

Demetri Kofinas: 00:00 Today's episode of Hidden Forces is made possible by listeners like you. For more information about this week's episode or for easy access to related programming, visit our website at hiddenforces.io and subscribe to our free email list. If you listen to the show on your Apple podcast app, remember you can give us a review. Each review helps more people find the show and join our amazing community. And with that, please enjoy this week's episode.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:48 What's up, everybody. My guest on this episode of Hidden Forces is Soner Çağaptay. Soner is the director of the Turkish research program at the Washington Institute. He's written extensively on US-Turkish relations, Turkish domestic politics, and Turkish nationalism, and is the author of several books on Turkey, including his latest, "Erdoğan's Empire: Turkey, and the politics of the Middle East."

Demetri Kofinas: 01:16 This episode has been a long time coming. Those of you who heard the overtime to my episode with Peter Zeihan have already had a primer on Turkey and its unique geographical challenges and opportunities. But we've never actually dedicated an entire episode to studying this very important country, its politics, its economy, and its emerging role in the international order.

Demetri Kofinas: 01:42 Turkey's neighborhood is arguably ground zero for anyone interested in studying the effects of the breakdown of the American led international order. America and its Western allies have more or less kept the peace in this part of the world for the better half of the 20th century, but the misadventures in Iraq and Libya, along with the Obama administration's decision not to intervene in Syria and Trump's latest maneuvering of troops out of Rojava, have reinforced the view of regional players, including Russia, that the United States is no longer committed to providing a security guarantee to the region's most insecure countries.

Soner Çağaptay: 02:23 And to this point, Turkey has a lot to feel insecure about. To its south, it borders Iraq and Syria, two countries that remain highly politically fractures with large Kurdish populations. To the East, it borders its strategic regional competitor, Iran. To the North, across the black sea, sits it's historical nemesis Russia, and to the West lies the Mediterranean and Europe.

Demetri Kofinas: 02:36 It is both strategically insecure and simultaneously capable of projecting influence across a wide territory, which is why it has been such an important part of NATO, going back to the earliest days of the cold war. But the latest crisis that has broken out in the Eastern Mediterranean between Turkey and an Alliance of regional actors, including fellow NATO member states, Greece and France is deeply concerning. Not just because there's a real risk of military conflict in the Aegean, but because the fractures in the Middle East that began with Iraq, Egypt, Libya, and Syria are now potentially extending into Europe.

Demetri Kofinas: 03:30 And this poses huge security challenges for the EU, while simultaneously creating opportunities for Russia and perhaps Turkey, which stands to benefit from a reconfiguration of its Western territories that would allow it to capitalize on untapped natural gas reserves in the Aegean. It would probably take over 20 episodes to begin to peel back the layers of the onion that is modern day Turkey. And while I think today's conversation is a good start, the subject can certainly feel overwhelming, especially for listeners who don't already have

some background knowledge of the region, its history, its players, and its ongoing conflicts.

- Demetri Kofinas:** 04:11 To that effect my rundown to this episode is a 53-page monster. So, for super nerd subscribers, I definitely recommend checking it out or at least consulting it. And the same goes for the overtime, where among other things Soner and I discussed the Turkish Lira, the country's overleveraged banking system and the possibility of Erdoğan using the crisis in the Mediterranean as a platform from which to negotiate a future IMF-led bailout for the country.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 04:41 So, without any further ado, please enjoy this timely and important conversation about Turkey, it's history, it's politics and its role in the emerging international order with my guest, Soner Çağaptay.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 05:01 Soner Çağaptay, welcome to Hidden Forces.
- Soner Çağaptay:** 05:05 It's a great pleasure. Thanks for having me.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 05:07 It's my pleasure to have you on. Did I get your name right?
- Soner Çağaptay:** 05:10 You did. Excellent. Good Turkish.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 05:11 I've been practicing.
- Soner Çağaptay:** 05:13 Wonderful.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 05:13 It's great having you on. I'm so excited to do this today, to have this conversation. Someone had reached out a few weeks ago, I think one of my listeners, asking for an episode on Turkey, it wasn't the first time. I of course, have wanted to do one for a long time, as you know, I'm Greek, but we only covered this in one previous episode with Peter Zeihan and that was on the overtime, where we discussed Turkey and some of the security challenges the country faces as well as its opportunities. But I'm really excited today, because you're an historian, you're a historian of Turkey, you're Turkish. And this gives us an opportunity not to just to talk about Turkey in the context of what's happening today, but really a broader view of the country historically and currently, and also focused on Erdoğan, who is the president of Turkey. So, before we do any of that, maybe you can start us off with your background. How did you get started in being a political scientist?
- Soner Çağaptay:** 06:12 Absolutely. I'm of Turkish origin, born and raised in Turkey, from Istanbul. I came to the US for grad school, to be an historian. I went to Yale, I studied European history. I thought it was going to go back to Turkey and teach, had a wonderful job offer. And I got recruited by think tank, which is where I work now, called the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. And this is just after I finished grad school and nearly two decades later, I'm still where I am. I love what I do. I'd say what I do is a crossroads of policy and academia. And as an historian, I feel that I can explain America to the Turks and Turkey to the Americans, and I love doing that.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 06:50 Is it just me or are there very few Turkey experts in the US?

