

THE US, THE EU, AND TURKEY: NOW WHAT?

Having failed to get the results he wanted in the June 7 parliamentary elections, President Erdoğan went to war, hoping the AKP can ride a wave of rally-round-the-flag-ism to return his party back to a majority in new elections on November 1st. In this article, the authors take stock of the tumultuous events of the summer of 2015, arguing that Erdoğan has demonstrated a renewed determination to go to any lengths to secure his grip on – and even enhance – his power. In the process, the West and the US in particular, which have lacked any coherent policy toward Syria and Iraq since 2011, have been exposed as lacking a smart policy toward Turkey as well. Still, the US and the EU must work toward keeping Turkey a part of the West and a democracy in the true sense of the word.

Nate Schenkkan & David J. Kramer*



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* Nate Schenkkan is Project Director for “Nations in Transit” at Freedom House. David J. Kramer is Senior Director for Human Rights and Democracy at the McCain Institute for International Leadership and former President of Freedom House.

The collapse of coalition talks and the scheduling of new elections for November 1st are the latest developments in a tumultuous summer for Turkey. As we started writing this article, the first news came that Turkey would open its airbase at İncirlik for use by US planes conducting operations against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The next day, Turkey began bombing Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) encampments in northern Iraq, followed by the blocking of websites and social media accounts of Kurdish and leftist news sites, journalists, and activists. On July 29th the government announced it had detained more than 1,300 people, the overwhelming majority of them Kurdish and leftist activists. The number by now is over 2,000 and includes over a dozen mayors of towns in the southeast.

It now seems clear that President Erdoğan's interest is less in confronting the challenge of ISIL – despite recent terrorist attacks inside Turkey itself – and more in dealing a swift blow to Kurdish forces in ways that would affect the outcome of a new electoral round. This poses a significant challenge to the West and the United States in particular, which had initially welcomed Turkey's decision to allow the use of the airbase as a breakthrough.

The immediate consequence of the aforementioned military raids on the PKK in northern Iraq and the attacks on domestic allies of the PKK within Turkey is the end of the 2013 truce between the government in Ankara and the Kurdish militants. More significantly, the use of the security services and the military to suppress a political rival marks the logical conclusion of the total instrumentalization of the Turkish state toward the purpose of ensuring that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan never has to leave power.

How Did We Get Here?

The overarching question of Turkish politics for much of the last five years has been whether the current constitution would be changed to increase the powers of the president at the expense of the Parliament. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) campaigned hard in a referendum in 2010 to ensure that voters gave a popular mandate to change what they called the “coup constitution,” because it was written and ratified in 1982 under a military dictatorship following its 1980 takeover of the government. In 2012 and 2013, while the constitutional commission was still working, the discussion was whether the Kurdish movement (then represented by the Peace and Democracy Party – BDP, now by the Peoples' Democratic Party – HDP) would endorse a presidential system in exchange for equal rights and some form of decentralization. That bargain never happened, however, as all parties to the process had fundamentally incompatible goals. The social democratic Republican

People's Party (CHP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) resisted changes to the intertwined constitutional definitions of Turkishness and citizenship, while the AKP was reluctant to take bold steps that would ensure equal rights, and the PKK (participating through its affiliate the BDP) was mistrustful of laying down arms before seeing results.

The Gezi Park protests in June 2013 drove the last nail into the coffin of the constitutional process. The glue that held the much-discussed "Gezi spirit" together was anti-Erdoğanism. When tear gas and batons eventually emptied Taksim Square, the idea that anyone would give Erdoğan an empowered presidency was dead.¹

But the protesters' "success" was Pyrrhic. Erdoğan remained in power, and the protests cemented his belief that the country and the world were out to get him. The coup in Egypt on 3 July 2013 following mass protests organized by the Egyptian military, and the massacre of Muslim Brotherhood protesters at Rabaa a month later, confirmed his suspicions that Gezi had been the beginning of a coup attempt against him.

At each step of the way, Erdoğan has struck back against threats by consolidating more control over the country's institutions, weakening their independence and limiting their capacity to act outside of the parameters he sets. Erdoğan learned the hard way the danger of outsourcing the judiciary and police to the Gülen movement, an Islamist social movement that supported

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Erdoğan and the AKP through 2013, until splits over dialogue with the PKK, foreign relations, and internal power struggles drove them apart. The movement helped Erdoğan by using its positions in the police and judiciary to fabricate evidence in the *Ergenekon* and *Balyoz* trials of hundreds of military officers, which took the military out of politics. When the movement turned on him by releasing dozens of tapes of high-level corruption from December 2013 to March 2014, Erdoğan struck back by frantically firing, hiring, and relocating hundreds of judges and police officers while changing the selection procedures for judicial posts in order to re-gain control over those branches.

