

In Brief: Events of the past weeks underscore the reality of risk in today's Turkey. The internal and external position of the country has deteriorated, and the polarization and discord that have long marked Turkish society has reached a new and higher pitch. The number of groups and individuals with grievances against the state has grown. Fueled by spillovers from chaos in Turkey's neighborhood, these grievances increasingly threaten the country's stability. As Europe and the United States look to Turkey to help manage risks emanating from the Middle East and Russia, Ankara, like many other capitals, is increasingly inclined to a renationalized, sovereignty conscious approach. Recent discussions in Istanbul and Ankara suggest that Turkey is on course for a period of protracted instability and turmoil, and a troubled relationship with transatlantic partners.

Turkey's Travails, Transatlantic Consequences: Reflections on a Recent Visit

by Ian O. Lesser

Power and Insecurity

Turkey has been in the vanguard of trends evident on both sides of the Atlantic and very well described by Ivan Krastev, chairman of the Centre for Liberal Strategies in Sofia, as a "revolt against the elites." Since the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKParty) as Turkey's leading political movement, indeed Turkey's only real mass party, Turkey has witnessed a steady political, economic, and, above all, social transformation. Established secular actors have not exactly been driven from the scene, but they have retreated to the position of an embattled parallel elite. Populism, nationalism and religion have emerged as leading forces. After more than a decade in power, the personality and preferences of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan increasingly set the country's policy direction. The forced resignation of Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu is widely seen as simply the latest and most dramatic step in Turkey's evolution toward a presidential system, whether *de facto* or *de jure*. Personality driven politics, populism, appeals to nationalism, constraints on press freedom and freedom of expression, declining confidence in the rule of law, and intolerance of dissent have become hallmarks of the contemporary Turkish scene. It is a stark departure from the more open approach that characterized earlier years of AKParty government, and that gained

Erdoğan and his party many admirers in Europe and the United States.

The departure of Davutoğlu removes a figure widely perceived as more moderate in style, if in many respects more ideological than Erdoğan. The choice of Binali Yıldırım, a long-time conservative colleague of the president as Davutoğlu's successor, puts a predictable and compliant figure in the office of prime minister. The inability of Turkey's traditional opposition parties to mount a credible electoral challenge to AKParty, and the May 19 vote in parliament allowing HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party) members to be stripped of their immunity and subject to prosecution, leaves dissenting individuals in the AKParty movement itself as the only viable source of opposition. But leading figures such as Abdullah Gül and Bülent Arınç seem disinclined to either challenge Erdoğan within AKParty or form a new conservative party. Erdoğan's brand of politics and foreign policy are likely to be a driving force on the Turkish scene for some time to come.

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In foreign policy, the president and his close advisors are inclined to combine Muslim affinity with a form of non-alignment in which policies emanating from Brussels or Washington are treated with considerable suspicion. To be sure, this distrust of the West is widely shared across the Turkish political spectrum, and is hardly unique to AKParty circles. But it takes on new meaning in light of the rapid deterioration of Turkey's internal and external security environment. Under

these conditions, the president's tendency to personalize international disputes, including those with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Russian President Vladimir Putin, risks turning Turkish foreign policy into a series of unpredictable and open-ended vendettas. The president's sharp rhetoric in talking with and about Western partners has made Turkey an increasingly uncomfortable interlocutor for European and U.S. policymakers. The scenes of Erdoğan's security detail roughing up protestors and media outside a policy event Washington in April only contributed to his declining reputation in U.S. policy circles. These are not minor considerations at time when Turkey needs all the good will it can muster in responding to the deepening chaos in its neighborhood, chaos that is increasingly finding form in attacks inside Turkey.

Terrorism, Again

Turkey is no stranger to terrorism. Since the 1960s, Turkey has faced the threat of terrorism from various quarters, including violent Islamists, the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) and related networks, and extremist movements on the right and the left. At times, terrorist attacks have shaken the security of the state in fundamental ways, spurring coups and shaping relations with allies and adversaries. With recent incidents – collectively more lethal than the attacks in Paris and Brussels – terrorism has once again moved to center stage in Turkish perceptions. Turkey is no longer immune from the self-proclaimed Islamic State group (ISIS) or ISIS-inspired attacks on Turkish as well as foreign targets. The end of the PKK's truce with Ankara has unleashed a new spate of terrorism and insurgency targeting civilians as well as the security forces. Turkish and foreign experts worry that the conflicts in Iraq and Syria, and the flow of foreign fighters from and through Turkey in recent years, has created a substantial reservoir of radicalism and an extensive network around the country that Turkey's intelligence and security services are belatedly attempting to roll up.

