlikely to lose soon to opposition politicians who have little in common beyond personal dislike for him. Still, around half the society is aggrieved by his heavy-handed governance.

Some of those countries that besieged the Dardanelles Strait a century ago and are

framed as “enemies” by today’s narrative have been Turkey’s allies for the past six decades, and share strong interest in the country’s stability, democracy and prosperity. While the critics of Ankara’s political leadership need to recognise that Erdoğan still enjoys considerable domestic support, there is also a good case for Turkey’s leadership to adopt a more inclusive platform – both internally and externally – for what is likely to be many more years of rule.

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