¹ More than two years after the protests, the "Gezi spirit" (*Gezi ruhu*) is still used by all sides of the political contest to describe the unity of anti-government sentiment from the protests: http://www.radikal.com.tr/yazarlar/cengiz_candar/7_haziran_gezi_ruhu_ic_muhasabe_restorasyon-1375936; <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/-gezi-ruhu-canlandirilmak/siyaset/detay/2106742/default.htm>.

During Gezi, instrumentalization of the press reached a new height, as media companies beholden to Erdoğan through their other business interests fired dozens of employees, including many of the country's most prominent columnists. The Parliament strengthened the National Intelligence Agency (MİT), headed by one of Erdoğan's closest allies, Hakan Fidan. When Fidan tried to step down to run for Parliament this year, Erdoğan rejected the attempt and put him back in charge of MİT.

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In hindsight, it is strange to think that there was debate about what Erdoğan would do as the August 2014 presidential elections approached. Rather than break his word to the voters that no AKP member of parliament would stay past three terms in office, Erdoğan stepped down as head of the AKP and as premier in the most notional sense possible, appointing his favored candidate, Ahmet Davutoğlu, to be prime minister and asserting control over the most important decisions of state. As

president, he has run the country as if he is still the prime minister, only now with the president's powers as well. Most critically, in March he condemned the so-called “Dolmabahçe Agreement,” when the government he himself appointed publicly announced new steps in the peace process in a joint appearance with the HDP.

HDP Co-Chairman Selahattin Demirtaş has argued publicly that Erdoğan rejected Dolmabahçe because he saw that the peace process with the PKK was not yielding votes.² Erdoğan had been flirting with a nationalist strategy for two years, especially after Gezi finally soured influential liberals on him, and after the break with the Gülen movement gave him an opening to patch up relations with the military by renouncing the Ergenekon case he had once championed. Once the HDP decided to run as a party in the June 7 parliamentary elections and it became clear they would lock up the Kurdish vote, Erdoğan turned his election strategy hard right. It was too little, too late and the HDP cleared the discriminatorily high threshold of 10 percent for entering Parliament, even as the nationalist MHP increased its vote share. The election, with an impressive 86 percent turnout, marked a strong rebuke from voters of all different persuasions to Erdoğan, whose party won only 258 seats compared to 327 in the previous election.

² Ezgi Başaran, “HDP co-chair Demirtaş reveals details of peace process,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, 28 July 2015, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/hdp-co-chair-demirtas-reveals-details-of-peace-process-.aspx?PageID=238&NID=86041&NewsCatID=338>

That has not stopped Erdoğan, however, who is now calling for the HDP's leaders to be prosecuted and cheering the current crackdown with all his might. Making matters worse, he deliberately slow-rolled the search for a new government. The failure to reach agreement will lead to new elections, slated for November 1st, in which the HDP's vote share may well fall below the threshold. Basically, having failed to get the results he wanted the first time, Erdoğan went to war, hoping the AKP can ride a wave of rally-round-the-flag-ism back to a majority.

For sure, this is an Erdoğan-centric narrative of how we got here, and critics will say it overlooks other factors, like widespread popular opposition to any settlement with the PKK, recalcitrance in the militant sections of the Kurdish movement, and the collapse of Syria and Iraq into civil war that strengthened the PKK's position in northern Syria and northern Iraq. Erdoğan does not take his decisions in a vacuum, and he is a canny tactician, which is why he is still running the country 13 years after the AKP first made it into power. But it would be absurd to ignore Erdoğan's unique and defining role. The last five years have been about whether Erdoğan would be able to create a presidency that would allow him to remain in power for more than two decades combined, including his tenure as prime minister. Even with his party weakened by the general elections, he has not given up, and that has made him even more unpredictable.

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What Is the West to Do?

Following the EU's new foreign policy head Federica Mogherini's visit to Turkey in December 2014, the EU has been attempting to reset the relationship with Turkey by focusing on areas where there can be bilateral progress outside the accession process. This has been unhelpfully preventing necessary engagement on issues of mutual interest for the two sides – visas and migration, a deepened customs union, and counterterrorism, especially. The policy recognizes that there is little hope for real progress on accession, due to the grave (and in some cases increasing) opposition to Turkish membership from key European parties, the Turkish side's regular and overt rejection of the EU's values agenda, and a lack of meaningful Turkish effort in a number of technical areas. It is an appropriate reaction to the Erdoğan years, setting aside for better times the issue of accession, while hoping the intervening period does not make things worse.

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Such a policy is the best the EU can do, but unfortunately events seem likely to derail it or at least bog it down. After several years of mounting tension, Turkey is back on an internal war footing. At best, Turkey is going to be riven by fundamental internal political conflicts that stay below the level of mass violence but prevent any progress on fundamental issues for even a limited agenda for EU cooperation like corruption, economic reform, or equal rights for minorities. At worst, it is returning to a period of civil war. And unfortunately,

consumed as it is with its own crises and still struggling to define how its foreign policy works, the EU is not yet ready to play a major role in the security and political crises Turkey is facing. Although the Kurdish side in particular would like to see the EU playing a more active role in mediation of the present conflict, it is hard to see the EU having the capacity, or Turkey having an interest, in allowing that to happen. The current policy is a reasonable construction given these limitations.