Turkey is highly exposed to spillovers of terrorism and political violence, as well as homegrown radicalism. The deepening conflict with the PKK reminds many Turks of the violence that wracked the south-east of Turkey in the 1990s and greatly complicated Ankara's relations with neighbors, including Syria and Greece, as well as the United States, Germany, France, and others. The latest incarnation of this struggle could prove even more challenging. The conflict has acquired a more widely distributed urban dimension, with a greater risk of inter-communal violence between Turks and Kurds, something that Turkey has thus far avoided. PKK and Islamist terrorism (along with some attacks by radical leftists) is already having an isolating effect on the country. Tourism has reportedly declined by at least one-third, a trend made worse by the loss of Russian visitors and the general perception of risk in the region. International officials, military personnel, and businesses are reducing their presence in the country, and there are understandable concerns that security fears will combine with political and economic conditions to dissuade foreign investors. A protracted struggle with terrorism would have a significant effect on the prosperity of a country that has benefited greatly from globalization.

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Ankara's insistence that the Democratic Union Party (PYD) is little more than a front for the PKK in Syria has emerged as a leading obstacle in relations with Washington over the defining regional conflict on Turkey's borders. Turkish officials and analysts do not share Washington's view of the PYD as an effec-

tive counter to ISIS in Syria. Ankara continues to give strategic priority to the struggle against Kurdish separatism in the region, which it sees as closely linked to Turkey's own internal security and cohesion. These conflicting perspectives may be difficult to reconcile in the near-term. Over the longer-term, and if Syria remains a zone of chaos, some Turkish observers suggest that Ankara might possibly come to terms with the Kurds in Syria, much as it has done with the Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq. The prospect of a fragmented Syria may make such compromises a necessity, if only to establish a buffer against spillover attacks. The daily and sometimes lethal rocket attacks on the town of Kilis could be the harbinger of more serious strikes. The pressure on Ankara to launch more extensive cross-border military operations to put Turkish border areas out of range is likely to grow, along with the need for surveillance and defense systems capable of countering the rocket threat from ISIS-held areas. Parallels with the Israeli experience with Gaza are hard to ignore.

Coming to Terms with Chaos

The very real prospect of de facto fragmentation in Syria and Iraq, with the extensive involvement of Iran, Russia, and the Gulf states, both directly and via proxies, overturns longstanding Turkish assumptions about the Middle East. The region has variously been treated as a source of risk and held at arms length, or more recently as a source of commercial and diplomatic opportunity. The latter was very much the policy pursued by Davutoğlu as an advisor and minister. It was an approach reinforced by the affinities and interests of the AKParty political class, many of whose members have been more enthusiastic about relations with the Muslim world than the West. The collapse of the regional order has cut Turkish policy loose from its essentially conservative and state-centered moorings. The attempt to shape the political and security environment across the Arab world through support for the Muslim Brotherhood, and allegedly, by backing armed Islamist factions across the border in Syria,

might have been a reasonable bet if the established regimes had fallen and an alternative order had been consolidated. This has not been the case, and Ankara is now faced with the prospect of durable chaos on its borders and troubled relations with Cairo and Tehran.

Beyond the prospect of sustained instability and broken or weak states in its neighborhood, Turkey now faces the stark challenge of the return of geopolitical competition and hard-security threats. Russia has come back to the region in ways that directly threaten Turkish security and risk new confrontations and escalation (of an even more serious nature than the November 24, 2015, shoot-down of a Russian Su-24 that had briefly violated Turkish airspace). Ankara has been supportive of the Iran nuclear deal – it has no interest in seeing the rise of a new nuclear armed state in the region – but now fears the extension of Iranian influence and the potential for tacit cooperation between Tehran and Washington. Whether driven by affinity, national interest, or both, the result has been an increasingly sectarian Turkish policy in a region increasingly defined by Sunni-Shia antagonism. Ankara's decision to establish a military base in Qatar is the latest step in an approach that places Turkey squarely within a Saudi-led Sunni coalition. It is all a far cry from the diffident, arms-length approach to the Middle East that characterized Turkish policy for most of the period since the establishment of the Republic. It is also increasingly at odds with U.S. and European strategies that give precedence to the fight against Sunni extremists.

The regional challenge is further complicated by its connection with Turkey's internal security. The murky role of both moderate and more radical militias in Syria, after years of Turkish involvement, may have unpredictable consequences for security inside the country, from terrorism to organized crime. As in southeastern Anatolia in the 1990s, the persistence of unstable and violent conditions has encouraged a cross-border war economy based on the smuggling of people, goods and arms, and the corruption this inevi-

tably encourages. These activities can be difficult to contain, and will complicate Turkey's ability to control its borders, including the border with Syria and on the Aegean coast.

