

# Turkey's palace intrigue [The Elitelore of striving to create a future World Heritage Monument to one's self]\*

**A \$615-million (so far) presidential residence proves as divisive as President Erdogan's rule.**

By Glen Johnson and Patrick J. McDonnell

*Los Angeles Times* (USA),

November 29, 2014

*Posted by Acturca in Middle East / Moyen Orient, Turkey / Turquie.*

<http://acturca.info/category/middle-east-moyen-orient/>

Ankara, Turkey -- From the hilltop mausoleum of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, founder of the Turkish Republic, a panoramic sweep of this modern capital shows skyscrapers, five-star hotels, bustling residential districts and, to the west, an extravagant new official residence for President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The controversial White Palace is a lavish Ottoman-themed compound that many view as a symbol of Erdogan's polarizing and authoritarian leadership style --and his efforts to appropriate and reshape Ataturk's far-reaching legacy.

Gouged into about 50 acres of former public parkland and constructed in defiance of court orders, the 1,000-room palace, replete with marble floors and soaring atriums, has already cost \$615 million, double its initial price tag. An additional \$135 million in outlays is slated for next year. Yet to come are a conference center and public mosque.

On Friday, Pope Francis became the first foreign head of state to be hosted at the grand edifice, meeting with Erdogan at the start of a three-day visit widely seen as an effort to build interfaith dialogue with Muslims and focus attention on the plight of Christians and other minorities in the war-ravaged Middle East.

Though the Argentine "people's pope" is known for eschewing the trappings of office, the Vatican rejected pleas from opposition activists and others that he decline to set foot in the White Palace.

The presidential palace has sparked outrage in this deeply divided nation, rocked in the last 18 months by a series of protests assailing various Erdogan-backed initiatives. Critics see a profligate vanity project, the latest manifestation of the pugnacious leader's grandiose ambitions.

"It is better to spend this money on schools and hospitals," said Rafet Gorgulu, 64, a discouraged taxi driver in the capital. "What can we do? Erdogan has all the power."

Others defend the White Palace as a focus of pride for a dynamic nation of 80 million that has seen robust economic growth and bolstered regional clout during Erdogan's 12-year tenure, first as prime minister and then as president.

"It shows Turkey's power to people who visit us," said a recent visitor to Ataturk's tomb who declined to give his name for privacy reasons, referring to the new palace rising in the distance. "It is a symbol of our modernity and greatness."

The raging dispute is emblematic of a more profound battle for national identity in Turkey, which has largely shed its longtime image as a stultified but strategic NATO backwater subject to periodic military coups.

The secular vision of Turkey pioneered by Ataturk is yielding to what Erdogan labels the "New Turkey," an increasingly Islamist nation in which behemoth building projects signify prosperity and exalt the president's standing.

"Erdogan realizes he cannot attack Turkey's nationalist symbology, like this mausoleum," said Buse Ceren, a postgraduate architecture and semiotics student, speaking on the grounds housing Ataturk's tomb. "So Erdogan is creating these new symbols."

Across the country, environmentalists express outrage as trees and open space vanish, replaced with highways and shopping malls, towering skyscrapers wrapped in glistening glass and about 20,000 Ottoman-themed, government-subsidized mosques.

Last year, protests roiled the country as bulldozers threatened Istanbul's Gezi Park, a vestigial patch of stately sycamores in the mega-city on the Bosphorus of which Erdogan was once mayor.

Authorities planned to replace the park with a replica of an Ottoman-era barracks, a manifestation of what critics deride as Erdogan's "neo-Ottoman" delusions. His sweeping blueprint, expressed in bricks and mortar, politics and international relations, recalls an epoch much admired in the inner circles of Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party, or AKP, which has its roots in political Islam.

The Gezi Park demonstrations abruptly morphed into a broad outpouring of discontent with Erdogan's take-no-prisoners style, Islamist tendencies and outsized ambitions. Erdogan has aggressively backed government spending on religious schools, curbed alcohol sales and lifted restrictions on the wearing of Muslim head scarves, while also throwing journalists into jail and periodically restricting Internet access, a reflection of his oft-stated disdain for social media and the free press.