- Soner Çağaptay:** 06:56 There's actually a number of them, people in academia, great scholars, people in the policy world, but it is a small group of scholars and analysts who study Turkey. And I think what we need to figure out and underline here, is that it's a really important country, because it borders Iran, Iraq, Syria, Russia across the black sea, ISIS territories. So, whatever US policies are regarding those five countries or entities, having Turkey on board is really important. But of course, Turkey lately has been presenting challenges to the US, which we're going to discuss. I would say, I wasn't surprised when you mentioned Demetri, that a number of your listeners, one of an episode on Turkey, because whether or not you like him or regardless of how your feelings are for him, Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, I think is a very consequential leader. He's always keeping Turkey in the news for good or bad. And so, it's really important to understand what he's doing domestically and in foreign policy and where he's taking Turkey to.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 07:53 So, you actually, your last two books, I think you've written three books total, correct?
- Soner Çağaptay:** 07:58 That's correct. I've done a trilogy Erdoğan. I just finished it. It started with a story of the economic, success story of Erdoğan. The first book called, "The Rise of Turkey: 21st Century's First Muslim Power." This was a book published in 2014, and I wanted to detail and tell the story of quite phenomenal economic growth that Erdoğan delivered. But this trilogy continued with my next book, "New Sultan: Erdoğan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey," not as good a story as the rise of Turkey. This was about Erdoğan's political side, as a nativist populist leader who has thrown Turkey into a deep political crisis. And then the trilogy ended with my most recent book published last year, "Erdoğan's Empire: Turkey and the Middle East," in which I look at Erdoğan's various foreign policy endeavors and answer the question of whether or not Erdoğan has been able to establish an empire or maybe a mini empire.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 08:53 And that of course, harps back to the Ottoman Empire. I wonder, how important is it for people to understand the Ottoman past, Turkey's Ottoman past in order to understand modern day Turkey?
- Soner Çağaptay:** 09:06 Very important. So, nations that were great powers once. Turkey, China, Iran, UK, Brexit vote, have a malleable and often exaggerated sense of their heyday. And I believe Demetri, this comes with a propensity to be inspired by leaders who can speak to this narrative and embody it. That's Erdoğan. Erdoğan has basically embraced this Ottoman dream. He said that, under its 20th century leaders known as Kemalists after the middle name of Turkey's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Erdoğan said that these Kemalists created an inward looking Turkey, that was just happy to be a small player in international politics. He promised when he came to power through his Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2013, Erdoğan promised to make Turkey great again, I'm not making this up, that was his rhetoric. And he said, Turkey can become great again, only by and through influence in former Ottoman countries, especially in Muslim majority countries.
- Soner Çağaptay:** 10:05 So, here's how it goes. We said nations that were great power once, such as Turkey and China and UK, never forget it. Especially, if this memory is fresh. The Romans used to measure time by a unit called saeculum, which meant the number of years that had to pass between the time and incident happened and

all the people who were alive at the time of this incident died. By this measure the Turkish Republic established in 1923, is not even one saeculum old, which means the memory of an empire is very fresh. People's grandparents, in some cases, parents, if they're old enough, fought for the Ottoman Empire, worked for it as bureaucrats.

- Soner Çağaptay:** 10:43 So Erdoğan's, Ottoman revivalism is not reviving some past, but a recent past. And a number of issues, which we can discuss. Turkey's EU accession process, its desire to join the union that went haywire. Turkish-US ties in Syria undermined by different priorities there, and Russia's pivot to Erdoğan in recent times, have helped, but also undermined Erdoğan's vision to make Turkey an Imperial power. So, I would say it's really important for us to look at him in the context of Turkish history, both 20th and 19th century. If you want to understand why his message that he wants to "make Turkey great again," why this is attractive and why people fall for it.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 11:27 I actually want to talk about all those things. I think, especially the EU accession is a very interesting one, because on the one hand you could argue that the EU should have done more to court Turkey, but on the other you could ask, well, Europe had a hard enough time keeping the union together with great Britain succeeding. So, the question of does Europe have borders and where are those borders, and then on top of that, Turkey is Muslim majority country, and does Europe consider itself to be a Christian continent? So, there are all these issues that come up there, but something came up to me, because I had written down a question to ask you, which is, what does a foreign press get right, and what does it get wrong when thinking about Turkey and Erdoğan? But that also makes me think about, what do Turkey's citizens themselves get right and what do they get wrong when thinking about their Kemalist secularist past and when thinking about their Ottoman past?
- Soner Çağaptay:** 12:25 You have asked me so many questions, let me try to unpack them, one by one.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 12:27 You can take the last one. The larger point is, is the Ottoman past that Erdoğan has put forward, and that is seemingly so appealing. Is this a caricature? How accurate is this?
- Soner Çağaptay:** 12:39 Absolutely. I think that Erdoğan's version of Ottoman past is imagined, it's a caricaturized version of the Ottomans. So, revolutions need to justify themselves by characterizing the systems that they overthrow as being completely backwards. And this is what Atatürk's revolution did, at the end of World War One, the Ottoman Empire collapsed. Atatürk established modern Turkey out of the ashes of the Ottoman empire, after liberating it from allied occupation, then he went on to reform it and make it secular. He got rid of the entire Ottoman system. He was a political revolutionary. To justify his revolution, Atatürk cast the entire Ottoman past as sort of the Turkish version of the Wahhabi state. Backwards, obsessed with religion, has nothing to do with Europe or Western modernity. It's quite the opposite. In reality, the 19th century Ottomans were a westernizing state, the Sultans had established institutions of secular Western education, of which Atatürk is a product.
- Soner Çağaptay:** 13:44 But of course, the way out of Turks revolution framed, the Ottomans was that, this was a system obsessed with religion, in foreign policy, and in domestic politics. The kind of Ottoman Empire, Erdoğan wants to bring back is not the

19th century westernizing Ottomans. It is the characterized version of the Ottomans that Atatürk's revolution taught to generations of Turks in the 20th century, including Erdoğan, who went to school in the second half of the 20th century and was exposed to a Kemalist, Atatürk inspired curriculum.

