Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is well on his way to becoming the longest-serving and most influential Turkish leader since Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who established the Republic of Turkey in 1923. With his Justice and Development Party (AKP), Erdoğan has been in power since 2003, first as prime minister and now as president. The AKP has overseen a period of growth, during which Turkey has re-established its presence – economically, politically and militarily – in the former Ottoman provinces in the Levant and Mesopotamia.

Erdoğan’s regular use of historical references, for instance when realising Ottoman-era dreams like linking the Asian and European shores of the Bosphorus by underground, or when equating anti-AKP attitudes with those who railed against the sultans, shows his desire to create a direct lineage between the Ottoman Empire and the AKP. The president’s personal efforts to avenge imperial demise are an unapologetic form of historical revisionism in a bid to consolidate power. His calls to rally round the flag in order to preserve the stability of the country are akin to the means employed by Sultan Abdulhamid II to exert autocratic control over a fracturing empire.

In his years in power, Erdoğan has brought the military to heel (which was necessary), politicised the judiciary and the law enforcement bodies, muzzled the free press, clamped down on his erstwhile but increasingly critical partner, the Gülen movement, defused numerous corruption charges brought against his supporters, and purged the AKP of moderates. President Erdoğan does not stand above Turkish politics, as the constitution prescribes, but bulldozes his way through the system to overcome any inconvenient obstacles.

Erdoğan has not only converted the rule of law to the law of the ruler. Over the past decade he has also chipped away at Turkey’s secular base by hailing the country’s Sunni Islamic identity and insisting on the cultural rights of ‘ethnic Turks’. Erdoğan’s creeping authoritarianism – based on majority consent shrewdly construed in increasingly unfree and unfair elections – is deeply polarising Turkish society, to the point that warnings that the president could be leading the country towards civil war may now be partly materialising. In an effort to roll back the electoral gains of the Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) ahead of the 2015 general election rebound, and to capitalise on the rivalry between the HDP and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), Erdoğan has effectively imported his war against ‘Kurdish terrorists’ on Syrian and Iraqi soil to the southeast of Turkey.

President Erdoğan has much in common with Vladimir Putin. In fact, he has long sung the praises of the Russian president, probably because he sees Putin’s career as a textbook lesson in how
to ‘manage’ democracy and replace it with a nationalist autocracy rooted in conservatism.

The assent of Putin as director of the FSB, the successor to the KGB, to the position of prime minister in 1999 coincided with the start of the Second Chechen War. It was in his capacity as Russian president that Putin established direct federal control over Chechnya in 2000. Russian forces remained active in ‘anti-terror operations’ until victory was declared in 2009.

Vladimir Putin has dominated Russian politics for more than 15 years. During that time the former KGB operative crushed all independent centres of power and built a personalised mafia state. Putin is intent on re-establishing the standing of Mother Russia as a major power on the international scene. In his own aggressive model of historical revisionism Putin harks back to tsarist Russia, which not only built Saint Petersburg but also defeated Napoleon and snatched Crimea from the Ottomans, after numerous military confrontations. His famed speech of 18 March 2014 was designed to justify what the Kremlin considers as Russia’s historic claim to Crimea after the Soviet Union ceded it to Ukraine. Declaring an end to Moscow’s patience with post-Cold War accommodation, he vowed to protect Russia’s interests in Ukraine and the wider Orthodox and Slavic Russosphere from Western encroachment.

In another act of exploiting the Russian Orthodox Church, Putin got its leaders to bless his military intervention in Syria as a “holy war”. Putin has used this cover to secure Russia’s only remaining military base in the Middle East (in Latakia, Bashar al-Assad’s Alawite heartland) and to promote Russia’s role on the international stage. Russia’s warplanes have pounded the moderate Syrian forces fighting the Assad regime, as well as the Chechen militants fighting with al-Nusra and other radical groups. As such, Putin has saved his teetering client in Damascus and is using his direct access to Assad to position himself as kingmaker in the diplomatic peace process for Syria.

Both Sultan Erdoğan and Tsar Putin are scrambling to salvage what was left of the brittle political order that emerged in the Levant and Mesopotamia following the demise of their countries’ imperial predecessors. Yet they have been pursuing conflicting interests and strategies, and this has marred Russo-Turkish relations.

Turkey has been providing arms to anti-Assad forces, including to jihadist groups like al-Nusra, and through its porous borders foreign fighters have found a way to join ISIS. Ankara’s priority in Syria and Iraq is to prevent the Kurds there from establishing a contiguous autonomous region that could trigger an irredentist response by their brethren in Turkey.

Relations between Ankara and Moscow have soured in the wake of the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea and the persecution of its large Tatar minority, which has historic ties to Turkey. Tensions have soared since Russia’s warplanes entered the fray in Syria in September 2015 and allegedly dipped into Turkish airspace on several occasions to bomb Turkmen positions in northern Syria. When a Turkish jet fighter shot down a Russian warplane over the Syrian-Turkish border in November, a new dimension was added to the multifaceted war in Syria. President Erdoğan was quick to say that he gave the order to fire himself.

While direct clashes between Russia and Turkey have so far been headed off by the countries’ diplomats, the mutually beneficial economic interdependence between the two countries was severed after Putin had promised “serious consequences” in response to Erdoğan’s decision. In view of their respective leadership styles and domestic levers of power, Putin and Erdoğan may well have transferred violent tensions to a covert arena and cranked up the proxy war they have been fighting by way of their regional allies. All this suggests that the new Russo-Turkish rivalry is here to stay and could worsen still, especially if it expands into the eastern Mediterranean, the Balkans, the wider Black Sea region or Central Asia. Sadly, this would fit the pattern of the centuries-long hostilities between the Ottoman Sultans and the Russian Tsars, and the narrative employed by their latter-day heirs.

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