The president's embrace of political Islam is a clear retreat from the principles of Ataturk, who founded the Republic of Turkey as a Westernized, secular state after the Ottoman collapse at the end of World War I, which saw Turkey allied with the vanquished Axis powers.

“I suspect that Erdogan uses the narrative of democratization, or building a ‘new Turkey’ ... as a means of partially reversing the country’s secular traditions and imposing his own vision,” said Mateusz Chudziak, a Polish doctoral student specializing in Turkish identity.

Yet the two Turkish strongmen, past and present, share characteristics such as a cult of personality and a tendency toward authoritarian rule.

“If they have the power, let them tear it down,” Erdogan responded dismissively in March to critics of the White Palace. “They can’t stop this building. I’ll be opening it, moving in and living in it.”

Erdogan personally greeted Pope Francis on Friday at the imposing metal gates leading to the residence, and the two talked publicly about interfaith issues.

“Fanaticism and fundamentalism, as well as irrational fears which foster misunderstanding and discrimination, need to be countered by the solidarity of all believers,” the pontiff told dignitaries gathered at the palace.

Francis, the fourth pontiff to visit this overwhelmingly Muslim nation, cited the anguish of “prisoners and entire ethnic populations ... experiencing the violation of the most basic humanitarian laws,” noting specifically the suffering of Christians and Yazidis, both facing persecution in war-torn Iraq and Syria.

As a counterpoint, Erdogan condemned “escalating racism, xenophobia and Islamophobia in the West,” denouncing “the racist perception which associates Islam with terrorism.” He also criticized global “double standards,” pointing to what he called a lack of international resolve against government violence in Syria, Israeli actions in Gaza and Kurdish terrorism in Turkey.

With his triumph in August as the nation’s first popularly elected president, Erdogan is poised to expand the power of what had previously been a largely ceremonial post and assume near complete control of Turkish institutions. He has already tamed the military, long the guardian of Ataturk’s secular Turkey, and extended his influence on the judiciary and security services.

Erdogan has also beaten back sensational corruption allegations, fueled by eavesdropping tapes in which he appeared to be ordering his son, Bilal, to “make vanish” tens of millions of dollars in incriminating cash stashed at a family residence.

Among the White Palace’s many reported amenities are state-of-the-art anti-bugging “deaf rooms” and assorted high-tech security measures.

In the case of Syria, once part of the Ottoman domain, Erdogan’s efforts to reprise Turkey’s imperial glory has spurred tension with the country’s longtime NATO ally, the United States.

Keen to replace Syrian President Bashar Assad with a more pliable ally next door, Erdogan has aggressively aided sundry Syrian rebel factions, including militant Islamists. Turkey has been a notably reluctant partner in the U.S.-led campaign against Islamic State, the al-Qaida breakaway group that has seized vast stretches of territory in Syria and neighboring Iraq. Ankara has pushed for more direct Western intervention to topple Assad, a step Washington has resisted thus far.

But analysts say the tiff with the Obama administration may play well at home, where Erdogan is seen as forcefully standing up to a superpower and patron of Israel.

Polls show Erdogan has unwavering base support among roughly 50 percent of the population. Sweeping electoral triumphs and a fractured political opposition have lent democratic legitimacy to his populist program.

Erdogan's core constituency is composed of generally conservative and often devout Turks from working-class backgrounds, a kind of Turkish silent near-majority that mirrors his humble origins. Many unabashedly admire the president's defiant and public embrace of Islam, while crediting his policies with elevating Turks' economic fortunes.

"Erdogan saved Turkey. He earned this palace," said Mehmet Eraltay, 33, who hawks simit, sesame seed buns, from a street stall in Ankara, a job that an ambitious young Erdogan seeking extra cash once toiled at. "You need a big palace for a big president."

*(Special correspondent Johnson reported from Ankara and Times staff writer McDonnell from Beirut.)*

\*[The two-word phrase **one's self** is only justifiable when *self* is used in a spiritual, philosophical, or psychological sense. In all other cases, *one's self* can be replaced with the pronoun **oneself**.]  
<http://grammarist.com/spelling/oneself-ones-self/>