The US’ policy of doing nothing to end or mitigate the civil war in Syria for the past four-plus years has not only seen more than 250,000 lives lost and millions displaced; it has also left the region in turmoil and placed a NATO ally, Turkey, in a most precarious position. Now through a combination of hesitancy, impulsiveness, and bureaucratic insistence that what happens inside Turkey cannot be linked to what happens on Turkey’s borders, the approach of the US threatens to extend from a strategic disaster in Syria into a strategic disaster in Turkey as well. As much as the events after the June 7 elections have shown Erdoğan is willing to go to any lengths to secure his power, they have also shown the US to be utterly incoherent in its Syria, Iraq, and now Turkey policies.

It is hard to escape the sense that the US was played when it announced that it welcomed the opening of the Incirlik airbase for US lethal operations against ISIL, only to have the announcement undercut by the Turkish bombing raids against PKK targets in northern Iraq. The timing ensured that the US could not roll back its declaration of gratitude to Turkey, even as Turkey was pounding targets of the mother organization for the US’s best fighting ally so far in northern Syria – the People’s Protection Units, or YPG, which is for all intents and purposes a part of the PKK. Add to this the mess that is the “train and equip” program for US-approved Syrian

fighters that has come under assault by Al Qaeda's branch in Syria, and we have a situation in northern Syria spinning increasingly out of control.

The biggest danger in this – even bigger than any of the consequences of what is probably already an unsalvageable Syria policy – is that the US will go along with, or at least allow itself to be perceived as going along with, an aggressively Turkish nationalist policy inside Turkey. The US needs to remember that as big a threat as the Islamic State is in the region, there can be no stable endgame in southeastern Turkey or northern Syria without Kurdish participation. Alienating the Kurds by siding unstintingly with the Turks, even if the latter is a NATO ally, would damage what is already a badly weakened US position in the region.

In the immediate-term, the US must not trade Turkish support for the anti-ISIL bombing campaign at the cost of a peace agreement in Turkey. In the medium-term, it must recognize the tremendous risk in Erdoğan's determination to remain in power at all costs, even to the point of rejecting pluralist governance and embracing the Turkish nationalism he once spurned. Erdoğan is not going to change his approach based on US pressure. But might other political actors in Turkey, including more moderate members of the AKP, recognize the danger of a nationalist turn if it is framed as also damaging to the alliance with the US and NATO? Despite wide public hostility to the US in Turkey, the elites understand the importance of the US relationship, and communicating that message quietly might be the best way forward.

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Longer term, the US needs to prioritize making Turkey, with the second-largest standing military in NATO, a constructive actor in the Middle East and in southern Europe. US policy needs to catch up to the reality that there will be some form of Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria, and perhaps even a state. There is already a de facto state in the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq. The US needs to lay the groundwork for a stable northern Syria and northern Iraq, which will require mediating conflict between different Kurdish movements, Turkey, and probably some kind of Arab Sunni quasi-state. Erdoğan's re-opening of an anti-Kurdish front, and the perception that the US is backing his move, make this objective more difficult by the day.

In southern Europe, the Turkish flirtation with Russia over the Turkish Stream pipeline project (which has substituted for South Stream as Russia's play to maintain energy dominance in southern Europe and beat back the EU's Third Energy Package) needs to end. So far the Russia-Turkey negotiations appear to be going poorly, but the West must disabuse Erdoğan of the notion that playing the Russia card will strengthen his hand.

One of the rare areas where the US and the EU have concrete incentives to offer is in the negotiations for the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). Turkey has felt marginalized in being excluded from the negotiations, which will affect it because of its customs union with the EU. The US in particular, with its bilateral flexibility, should look for low-cost ways to reassure Turkey about its inclusion in TTIP through preliminary steps to a parallel agreement to the treaty. Combined with the EU's initiative to deepen the customs union, this is an important means to lay the groundwork for continued Turkish integration with the transatlantic space.

Finally, the US and the EU need to ensure that Turkey remains a democracy, not only in the narrow sense of having free and fair elections, but also in the ability of citizens and others within Turkey's borders to realize their rights and to feel represented in the political process. This is a key interest for the US because accomplishing the first two priorities – making Turkey a constructive actor in the region and integrating it more with the West – will require it. For Turkey to be a player for stability in its relations with its future Kurdish neighbors, it will need to embrace a non-ethnic conception of citizenship, and allow on a permanent basis its largest minority to find representation in the Parliament and political system. And for Turkey to sustain an economy based on trade first of all with Europe and second with the Middle East, it will need to make further economic reforms based on breaking down corrupt practices and extending development to all parts of the country and all citizens, no matter their ethnicity or gender. These interests may not intersect with Erdoğan's agenda, but that is no reason for the US and EU not to pursue them.