- Soner Çağaptay:** 14:16 So, Erdoğan wrongly thinks that the Ottomans were parochial, shortsighted, I'm using these words, in his words, all about Islam, all the time, everywhere. And he wants to bring that kind of a religious, political view back. So, I think he's trying to revive a caricature that was taught to him by Kemalists. So, I blame Atatürk for Erdoğan's misplaced fascination with the Ottomans.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 14:43 I could go in different directions, but we've brought up Kemal Atatürk a number of times, of course, he was Turkey's first president. What are the differences and similarities between him and Erdoğan?
- Soner Çağaptay:** 14:58 Great question. So, I have argued for a long time that Erdoğan is the new Atatürk. Atatürk in quotes. Why? Because Erdoğan obviously doesn't share Atatürk's values. Atatürk who founded Turkey at the end of World War One, out of the ashes of the Ottoman Empire, had a specific vision of what Turkey ought to look like. And those were his values that he wanted to see across Turkish society. He envisioned Turkey to be a secular, Europe facing Western society. Erdoğan is the opposite of Atatürk in terms of values. He wants Turkey to be facing the Middle East, politically Islamists and socially conservative, adopting Erdoğan's own values. So, he is in this regard an anti-Atatürk, but where they are similar the two leaders, is that, Atatürk used state powers, educational policy, and his sheer personality to shape Turkey in his own image. And that's what Erdoğan is doing today, or trying to do today.
- Soner Çağaptay:** 16:00 So, Erdoğan is the new Atatürk in the sense that, minus Atatürk's values, he's using Atatürk methods to shape Turkish society in his own image. But the problem for Erdoğan is, Atatürk was not a democratically elected leader. He was Turkey's liberator. He had immense gravitas as liberal founder. And, so he basically could do whatever he wanted to. Erdoğan is democratically elected. He faces a fierce democratic opposition.
- Soner Çağaptay:** 16:29 So, Atatürk revolutionized Turkey in his own image. Erdoğan wants to revolutionize Turkey in his own image, but that's not possible in a democracy. On top of it, during the early 20th century, educated Turks supported Atatürk's agenda. When he changed Turkey's alphabet and secularized, pro-Western Turks who were educated were behind him.
- Soner Çağaptay:** 16:51 Today, educated Turks oppose Erdoğan agenda. There's an inverse relationship, between how educated someone is and whether or not they're likely to support Erdoğan. So, I think Erdoğan has multiple problems applying the Atatürk model of social change to the society. And I actually think, honestly, the time for the Atatürk model has passed in Turkey and the rest of the world. The fact that a leader could shape a country's own image, just doesn't work in the 21st century environment, but I don't think Erdoğan has embraced this fact. I think he's really trying hard to become the new Atatürk, meaning minus Atatürk's values and shape Turkey in his own image by using his power.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 17:30 That's notable, because of course, Atatürk was a secularist and Erdoğan is actually promoting this Ottoman sort of Islamist Muslim past. And then of

course, there's the point about the educated classes, which are super important, and Turkey's experiencing a bit of a brain drain as a result of some of this, and the democracy component is a problem, right? Because I think you've said that half of the country vehemently opposes him. So, maybe to take the first point about the Ottoman past, what is so appealing about Turkey's Ottoman past to the population that supports Erdoğan?

- Soner Çağaptay:** 18:06 So, first of all, Erdoğan's big appeal is not his pro-Ottoman foreign policy. It is the fact that he delivered quite phenomenal economic growth until recently, that is the main reason why he has won over a dozen nationwide polls. And it's also the reason why, because Turkey's economy went into recession for the first time since Erdoğan rose to power in 2018, is the reason why he lost elections for mayor in the local polls Istanbul and current other cities, meaning foreign policy is part of the Erdoğan package, but it's not why he wins. It's attractive if the economy does well, he sells the electorate a dream of national greatness. And I think that has to do with the way Turkey's foreign policy has worked or not worked in the first decade of the century, starting with EU accession to the European Union. I've often grappled with what I call Erdoğan's inflection points.
- Soner Çağaptay:** 19:02 I've tried to be an analyst for Erdoğan's career and try to find out why he picked this thing and not that path. When he was given a choice of embracing the EU accession process further, why did he abandon it? Why did he pick option B and not option A, which would have been going to EU? It takes two to tango. I think Erdoğan was perhaps never sincere about EU accession process. I think he embraced the EU process in order to undermine and push aside secularist Turkish military. The military in Turkey always considered itself to be the grand arbiter, if unelected of Turkish politics, it interfered in the democratic process and it had a strongly secularist bias.
- Soner Çağaptay:** 19:50 Erdoğan was afraid of the military, because he comes from a tradition of political Islam. And he saw it as his biggest threat. Now, in 2004, the European Union, you told Ankara at which time Erdoğan was Turkey's prime minister, that if Turkey wanted to get into the EU, it had to take military out of politics. Erdoğan happily obliged, because that was like a God gift present to him. Someone was telling him, take EU out of politics, and at the time 80% of Turkey citizens wanted to join the EU. So, there was near universal support behind Erdoğan, as he made reforms, passed legislation to take the military out of politics.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 20:30 I think that's an interesting point to just emphasize here for listeners, because a lot of Americans and other foreigners think of militaries in the Middle East, they think of a country like Iran. It's not exactly the Middle East, it's the greater Middle East. They think of the revolutionary guard, and they see the military as being aligned with the Islamic state. But in Turkey, it's very different because the military is really, it harks back to its Ottoman past, it's secularist to your point, which is why he was happy to actually break up the power in the military.
- Soner Çağaptay:** 21:02 Of course, remember we just spoke about Atatürk, what was Atatürk's job before he liberated Turkey? He was an officer in the Ottoman army. So, once he became Turkey's president and took off his uniform, became a civilian. He always saw the military as an institution that would carry on his legacy. So, the military in Turkey was strongly pro-Atatürk Kemalist in the 20th century, it was strongly pro-secularist and it wanted to undermine political Islamist forces,

