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December 2, 2020



In 2018, Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani gifted Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan a Boeing 747-8. This aircraft is reportedly the world's largest and most expensive private jet, with an estimated value of around \$400 million. According to Turkey's state-run broadcaster, TRT, it was presented as a symbol of "Al Thani's special love for Erdogan".

One and a half years later, TC-ANA — a \$90 million VIP plane which was part of President Erdogan's VIP plane fleet — was given to the Albanian government, this time, most likely as a symbol of Erdogan's "special love" for Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama.

This was the second significant gift given to Rama by Erdogan, following the Namazgâh Mosque, whose four minarets tower over the Albanian Parliament next door. While it is the largest, it is not the only mosque built by Turkey in the Balkans. Turkey's highest religious authority, the Diyanet, is currently constructing a monumental mosque in Kosovo's capital of Pristina. The project continues to divide Kosovars, as they debate its sources of funding and the reasons why they would even need such a large place of worship.

Mosque diplomacy, as it has come to be called, has been used by Erdogan in the Middle East, Africa, and most recently, in the Balkans. Nonetheless, it seems as though Turkey's mosque diplomacy has run its course as it shifts its focus to (state-financed) aircraft diplomacy.

While symbolic, these grand gestures are directly tied to Turkey's expectations of the countries receiving its "gifts". In other words, it is using these instruments to smooth over its political differences with recipients and to win over governments whose strategic interests may conflict with those of Turkey. With time, it seems that these innovative and prioritized approaches to public diplomacy have all but failed as foreign policy instruments intended to influence the Balkans. So then, what are the end-results of these million-dollar efforts to exert Turkey's "soft power"?

Recently, the Turkish Ministry for Foreign Affairs expressed its disappointment over Kosovo's decision to recognize Israel and establish its embassy in Jerusalem. Meanwhile Ankara remained silent to Tirana's endorsement of Greece's "inalienable sovereign right" to extend its territorial waters from 6 to 12 nautical miles in the Ionian Sea despite Turkey's announcement that any such extension would constitute a "cause for war". These two significant blows to Turkey's interests in the region go to show that Turkey's gifts may not have carried as much weight as Erdogan expected.

In normal times, or better said, in a normal country, disciplined foreign policy is built upon institutional channels and long-term strategic partnerships. Turkey, however, has opted for an overreliance on hollow gifts and gestures. Illustrative of Turkey's shock with regard to recent developments, it has remained dead-silent over Albania's statements on Greece's maritime rights and has expressed disappointment over Kosovo's decisions vis-à-vis Israel which reflects "its inalienable sovereign right" as Turkey is one of the first countries to recognise Kosovo's sovereignty.

Self-isolated as the result of its aggressive foreign policy and operating in what Erdogan's Chief Policy Adviser Ibrahim Kalin described as "precious loneliness", Turkey is now grasping at straws to find an ally. But the fact is that Turkey under Erdogan is not seen as a true partner for Balkan countries that want to consolidate their democratic values, strengthen Euro-Atlantic integration, bolster respect for human rights, and enhance their access to international trade.

With these larger trends in mind, it is plain to see why Albania, for example, would chose to side with EU member Greece, who has normalized its relations with its neighbours in the Balkans, over Turkey when it comes to rising tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Tirana, Skopje and Pristina are waiting for good news in the EU's waiting room to get the rewards for their democratic achievements. Ankara doesn't care about strengthening the rule of law where it builds mosques, organising mass circumcision events or gifts VIP planes. While Islamist bureaucrats laugh at democratic deficits, bureaucrats in Brussels closely monitor and regularly reproach.

This brings to mind a saying that is often heard around Tirana: "Erdogan thinks that by constructing mosques he will force the Balkans whatever he wishes to do. But the truth is: the direction of the Balkans is Europe in the West. The direction of Turkey is Russia in the East. The man who walks backward cannot lead the man who walks forward."

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