

Surveying Turkish Influence in the Western Balkans

Пише: Stratfor

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Summary

Turkish President Abdullah Gul will visit Bosnia-Herzegovina from Sept. 2-3, amid rising tensions in the lead-up to Bosnian elections. Turkey has been able to use tensions among Bosnia-Herzegovina's ethnic groups to exert influence in the Western Balkans by acting as a mediator. This is part of Turkey's plan to reassert itself geopolitically and show Europe that without Turkey, the Western Balkans will not see lasting political stability. However, Turkey's efforts face several obstacles, including a weak economic presence in the Western Balkans, suspicion inside the region about Ankara's motives, and growing concerns in the West about Turkey's power.

Analysis

Turkish President Abdullah Gul will pay an official visit to Bosnia-Herzegovina from Sept. 2-3. The visit comes amidst largely expected rising nationalist rhetoric in the country due to the upcoming Oct. 3 general elections. Milorad Dodik, premier of Serbian entity Republika Srpska (RS), has again hinted that RS might consider possible independence, prompting the Bosniak (Slavic Muslims from the Western Balkans) leadership to counter by calling for RS to be abolished. Meanwhile, Croat politicians continue to call for a separate ethnic entity of their own, a potential [flash point between Croats and Bosniaks](#).

Amidst the tensions between Bosnia-Herzegovina's ethnic factions — as well as between the countries of the Western Balkans — Ankara has found an opportunity to build up a wealth of [political influence in the region](#) by playing the role of moderator. As such, Turkey is both re-establishing its presence in the region it dominated during the Ottoman Empire and attempting to become the main arbiter on conflict resolution in the region, thus obtaining a useful lever in its relationship with Europe.

Ultimately, the Balkans are not high on Turkey's list of geopolitical priorities. Turkey has much more immediate interests in the Middle East, where the ongoing U.S. withdrawal from Iraq is

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leaving a vacuum of influence that Turkey wants to fill and use to project influence throughout its Muslim backyard, and in the Caucasus, where competition is slowly intensifying with Russia. The Balkans rank below these, but are very much on Turkey's mind, especially as the Balkans relate to Ankara's relationship with Europe.

However, three major factors constrain Turkey's influence in the Balkans: a paltry level of investment on the part of the Turkish business community, suspicion from a major group in the region (Serbs) and Turkey's internal struggle with how best to parlay the legacy of Ottoman rule into an effective strategy of influence without stirring fears in the West that Ankara is looking to recreate the Ottoman Empire.

Turkey's History in the Balkans

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Po Valley

Blessed with useful rivers, broad fertile plains and access to the calm Ionian Sea, the capital generation capacity of the Po Valley is second-to-none. Additionally, nestled as it is between the Alps to the north and the Apennines to the south, it is one of the most physically secure regions on the planet – and certainly the most secure in Europe. Taken together the Po Valley is not simply the richest part of Italy: It is the richest part of Europe, and has consistently ranked among the richest parts of the world for the nearly a millennia. At their respective peaks, the Italian city states of Verona, Turin, Milan and Venice were not simply regional economic centers, but global powers. As such, the Turks have historically treated the Po region as an equal and a partner, collectively dominating regional trade – particularly the Silk Road – by both land and sea.

Danube River

The Danube is Europe's longest river, with its head of navigation (pre-canal) in Regensburg, Germany (roughly 125 kilometers north of Munich). Turkish power has historically found it simple to expand to the mouth of the Danube, at which point the Turks could easily profit from the entire watershed's trade. That makes the Danube the natural highway for Turkish expansion until it reaches Vienna, the city at the gap between the Carpathians and the Alps. Had the Ottomans been able to capture Vienna – as they attempted to in 1529 and 1683 – they could have concentrated their forces there, and prevented any of the northern European powers from undermining Turkish influence in the Balkans.

Crimea

The Crimean Peninsula is the most strategic point relative to the Turkish-Russian balance of power. Russia's primary riverine access to the Black Sea is the Don, which flows into the winter-ice bound Sea of Azov. During the Ottoman period, Turkish naval bases on the Crimean Peninsula allowed the Turks to easily observe and smash Russian forces attempting to break out of the Azov. Russia's only other river access points to the Black Sea – the barely navigable Dnieper and Dniester Rivers – could also be very easily monitored from Crimea. The defense of Crimea itself was also very simple, as access to the peninsula across the Perekop Isthmus is only 6.3 kilometers at its narrowest point.

Cyprus

Cyprus is a natural evolution of Turkish naval expansion strategy. Situated close to the Anatolian mainland, a strong naval province on Cyprus allows Turkey to reliably project power throughout the eastern Mediterranean – all but guaranteeing Ottoman control of Egypt. One consequence of the 1877-1878 war with Russia was the loss of Cyprus to the United Kingdom. Unsurprisingly, Turkey lost control of the Nile within one generation of Cyprus' loss, and the Levant within two.

Nile River

While somewhat removed from the Sea of Marmara, the Nile River provided the Ottomans with an extremely rich, self-managing province that could be maintained with a minimum of effort. What it did require, however, was naval superiority. So long as Turkey – in league with its Italian allies – remained the dominant naval power in the eastern Mediterranean, Egypt provided Istanbul with a steady stream of income. But the rise of the French and English navies in the 18th and 19th centuries eventually limited the Turkish navy to the Black Sea. Supplying Ottoman garrisons via land required a much longer and more vulnerable logistical tail, leading to the Empire's loss of the province.