including Erdoğan, who actually was elected first time in office to become Istanbul's mayor in 1994. Erdoğan at the time was a member of a political Islamist faction known as welfare. The military actually interfered in politics to kick this party out of government. So, Erdoğan knew that it was not a matter of if, but when the military will strike again and he wanted to go for the first strike and not give the military the opportunity and the EU provided them with that window of opportunity.

- Soner Çağaptay:** 22:03 So once he passed reforms, sidelined the military, I argue Demetri, that Erdoğan dropped the EU accession, like a hot potato. He was never interested in making Turkey, a consolidated liberal democracy, which is what was required at the time for countries who wanted to get into the EU.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 22:20 So, ironically EU accession and their liberalizing reforms was an expedient for him to centralize power into his own hands.
- Soner Çağaptay:** 22:29 That's correct. And I think EU misplayed it's hand, and they probably allowed Erdoğan to take this path, because you know it takes two to tango, just as Erdoğan dropped the EU accession, like a hot potato. EU's key countries, France and Germany dropped Turkey's accession, like a hot potato as well. These two countries in my view, never really wanted to have Turkey in the union, because given it's demographic size, Turkey would be a third large power inside the EU, equaling in size or matching in size, the power of Germany and France. So, these two countries created obstacles ahead of Turkey's EU accession, loopholes, which made it impossible for Turkey to join the union in the foreseeable future. I recently did a lecture, someone asked me, what does Turkey need to do, I told them you can use to negotiate with the EU and implement EU's legislation, known as a key communicate.
- Soner Çağaptay:** 23:23 They said around how many pages is that? I said 200,000 pages. This was an air force Colonel. He said, well, how much have they done? I said one and a half pages. He put it into his fancy calculator. He said, it's going to take 200,000 years to become a member. So, even if you wanted Turkey to join the EU, you don't believe it will happen. Erdoğan doesn't care because all he wanted, I think about EU accession was to use that, to sideline the military. But having said this, had EU kept a fair accession process for Turkey? What is fair? Turkey is a large country and nobody expects it to join the EU tomorrow. Accession talks with large countries take about a decade, countries comparable in size to Turkey demographically, economically, politically, such as Spain, Poland, UK, it took them over about 10 years to join the EU.
- Soner Çağaptay:** 24:08 So Turkey started accession talks in 2015. The idea that it should be ready around this time to join the EU, but yet Croatia which joined, started the accession talks with Turkey, great countries speak their language, deservedly joined in 2013. So, you got Croatia, which goes in as expected. You got Turkey, which has given a 200,000 year timeline. So, I think Erdoğan played the EU, while the EU thought it was playing Turkey.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 24:35 And of course, the accession plan didn't begin in 1959 or 1963, but 63 was when they signed the Ankara Agreement. So, it has been a long process, but again, the issue of EU accession and integration with Europe brings up the larger cultural historical forces. And one has to wonder looking now retrospectively, if a country like Britain had to exit, what would have happened with a Turkey. So,

it's certainly complicated. And there was also, I think, speaking of inflection points, I think it was, when was it that Cyprus was accepted, was it 2004?

- Soner Çağaptay:** 25:11 Cyprus joined the EU in 2004, just a year before Turkey started the accession talks. And I think that for countries, France and Germany, that wanted to give Turkey a new category of partnership with the EU, they call it special membership, but not full membership. Cyprus provided the right excuse, because Turkey doesn't recognize Cyprus, for them to say, sorry, you can't really come into this club. But this is after they told Turkey it could come in first, because there has never been a case that the EU started the accession talks with a country and these talks did not end up in membership offer. And the EU suggested to Turkey that in the case of Ankara, that might not be the case. European leader said talks are open-ended, we can't guarantee anything. So, I think that, EU thought it could kind of put Turkey into this triage room, it waited forever, as you said, Turkey, first applied to join the EU or the EU's predecessor, the European Economic Community in 1963, that's before I was born. So, you could see how long it's been waiting in triage room.
- Soner Çağaptay:** 26:14 That could have worked, had Turkey, not experienced phenomenal economic growth under Erdoğan. So, that instilled in the citizens a can do attitude on foreign policy and also had it not come with the sense that Turkey was not treated right by the EU, that's where Erdoğan's near-Ottomanist foreign policy came in, and it looked attractive suddenly. People said, why do we have to back to get into this union when our economy is doing so well, let's follow Erdoğan, maybe we can become a star power nation in Middle East and revive Ottoman greatness.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 26:47 It's an appealing vision. And to some degree, it's something we've seen, I think with other countries where we idealize the past, whether it's Putin, idealizing the time of the USSR or some other case. And so, I can see how it appeals politically to Erdoğan. We're going to jump back and forth now a bit. I mean, I do also, speaking of sort of inflection points, not only is the case of Cyprus interesting because that could have led to unification. And now we're seeing renewed problems in the Eastern Mediterranean around not only Greek, but also Cypriot continental shelves. And I also want to talk about the 2016 coup, because that was really a traumatic event, but let's kind of fast forward a little bit and get to where we are today, because some of the recent, the really important items that have changed since you wrote your last book.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 27:40 One was, the push into Northeastern Syria by the Turkish military, and the takeover of that region of Rojava after the US began to pull troops out or pull US military out. And then the other is, what I would say, is not an exaggeration to say a crisis unfolding currently in the Eastern Mediterranean, that is involving more and more players, not all of them regional, it started with regional players, with Greece and Egypt. You could say perhaps Libya, certainly Turkey and Israel to some degree, it's already pulled in France who have sent not only battleships to the area, but also planes and the US potentially. What is going on with the Eastern Mediterranean, with the EastMed pipeline, with natural gas reserves in the Mediterranean? Fill our listeners in so we understand what is going on there right now.
- Soner Çağaptay:** 28:34 So, broadly speaking, Erdoğan has departed from Turkey's 20th century foreign policy model, according to which Turkey saw itself, following the legacy of

