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Is Erdogan out to undo the Treaty of Lausanne?

For someone as ambitious as Erdogan, the presidency may not be enough.

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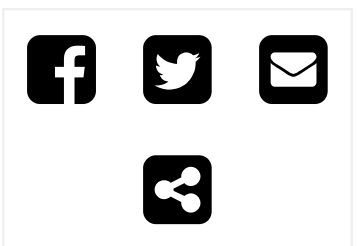
Not enough. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan speaks during a news conference at the Cankaya Palace in Ankara, March 18. (AFP)

To say that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is power hungry would be a gross understatement.

It's been nearly two decades since Erdogan rose to power, initially as prime minister in 2002 and then as president after amending the country's constitution to give the mostly ceremonial role of the Turkish



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Erdoğan as mayor of Istanbul (1) from where he propelled

himself onto the national stage and was elected to the country's top job.

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However, for someone as ambitious as Erdoğan, the presidency may not be enough. His ego demands more, much more. Some say he would like to be considered leader of the Arab world in the absence of any charismatic Arab leader. If leading the Arabs is unlikely to become a reality, he is likely to set his sights on leading the Muslim world.

There is little doubt Erdoğan aspires to becoming the man who returns Turkey to its glory of yesteryear. He wants to reach the top of the charts of Turkey's politicians. From where he sits today, Erdoğan has only one politician whose star shines brighter than his and that is Mustafa Kemal, aka Atatürk.

The problem for Erdoğan is that Atatürk is more than a national hero. He is revered almost as a saint. A strange analogy for a man who introduced "laicite" to Turkey, that is the separation of religion and state.

Surpassing Atatürk's accomplishments is no simple task. Erdoğan is aware that to reach such a position he would need to accomplish deeds that even the great Atatürk could not. Still, Erdoğan is confident that he has two aces up his sleeve. The first is religion.

Whereas Atatürk sought to remove religion from politics, Erdoğan is trying to manipulate politics with religion. While his attempts to return Islam as religion

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The Kemalists stood for, Erdogan believes he can use

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Islam as a weapon to win greater support. Indeed, the more he consolidates power the more he seems to rely on his Islamist base.

Second is the question of land, land that the Ottoman Empire lost to its neighbours through the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. The treaty was to outline the boundaries of the modern Turkish state after the demise of the Ottoman Empire.

Under that agreement Turkey was to return to its neighbours lands that the Ottomans had taken, often under the excuse that ethnic Turks were in peril and that they went in to protect the minorities. What the Turks omitted to mention is that, once in the territory, they carried out ethnic cleansing, moving populations, destroying homes and businesses and even tearing up cemeteries.

Does Erdogan wish to revisit the Treaty of Lausanne? There are some who say that is exactly what he hopes to accomplish. That, in his mind, there can be no greater accomplishment than to expand Turkey.

The Treaty of Lausanne set out to establish the permanent borders between post-Ottoman Turkey and its neighbours. De-establishing the framework of treaties takes time and cannot be achieved overnight, unless Turkey is prepared to go to war, as it did in Cyprus in 1973.

In December 2017 he suggested that "some details"

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in the Treaty of Lausanne were "unclear" and that they may need to be revisited. He had maps shown on Turkish television with the current borders extending beyond where they should be into Greece, Bulgaria, Armenia, Iraq and Syria. Certainly, a detail that would not elude the governments in Athens, Sophia, Yerevan, Baghdad and Damascus.

Reclaiming contested territories demands tact, patience and, most of all, diplomacy.

Another worrying sign of Erdogan's expansionist policy is the way Turkey has acted in Syria. Erdogan saw an opportunity to send troops into Syrian territory and jumped at the chance, knowing that once Turkish forces were in Syrian territory it would become very difficult to extract them amid the chaos of war.



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