A Fragile Bargain with Europe

The Turkey-EU refugee agreement should be strategic for both parties. With almost 3 million refugees in Turkey, Ankara has as much of a stake as Brussels in controlling the migration flow, perhaps more. But the agreement with the EU exposes a range of unresolved issues beyond migration and border control. Europe, above all Germany, looks to Turkey as a partner in managing longer-term migration and security risks emanating from Europe's south. Turks, increasingly

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inclined to the view that Europe needs Turkey more than Turkey needs Europe, are still keen to put the country's EU accession process back on track. This last aspiration, in particular, is unlikely to be met. Ankara may yet succeed in securing the prize of visa-free travel to the Schengen area, after much delay and with many caveats. More likely, Turkey's recent slide from liberal democratic norms will keep the European Parliament from approving the agreed package. Turkey's refusal to amend its legal definition of terrorism is a key point of disagreement, a dispute that will surely deepen if HDP deputies lose their seats in parliament. In this case, Ankara has made it clear that the entire agreement could collapse.

Even under the most favorable political conditions on both sides – very far from the current reality – the prospects for a broad revival of Turkish-EU rela-

tions are not good. Turkey is no longer converging with European norms, and a troubled Europe is hardly primed for enlargement. At best, Turkey and Europe may come to a medium term *modus operandi* based on a series of transactional arrangements on borders, visas, and counter-terrorism cooperation. This is closer to “privileged partnership” than a path to accession. The United States, too, is a stakeholder in Turkey’s progressive convergence with Europe (a process underway for centuries, so it would be unwise to dismiss as a long-term trajectory). The interruption of this process undermines a longstanding feature of the United States’ Turkey policy.

Deterrence and Reassurance

Turkey’s security concerns are a window into NATO’s new strategic challenges. As the Alliance looks toward its July Warsaw summit, the need to balance strategy toward the east and south is a central task. Many alliance members are focused primarily on risks from only one of these quarters. For Turkish officials and strategists, NATO’s southern strategy is the leading concern, but for Ankara this is now largely about deterring Russia. Dealing with Moscow’s return as a military actor in the Levant, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Black Sea is at the top of Turkey’s security agenda. Looking toward the summit, and after, Ankara will seek additional NATO commitments to Turkey’s air defense and a larger standing naval presence in the region. Turkey will seek reassurance that NATO’s evolving rapid response capabilities will be available for use in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean as well as more obvious flashpoints around the Baltic Sea and on the Polish border. The specter of Russia’s growing assertiveness is rapidly eroding Ankara’s traditional resistance to a greater role for U.S. and European naval power in its neighborhood.

Apart from the desire to see a tougher NATO stance toward the PKK, Turkish policymakers appear less enthusiastic about an Alliance role in addressing crises in Syria and Iraq, and the spillovers on Turkey’s

borders. This could be explained by Turkey’s desire to manage these protracted conflicts free of the encumbrances of Alliance decision-making. Or it may simply reflect the fact that when it comes to Russia, Turkey and its transatlantic security partners are essentially on the same page; when it comes to the complex situation in Syria, often they are not.

Turkish-U.S. relations – never easy to manage – will be a critical part of this equation. As in the EU, U.S. policymakers and observers are deeply uncomfortable with the authoritarian drift in Turkey and the consequences of a deepening conflict with the PKK for Turkish democracy and security. Security concerns, declining confidence in the rule of law and the waning of Turkey’s European vocation will further discourage U.S. trade, investment and tourism – all underdeveloped in any case. The net result is a situation reminiscent of the 1990s, characterized by transactional diplomacy and frequent differences over regional security policy. Policymakers on both sides will continue to acknowledge the strategic nature of the relationship, but based more on geography and momentum than on shared projects and affinity.

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Against this backdrop, Ankara will no doubt weigh the implications of a Clinton or Trump presidency. Neither is likely to provide Ankara with an easy partnership. A Trump administration would presumably apply much tougher tests in the United States’ security commitments and regional presence, and might seek a unilateral accommodation with Moscow in areas of concern to Turkey. A Clinton administration would presumably be more conventional and predictable in its approach, and perhaps more inclined to a forward

leaning policy in Syria and elsewhere. But as with the Obama administration, these policies might not accord with Ankara's preferences.

The Long View

The combination of Turkey's own internal conditions and a deteriorating external environment suggest that Turkey is on course for difficult times, not least in relations with transatlantic partners. Of course, the flux is not limited to the Turkish side. Europe's troubled economic and political scene would be enough to send Turkey's accession prospects into reverse, even in the absence of the country's sharp turn away from EU norms. The very uncertainty of the European project could offer new avenues for Turkish integration over time, but this is a very distant prospect. Ironically, the real potential for a Cyprus settlement in 2016 could remove a chief obstacle to Turkey's accession prospects, and much else, but this may be to no avail if Turkey continues on its current course.

It is correct to see Turkey as a critical partner in crisis management for the EU and NATO, but the reality goes well beyond this immediate image. The conflict and competition in Turkey's neighborhood are unlikely to be transient and may prove very durable, presenting Ankara and transatlantic partners with long-term, structural challenges, from migration to terrorism, alongside more conventional threats. Under these conditions, Turkey is likely headed for a protracted period of profound insecurity, and Turkish-Western relations will revert to the security-heavy and often uncomfortable pattern of earlier decades – a strategic partnership of convenience, with little warmth and many risks.

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