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, as part of Europe and the West. Erdoğan deals with the West, he has a contractual relationship, give and take with Europe, but ultimately he does not believe Turkey is a European or Western state par excellence. And so that means he doesn't mind conflict and confrontation with European and Western powers. And we're seeing this kind of play out in the EasternMed, where Turkey's involvement in the war in Libya has put it at odds with the supporters of rebel forces led by General Haftar in the East. So, there was a civil war in Libya that has reached a point of stasis in 2019, Turkey was backing the internationally recognized government in Tripoli, and Turkey's regional opponents, UAE and Egypt were backing the force of General Haftar in the East, and enter Vladimir Putin, who I believe is of the craftiest foreign policy practitioners today.

- Soner Çağaptay:** 29:44 What does that mean? Crafty because he achieves so much by doing so little. So, Putin saw an opportunity, there's a civil war where no side is winning. He decided to help one side, the force of General Haftar. He sent him what is called Wagner's army. These are Russian special ops with no formal paper trail connecting them to Putin, but everybody knows they are Russia's army. Wagner's a deployment to the field and Libya, it made Haftar a critical threat to Tripoli, the government there, because now Wagner came in with nighttime warfare capability, the capability to shoot down drones and snipers. Suddenly it looked like Tripoli was going to fall. And to whom does Erdoğan go for a deal? He goes to Putin. So, first Putin is the arsonist, he creates a fire and now he's the firefighter. He says, come to Moscow, I'll offer you a deal.
- Soner Çağaptay:** 30:37 And I think his deal was, is that, he wants to become in Libya, one of two sides to create a frozen conflict, where Turkey will be the other side, it will deal with them. It's very similar to the situation that has emerged in Syria. So, I think what we're seeing increasingly is Turkey, that kind of doesn't agree with Russia, but deals with Russia in various conflicts. It has a lot to do in my view with the dramatic transformation of Turkish-Russian ties in the aftermath of the coup attempt against Erdoğan in 2016. I can't emphasize this enough that this coup not only changed Turkey, but also changed Turkish Russian ties, perhaps irreversibly.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 31:19 Is there any truth to the claims that Erdoğan has made on multiple occasions, that the United States played some role in instigating or supporting the Gülen faction that tried to overthrow him in 2016?
- Soner Çağaptay:** 31:34 Of course not. But here's how it goes. You asked me earlier about what about Turkey does the outside world get? And what about that the outside world does not get, right? So, I would say the biggest fallacy for anyone reading about, studying Turkey, is to commit what I call, I'm making this up. I think it's a Latin word. It's engaged in what I call, Reduxio Erdogana, which means reduced Turkey down to Erdoğan.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 31:57 Well, Americans have this problem with Putin and a lot of other people. They've obsessed-
- Soner Çağaptay:** 32:02 Well, it's different.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 32:02 ... they've done the same thing with Putin for years.

