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To Washington, Turkey's Prime Minister Erdogan Has Gone Off the Reservation

By Conn Hallinan
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The current corruption crisis zeroing in on Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has all the elements of one of his country's famous soap operas that tens of millions of people all over the Middle East tune in to each day: bribes, shoe boxes filled with millions in cash, and dark whispers of foreign conspiracies.

As prosecutors began arresting leading government officials and businessmen, the Prime Minister claims that some foreign "ambassadors are engaging in provocative actions," singling out U.S. Ambassador Frank Ricciardone. The international press has largely dismissed Erdogan's charges as a combination of paranoia and desperation, but might the man have a point?

The corruption story is generally being portrayed as a result of a falling out between Erdogan's conservative brand of Islam and the Gulen Community, a more moderate version championed by the Islamic spiritual leader Fethullah Gulen, who currently resides in Pennsylvania. Both are Sunnis. More than a decade ago the two men formed a united front against the Turkish military that eventually drove the generals back to the barracks and elected Erdogan's Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002.

There are differences between the two currents of Turkish political Islam. Erdogan's brand comes out of the "National Outlook" tradition that tends to be suspicious of the West and

democracy, cool to wide-open free market capitalism, and more socially conservative. Erdogan has recently told Turkish women how many children they should have—three—and railed against abortion, adultery, coed housing, public kissing, and alcohol. The AKP is also closely allied with the Muslim Brotherhood, and Erdogan was a strong supporter of the Brotherhood government in Egypt that was overthrown by a military coup this past July.

In contrast, Gulen's brand of Islam is pro-West, strongly in favor of a free market, and socially flexible. Gulen supporters were active in last summer's demonstrations against Erdogan, although their commitment to democracy is suspect. For instance, Gulen has a more hard-line nationalist approach to the Kurds, Turkey's largest ethnic minority, and only recently began challenging the AKP's authoritarian streak.

Gulen was also critical of Erdogan for breaking relations with Israel following the 2010 Mavi Marmara incident, when Israeli commandos killed eight Turks and a Turkish-American trying to deliver aid to the Palestinians in Gaza. Gulen accused Erdogan of provoking the clash.

The current falling out came to a head when Erdogan proposed closing down one of the Gulen Community's major sources of financing, the "dershanes" or tutorial schools that prepare Turkish students to take exams. The Community has expanded such schools to over 140 countries, including the U.S. The schools also serve as effective recruiting conduits for his movement. The Russians recently closed down the schools, accusing them of being fronts for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

Gulen called the move against the dershanes a "dagger stabbed in our hearts."

But the timing of the corruption investigations suggests this is more about regional politics—with global ramifications—than a spat over influential schools and interpretations of Islam.

Erdogan's supporters charge that the investigation is coming from Gulen-dominated prosecutors and judges, and that it is little more than a power play aimed at bringing down the Prime Minister and damaging the AKT on the eve of local elections scheduled for March. "It is clear that I am the real target," Erdogan told the media.

Gulen supporters counter that corruption is widespread, and that the Erdogan government has alienated former allies throughout the region.

There is certainly truth in that charge. From a former policy of "zero problems with the neighbors" Turkey finds itself embroiled in the Syrian civil war, and feuding with Israel, Egypt, Iraq, and Iran. Even what looked like a breakthrough peace accord with the Kurds appears to be turning sour.

But this past fall, the Erdogan government began reversing course and patching up relations with the locals.

Turkey and Iran jointly agreed that there was “no military solution” to the war in Syria, and Ankara expelled Saudi Arabian intelligence agents, who it had accused of aiding the more extremist elements fighting the government of Bashar al-Assad.

Turkey also buried the hatchet with Iraq. Instead of setting up a separate oil and gas deal with the Kurds in Northern Iraq, Ankara has agreed to work through the central government in Baghdad and is pushing to increase cross-border trade between the two countries. Of course much of this is practical: Turkey needs energy and Iran and Iraq can provide it more cheaply than anyone else.

These recent policy turnarounds make the timing of the corruption charges suspicious. For two years Erdogan’s government has played spear carrier for the U.S. and its allies in Syria and courted the reactionary Gulf Cooperation Council. The latter consists of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, The United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and newcomers Jordan and Morocco.

But the Syrian civil war has not gone as planned, and, despite predictions that Assad would quickly fall, his government is hanging on. It is the forces fighting him that are spinning out of control. Ankara’s allies in the Gulf—in particular Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—are funding Islamic extremists fighting in Syria, who are turning the war into Sunnis Vs. Shiites. The Assad government is dominated by the Alawites, an offshoot of Shiite Islam. Those groups are now also destabilizing Lebanon and Iraq by attacking Shiite communities in both countries. Most these extremists are contemptuous of Turkey’s Islamic government.

From the U.S. point of view, Turkey is no longer a completely reliable ally. It is quarreling with Israel, Washington’s number one friend in the region. It has fallen out with Saudi Arabia and most of the GCC—the new government in Qatar is an exception—and has essentially broken off relations with the U.S.-supported military government in Egypt. Most of all, it is developing ties with Iran, and both countries are suddenly issuing joint communiqués calling for a diplomatic resolution to the Syrian civil war.

Rather than joining in the newly forged Saudi-Israeli-Egypt alliance against Iran, Turkey is feuding with all three countries and breaking bread with Shiia-dominated governments in Teheran and Damascus.

In short, from Washington’s point of view, Erdogan has gone off the reservation.

Seen from this perspective, Erdogan’s suspicions do not seem all that bizarre. Despite denials that the U.S. and its allies are not involved, and that the corruption issues is entirely an internal Turkish affair, Washington and its allies do have a dog in this fight.

For instance, one target of the corruption probe is Halkbank, which does business with Iran. “We asked Halkbank to cut its links with Iran,” U.S. Ambassador Ricciardone reportedly told European Union (EU) ambassadors. “They did not listen to us.” Did the U.S. influence Turkish prosecutors to single out Halkbank?

If Erdogan falls and the Gulen forces take over, it is almost certain that Turkey will re-align itself in the region. If that happens, expect Ankara to patch up its fight with Tel Aviv and Cairo, chill

relations with Iran, and maybe even go silent on a diplomatic solution in Syria. The free-market section of the Turkish economy will expand, and Western investments will increase. And the current roadblocks in the way of Turkey's membership in the EU may vanish.

Whether this will be good for Turkey or the region is another matter. The Gulf monarchies are not nearly as stable as they look. The military government in Egypt will always be haunted by the ghost of the Arab Spring. Israel's continued settlement building is gradually turning it into an international pariah. And, in the end, the West does not really care about democracy, as the U.S.'s endorsement of the military coup in Egypt made clear.

Erdogan's political instincts seem to have deserted him. His brutal suppression of last summer's demonstrations polarized the country, and his response to the corruption investigations has been to fire or reassign hundreds of police and prosecutors. He has also gone after the media. Turkey has jailed more journalists than Iran and China combined.

There is little doubt but that the Prime Minister has played fast and loose with zoning laws and environmental regulations in order to allow his allies in the construction industry to go on a tear. But Erdogan hardly invented corruption, and the question about the investigations is, why now?

Maybe the charge that this Turkish corruption scandal is orchestrated is just paranoia, but, then, paranoids do have enemies.