Mesopotamia

Mesopotamia was the last of the provinces acquired by the Ottoman Empire, and the last lost when the Empire fell during World War I. Supplying forces in the region required traversing the entirety of Anatolia – no small feat – and anything gained from the region had to be repatriated at great cost back the same way. Additionally, trade routes largely avoided the region, instead favoring a northern route to China – and what little trade existed was negated by the English colonization of India. Occupation of Mesopotamia also brought with it a strategic clash with Persia, which saw – and continues to see – any centralization of power in Mesopotamia as a threat to Persian security. In short, the Turks did not come to this region until they had already obtained the greater prizes in their neighborhood, and this was the last piece of the empire they lost because it was the piece that their foes wanted the least.

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OTTOMAN EMPIRE IN THE 19TH CENTURY



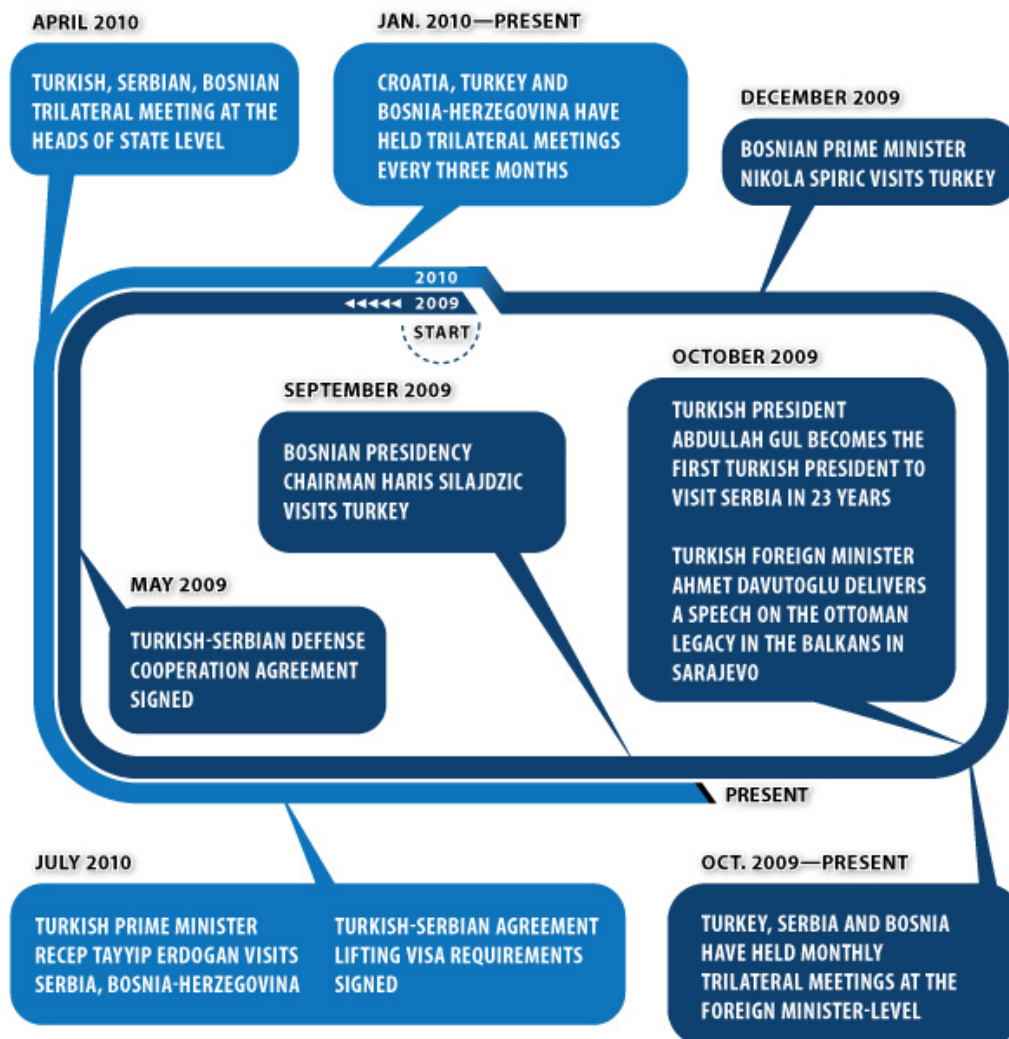
ETHNIC DISTRIBUTION PRIOR TO CIVIL WAR



ETHNIC DISTRIBUTION FOLLOWING THE CIVIL WAR



TURKISH DIPLOMATIC INITIATIVES IN THE BALKANS



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TURKEY'S ECONOMIC PRESENCE IN THE BALKANS

COUNTRY	TO TURKEY		FROM TURKEY				
	EXPORTS (2007)**	IMPORTS (2007)**	NET FDI FLOWS (2007)**	NET FDI FLOWS (2008)**	% OF MAIN INVESTORS (2008)	FDI STOCKS**	% OF MAIN INVESTORS
Macedonia	\$ 53,249	\$ 194,766	\$ 9,448	\$ 10,604	1.91%	\$ 56,480	0.67%
Serbia	\$ 45,123	\$ 293,851	\$ 10,512	\$ 19,711	0.42%	N/A	N/A
Montenegro	\$ 1,339	\$ 48,494	\$ 1,314	\$ 3,942	0.29%	\$ 5,256	0.38%
Albania*	\$ 6,016	\$ 292,522	\$ 26,282	\$ 2,628	0.21%	\$ 48,621	0.99%
Croatia	\$ 140,011	\$ 304,347	\$ 0	\$ 0	0%	\$ 0	0%
Bosnia	\$ 36,406	\$ 260,557	\$ 5,256	\$ 9,198	1.57%	\$ 151,121	1.51%

*No FDI data for 2009/2010, but according to local media, Italy and Turkey have become the main investors in Albania.

**In thousands

SOURCES: Eurostat, national central banks and statistics offices, UNCTAD, European Commission, Trademap

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