- Soner Çağaptay:** 32:05 Look, I think it's different, because Turkey is different than Russia, and Erdoğan is different than Putin, because while Erdoğan is autocratic, just like Putin is, Russia is not democratic and Turkey is. So, Erdoğan has a very vibrant opposition, Turkey's a very complicated place, demographically too big, politically too complicated, for one person to control it. And I think sometimes people boil their view of what Turkey should be or US policy on Turkey or what analysis of what Turkey should look like to their passions to Erdoğan. I would say in the first decade of the century, this was sympathy. A lot of people really liked that Erdoğan was delivering growth and it looked like he was making it more liberal.
- Soner Çağaptay:** 32:46 He was pursuing EU accession. I argue that he never really embraced EU. And now the opposite is true. Passions for Turkey are bowled down to unfortunately deep hatred for Erdoğan. So, the view is, he could do nothing, right. Anyone who opposes him must be good. And when the coup plot against Erdoğan happened a nefarious attempt, because the country's capital Ankara came under direct military threat, when it was bombed by coup plotters, for the first time since the armies of Tamerlane occupied it, very traumatic affairs for Turkey's citizens.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 33:18 It was very traumatic. The images and video that came out of the country, were very frightening.
- Soner Çağaptay:** 33:24 And not just only for Erdoğan's supporters, but even those who opposed him, but United States and Turkey's other allies were late to reach out to Erdoğan, because at that time views of Erdoğan had soured. People were upset at him for his democratic transgressions, his policy in Syria, but guess who did not commit Reduxio at Erdogana? Vladimir Putin. He was the first leader to call Erdoğan after the coup, the next morning. And in my view, who basically called and said, my friend Tayyip, what can I do for you? Would you like to come visit me in St. Petersburg? Erdoğan went to see him in two weeks. This was a dramatic and historic visit. Russia is Turkey's historic nemesis. It's a country that has always bullied the Turks. It's the one neighbor that the Turks have never been able to defeat.
- Soner Çağaptay:** 34:13 It's the one neighbor that has in fact defeated the Turks and their Ottoman predecessors over and over. By my count, as I wrote in Erdoğan's Empire, the Turks and Russians fought 17 major campaigns, guess who started them overall, all of them, the Russians. Guess who lost them all overall, the Turks. In Syria, when the rebellion started in 2011 and 12, Erdoğan's supported the rebels, of course, Russia was supporting the Assad regime. The two countries to me look like were on the verge of their 18th war, and you don't need a crystal ball to figure out who was going to win. But the coup changed all of that, because Putin suddenly realized there was a bigger prize winning Turkey, reaching out to Erdoğan.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 34:54 I have a question, because obviously there's no question that the coup played a role, but how much did America's policy to support the YPG and Kurdish forces in Syria and their alignment with Kurdish forces in Iraq, how much did all of that play a role?
- Soner Çağaptay:** 35:11 It did play a significant role. So, in Syria, in the beginning, Turkey and the US had the same objective. They both supported rebels, opposing Assad, but these

objectives diverge after ISIS emerged. At that time, president Obama did not want to put boots on the ground. He saw ISIS as the greatest threat to America and its allies. This is in the aftermath of horrible attacks by ISIS in Orlando, Nice, and elsewhere in Paris. So, the priority was to defeat ISIS without putting US boots on the ground, because Obama was not going to declare war in yet another Muslim majority country, that was his platform. Enter Kurdish YPG, people's protection forces. This is the Syrian branch of another Kurdish group known as PKK, Kurdistan Workers party.

- Demetri Kofinas:** 35:58 PPK is the terrorist's designated party that operates within Turkey, correct?
- Soner Çağaptay:** 36:04 Yup. PKK is a terror designated entity, not only by Turkey, but also by US and all NATO members. Obama for reasons of expediency wanted to ally with the PKK Syrian franchise to defeat ISIS. So, he worked with one terrorist group to undermine another terrorist group. Turkey never liked this policy. Ankara said, this is working with our enemy, but fine, because it helps you defeat ISIS. And until you defeat ISIS. But the United States kind of didn't want to work more away from that policy. So, by 2015, there was a lot of bad blood in Ankara towards the US. Similarly, because Erdoğan priorities in Syria did not overlap with US priorities. There was also a lot of bad blood and feelings towards Turkey inside Washington. I've followed Turkey policy here and Erdoğan's political career for two decades. When I started my job at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, as a young analyst, the US military was Turkey's greatest fan in Washington. Now it's Turkey's perhaps greatest opponent.
- Soner Çağaptay:** 37:10 This has to do with Turkey's policies in Syria. Erdoğan was so committed to ousting Assad. He didn't care who did it. He turned a blind eye to radicals who cross into Syria to fight ISIS, and US military got upset that some of these fighters, of course then joined ISIS and morphed. And I think both sides Ankara and Washington equally disliked the others tactics in Syria. So, there was already bad blood. Now let's bring the coup in, right? The coup plot against Erdoğan happens. It's a coup plot. It's not a coup. It's not the whole military attacking Erdoğan, it's part of the military attacking the rest of the military, and Erdoğan, and there is consensus inside the analytical community in Washington that officer's aligned with Fethullah Gülen at the time, played a key role in the coup. Fethullah Gülen happens to live in the United States.
- Soner Çağaptay:** 38:04 So, Putin took advantage of this fact that most Turks were going to blame US by implication for the coup, wrongly so, but he took advantage of this perception. He invited Erdoğan, and I think that started a political bromance between the two leaders. Erdoğan I think was elated when Putin called him after the coup and said, come let's meet, because he was afraid until that moment that there would be an 18th Turkish-Russian war. This time in Syria, that Turkey would lose, and suddenly Putin reaches out to him, because I think Putin realized during the coup in Turkey, the coup plot, that the bigger prize there was not Syria, it was Turkey. He could bring Erdoğan into his fold, he invited him over. And where was the meeting? Not in the Russian capital Moscow, but in St. Petersburg, which as you know, is Russia's Imperial Capital.
- Soner Çağaptay:** 38:57 And where did the meeting take place in St. Petersburg? At the Constantino Ski Palace built by Catherine the Great. Catherine the Great is the first Russian or Zarina who defeated the Turks. So, Putin basically told Erdoğan at that meeting, that took place two weeks after the failed coup against Erdoğan, he said, look,

my country has a tradition of bullying, and bloodying the nose of your country, a tradition started by Catherine the Great. I Putin the Great will end, let's have deals. I think that's the biggest shift in Turkish foreign policy and opportunity that Putin used to start a process of peeling Turkey away from the US. What was the first thing Putin allowed Turkey to do after that visit? He told Erdoğan, you have my green light to go into Syria to undermine Kurdish YPG, an extension of this PKK that Turkey has been fighting.

- Demetri Kofinas:** 39:50 So, I'm concerned that because we've touched on so many different issues, I'm concerned that listeners who don't have any or remote amount of background and understanding about the area are going to really lose the thread here. So, I'm thinking, so this region has always been politically, well, maybe it's a stretch to say unstable, I would say on stable, I would say for example, that Saudi Arabia is unstable by that definition of the term. It's a rigid, strong monarchy, but underneath, it's fundamentally built on cheap resources that are going to run out at some point. And so, when the United States moved into Iraq in 2003, I feel that it really broke something. And of course, the Kurdish problem became a much bigger issue for Turkey after the US invasion. And generally speaking, so many of the fractures that we've seen in the Middle East really emanated out of that.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 40:43 And so like when I look at Turkey, and I look at Turkey security situation, we've talked a little bit about Syria. This is a huge problem for Turkey, not only because of the concern about Kurdish rebels, not only because of the concern about ISIS, which as I understand it, is less of a concern for Erdoğan and Turkey, than the Kurds, but also because of the refugee crisis. I mean, Turkey has taken in millions of refugees. This has also been a sore spot between Turkey and Europe, because of the refugees that Turkey has allowed into Europe. But I sort of struggle to understand. I mean, so my point is, I understand the security concerns for Erdoğan, right. I get that. I struggle to understand what he's doing in the Mediterranean, and I struggle to understand his overall vision. What is his objective? What do you understand to be his objective with his foreign policy, specifically?
- Soner Çağaptay:** 41:37 I think that Erdoğan's main objective and foreign policy is number one, to use foreign policy, to promote his brand domestically, that he's going to make Turkey great again. And secondly, I think he sees Turkey as a power that should be taken seriously, by the United States, by Russia and by countries around the Eastern Med. So, here's what has triggered in my view, Turkey's strong intervention in Libya. Not only there was an element of a civil war that Russia took advantage of and pulled Turkey in, so now Turkey has to deal with Russia and Libya as it does in Syria. But also, Erdoğan realized that Turkey's old adversaries, Greece and Cyprus and new adversaries, Egypt and Israel, were all the time lining up in new initiatives, security related, natural gas related and always exploiting Turkey. So, this fear in Ankara, and this is where it goes beyond Erdoğan.
- Soner Çağaptay:** 42:40 The view shared by many, including those who oppose Erdoğan, is that Turkey is being boxed in by an axis that stretches from Tel Aviv to Athens, crosses through Cyprus, and that it needs to break this axis that is boxing-
- Demetri Kofinas:** 42:55 Is that a fair perspective?

- Soner Çağaptay:** 42:56 I think that's a Turkish perspective. As you look at the world from Ankara, and what Erdoğan has done is it's basically taken this and said, if we can win the war in Libya, it doesn't matter if these countries oppose us, because they form an East-West axis. We can cut this with a South and North axis, meaning connecting-
- Demetri Kofinas:** 43:15 Right. The shared maritime zone between Turkey and Libya, the proposed new map. But what I'm asking is when I say fair, what I mean is, does Turkey have fair security concerns? When you say that they're feeling boxed in? I mean, I think that that suggests some kind of security issues, right? Not simply about sharing economic resources in the Mediterranean, because from what I've seen, it seems that the argument rests primarily on a dispute about the fairness on behalf of Turkey, of the fairness of the distribution of the continental shelf. That Turkey feels that just because Greece, Cyprus, they have islands, that these islands should not determine-
- Soner Çağaptay:** 43:56 So, why does Turkey feel that it is under threat when it sees Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, and Israel getting together, excluding Turkey? I think it has a lot to do with the global outcome of Erdoğan's foreign policy endeavors. So, when he came to power, he said, number one, Turkey doesn't need to fold under Europe, it can be bigger than that. And it can go into the Middle East, become a star power Nation, that hasn't really happened. In fact, Turkey is today more isolated in the Middle East than ever before, including the times before Erdoğan.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 44:33 Well, their only good relationship is with Qatar, right? They've basically-
- Soner Çağaptay:** 44:36 I mean, it's almost crazy, right? So, Erdoğan said, Turkey is going to become a powerful in the Middle East because it will be listened to in all capitals. Turkey today has only one friend, which is Qatar and maybe the government of Tripoli, half of Libya, how did it happen?
- Demetri Kofinas:** 44:52 Which is really North Africa.
- Soner Çağaptay:** 44:53 I think it's basically Erdoğan has played his hand wrong in the Arab uprisings. When Arab uprising started in Egypt and Syria, Erdoğan supported just one faction in those uprisings known as Muslim brotherhood, which I think not organically, but politically close to Erdoğan's AKP. I think his faction is Muslim brotherhood, light. Muslim brotherhood being this Arab political Islamist movement. The AKP is the light version of that, because most things about Islam and Turkey are light. But having said this, Erdoğan basically thought that he could spread Turkey's influence, if brotherhood related parties came to power in Cairo and then other capitals. Well, that was smart, but not crafty enough, because it's like betting in a horse race, if you put all your money behind one horse, if that horse wins, you went really big, but if the horse loses, you lose everything. The brotherhood lost, Turkey, lost everything.
- Soner Çağaptay:** 45:51 The brotherhood was ousted from powering Cairo by General Sisi, and its international or Sisi's regional backers, the Emiratis and the Saudis oppose the brotherhood, but also hate Turkey, because of Turkey's former and continued support to the brotherhood. Turkey is already at odds with Syria because it's supporting the civil war rebels there against the Assad regime. It's at odds with Iran, which backs the Assad regime. So, it leaves Turkey with almost no friends. I asked this question to myself. I said, does Erdoğan have an empire in the Middle

East? He does not. He's swearing a ceremony in 2018, July 9th. He's about to take office as a Turkey's executive-style president. He ran into something, inconvenient joke of course, called term limits after he was Turkey's prime minister for three terms. So, he changed the constitution and became president, new job, same responsibilities, so he is about to take office as Turkey's newly appointed, designated executive style president would increase political powers.

- Soner Çağaptay:** 46:55 He is about to take office as head of state, head of government, head of ruling party, head of police, which is a national force, head off the military as chief of staff. So, for all practical purposes, if Atatürk created Turkey's first Republic, Erdoğan is about to start its second Republic. He is about to become the first Sultan of the second Republic. Guess which Middle Eastern country is there to say you have done so well? Not a single Monarch or head of state with the exception of Emir of Qatar. So, clearly Turkey has no friends left. And I think this is why when it sees its neighbors lining up, it perceives threat, because it doesn't like any of them. And it doesn't get along with them anymore.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 47:35 It's interesting. It sounds to me like Erdoğan decision to pursue a more, sort of, not just Ottoman, but his Islamo-Ottoman conception of Turkey's place in the world, was partly perhaps an opportunistic brand decision, because of the climate in the Middle East post-9/11, and perhaps rise of Islam as a popular calling front or brand. I mean, I'm not an expert on the Muslim world, but I sense that from what you're saying, based on his intuition to align with the Muslim brotherhood and some of the other things he's done. Is that an accurate understanding and that because that has shifted, he has been behind the ball and he's lost the opportunities of where the region is going?
- Soner Çağaptay:** 48:26 I would say that's a near, almost excellent characterization of what Turkey did. So, on the one hand, its economy experienced phenomenal economic growth starting in 2003, by the time the Arab uprising started, 2011-12, the economy had almost doubled in size. Incomes had risen, people lived better off. So, when Erdoğan came to power, Turkey's infant mortality rate was comparable to pre-war Syria, that's in 2002. 10 years later, it was almost comparable to Spain. So, Turks used live like Syrians, now they live like the Spanish. So, I think this instilled in them, I can do attitude. Then there's Erdoğan who is political Islamists, and he sees that dictatorships are falling across Arab countries and political Islam is the future, as he thinks it will be. So, he decides to support these movements. It's completely opportunistic. And it is in a way, although it's framed as ominous, I think it's really about Turkish power, right?
- Soner Çağaptay:** 49:24 It's about Ankara having influence in Cairo. And I think what Erdoğan misread, it doesn't matter who's in charge in Cairo. Egyptians see themselves as the dominant nation in their world, as the dominant Sunni power in the Eastern Med, they were not going to let Turkey come and push them around. So, not only that, but Erdoğan also opposed the ouster of Morsi, the leader of Muslim brotherhood, who was elected president by General Sisi. So, what does that make Erdoğan and Sisi? Just to give you a sense of why Turkey feels so threatened by its neighbors, especially Egyptians. I think Erdoğan and Sisi are each other's nemesis. Erdoğan is the political Islamist who isolated and locked up secularist generals, and Sisi is a secular general who locked up political Islamists. And so that means in Libya, it's a win-lose game. They can't both win

and they both have to therefore do they can to humiliate and undermine each other.

- Soner Çağaptay:** 50:21 So, in my view, unfortunately that means Libya civil war is no more fought by Libyans, it's fought by countries, neighbors and nearby powers. It's sort of like a power game, where Turkey, France, UAE, Greece, Egypt are all involved, trying to undermine each other. Of course, unfortunately Libya's poor citizens are caught in this crossfire.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 50:43 This brings us back to the mess that the United States foreign policy establishment has made in the Middle East. Starting with Iraq, Syria, is certainly if not a direct result of the invasion of Iraq, it certainly did not help. Libya, of course, coalition forces attacked it. I think it was 2011 or 2010. When was it when we bombed Libya? And you've got other countries as well, you've got Yemen, you've got all these different regional actors that are pouring resources and efforts into other countries. The whole region just seems to be less stable today than at any point in the last, I don't know, 17 years, which of course was against the point of why we intervened in the first place.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 51:24 So, now I'm going to move the rest of our conversation into the overtime. For regular listeners, this week's rundown is a monster. It's 53 pages long. I'm concerned about people's ability to follow this conversation. So, I think the rundown really helps this week, because there are so many moving pieces. Those of you who heard our overtime with Peter Zeihan know this, Turkey has many borders, it's why it's been such an integral and important part of the world for so many years, going back to the Ottoman empire as a gateway between East and West.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 52:01 If you're interested in listening to the overtime, head over to patreon.com/hiddenforces and subscribe. There are also additional tiers that give you access to the transcript and to the rundown. And there's also a scholar tier for those of you who want access to my personal time as well, and who want to speak with me directly. Soner, stick around, we're going to move the rest of this conversation into the overtime.
- Soner Çağaptay:** 52:25 All right. Thank you.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 52:27 Today's episode of Hidden Forces was recorded in New York city. For more information about this week's episode, or if you want easy access to related programming, visit our website at hiddenforces.io and subscribe to our free email list. If you want access to overtime segments, episode, transcripts, and show rundowns, full of links and detailed information related to each and every episode, check out our premium subscription, available through the Hidden Forces website or through our Patreon page at patreon.com/hiddenforces.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 53:05 Today's episode was produced by me and edited by Stylianos Nicolaou. For more episodes, you can check out our website at hiddenforces.io. Join the conversation at Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram at [@HiddenForcesPod](https://www.instagram.com/HiddenForcesPod), or send me an email. As always, thanks for listening. We'll see you next week.