



# Middle East Studies

at the Marine Corps University

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## Turkey: Between Competition and Cooperation

### The US-Turkey Alliance

by Ross Wilson

In 1947, President Harry S. Truman declared that “it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures” from the Soviet Union. The Truman Doctrine committed American aid to Turkey and Greece. Three years later, US support brought the two countries into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which itself represented an unprecedented effort to advance American security through alliances.

The US-Turkey alliance has never been without problems, marked by tensions over Greece, Cyprus, and, more recently, Iraq and Syria, among other things. Its and Turkey’s deficiencies have been overcome or overlooked by a Washington focused on the realizations that whatever their warts may be, allies are a good thing—a force multiplier in security, foreign policy, social, economic, and other arenas; that Turkey’s location on the cusp between East and West, between Europe and the Middle East, makes it especially valuable; and that alternative anchors for US security interests in the region are at least as problematic.

Today, US-Turkish relations seem parlous. Some issues are substantive, based on differing perceptions and tactics. Others have to do with clashing aspirations. Ankara’s vitriolic criticism of the West and friendly relations with Moscow and Tehran have led to questions about a change of axis. Authoritarian, one-man rule in Turkey contradicts democratic values.

Syria presents the most vexatious problems. Turkey and the US partnered in backing the revolt against President Bashar al-Assad, but Russian and Iranian support since 2015 now seems to have secured his rule for years to come. Turkey backed the US-led coalition against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) whose success now poses new challenges, especially for the US military’s alliance with the Kurdistan

### MES Notes

#### AY18 MES Turkey Panel

This issue of *Insights* carries essays by the speakers who participated in the 3 May 2018 panel “Turkey: Between Competition and Cooperation” hosted by Middle East Studies at the Marine Corps University. The panel served as part of both the 2018 MES Lecture Series “Navigating Geopolitical Competition and Internal Wars in the Middle East and North Africa” and part of the Diplomacy and Statecraft instructional block for the Marine Corps War College.

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Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed People's Defense Forces (YPG)—a Kurdish faction anathema to Syria's Sunni majority and part of the violently anti-Turkish Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

The attempted overthrow of Turkey's government in 2016 constitutes another stain on US-Turkish relations because the individual most Turks believe masterminded it, Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen, lives in Pennsylvania. Turkish authorities have demanded the United States hand him over, but extradition must be based on evidence, where Turkey's case has been hard to substantiate. Taking up the cudgel, Turkey's government has detained local US embassy staff as well as a Protestant American pastor. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has publicly linked the pastor's release to Gulen's return home. The discord prompted an unprecedented suspension of visa services by both countries.

Bilateral dissonance over Syria, Gulen, and other issues coincides with speculation about a shift in Ankara's priorities from West to East. The reality is mixed. Turkey's European Union (EU) accession breakdown resulted more from EU than Turkish actions. Warming relations with Russia, Iran, and China involve more symbols than substance. Vicious, Erdogan-fanned anti-Americanism may be more Turkish domestic politics than real foreign policy orientation, but it has eroded trust and both countries' ability to work through problems. The contretemps playing out now over Turkey's air defense acquisition plans—first to buy Chinese, then a late 2017 switch to Russia—gives this a harsher edge.

Erdogan's monopolization of power, jailing of putschists and plain-vanilla critics alike, and evisceration of media freedom and political debate have rendered the media, parliament, and judiciary unable to function as safeguards of freedom. Deteriorating democracy has added to Turkey's incapacities, further complicated working with it, and made Washington's relationship with it harder to defend.

America's choices regarding Turkey are not good. Allies remain a good thing, location gives the country outsized value, and the alternatives seem dubious. But how in the world can things be made to work given the clashing personalities, ambitions, priorities, and interests? Successful US strategy with Turkey will take sustained attention, strong leadership, and luck.

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## **Deinstitutionalization of Foreign Policy Making in Erdogan's Turkey**

by Sinan Ciddi

The presidency of Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan has transformed the arena of foreign policy into a tool for obtaining a series of personal ambitions. The policy decision-making process has largely abandoned the traditional three advisers and succumbed to the whims of a bellicose president. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for example, is no longer an institution that provides analysis and input into policymaking but merely an implementor of decisions taken in the presidential palace. The National Security Council, which had for so long given the military a strong voice in decision-making, has been silenced. Instead of catching wind from these institutions, international leaders and observers today learn of Turkey's policies mainly through Erdogan's weekly speeches in front of his fellow Justice and Development Party (AKP) members.

It is this personalization of foreign policy that explains the numerous anti-Western policy pursuits Turkey's allies and partners have observed recently. When a handful of EU countries—including the Netherlands, Germany, and Austria—refused to permit Turkish Cabinet ministers from holding election rallies within their borders, for instance, Erdogan brazenly retorted that Nazism was still very

much alive in Europe. The president also threatened that he would scrap his country's deal with the European Union (EU) to keep Syrian refugees from reaching the bloc unless Brussels provided financial compensation to Ankara and visa-free travel rights to Turkish citizens in return.

Some have referred to Turkey's new way of interacting with the world under Erdogan as "transactional"—a rather polite characterization. But whatever the term for this policy, and the incendiary language surrounding it, Turkish decision-makers in the pre-Erdogan era never would have subscribed to it. It simply doesn't help Turkey achieve any meaningful goals. Instead, the new approach to foreign policy undermines the country's relationship with its European partners and serves to confirm the suspicions of Europe's right-wing voters and skeptics that Turkey does not belong to their club.

Similarly, Turkey's insistence on toppling the government in Syria initially was born not of any strategic goal but of Erdogan's outrage at Syrian President Bashar al-Assad for defying his recommendation to step down. During the Cold War, Turkey limited its substantive involvement in Middle Eastern politics to signing the 1955 Baghdad Pact and its successor, the Central Treaty Organization, aimed at containing the spread of communism. Its foreign policymakers determined that deeper engagement in regional affairs would render no tangible benefit for the country. Under Erdogan's direction, on the other hand, Turkey has plunged headlong into regional politics, working since 2012 to oust the Syrian government. Along the way, it has brought the region closer to the brink of open war by risking confrontation with Russia and Iran and embittering its relationship with the United States. Erdogan justifies his country's involvement in the Syrian conflict with reasons more and less legitimate. The prospect that a Kurdish state allied with the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) will coalesce along Turkey's southern border, for example, is a genuine worry for the country. Yet Turkey's operation in Syria's Afrin province to prevent that outcome carries with it the risk of a clash between US and Turkish troops.

In his attempts to project strong, determined and charismatic leadership, Erdogan has pulled out all the stops. He has defied Europe and the United States to show voters that he's a tough man who isn't afraid to stand up to the West. And now he intends to parlay the success of that strategy into success in snap elections scheduled for June 2018. Erdogan's swagger is likely to win him populist support ahead of the vote, originally slated for November 2019, but in the long run it will chip away at the decades long relationships that previous leaders worked tirelessly to create. Furthermore, opposing Europe and the United States in demeaning ways, such as arbitrarily detaining and arresting their citizens, will do very little to advance Turkey's strategic goals. As the economy deteriorates, the question of who will come to Turkey's aid remains unclear. Erdogan may win the presidency for a second term only to preside over an increasingly marginalized and inward-looking country. He would have no one to blame but himself.

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## **The New Sultan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey**

by Soner Cagaptay

Turkey is in a deep crisis polarized between supporters and opponents of Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has won successive elections in Turkey since 2002 on a platform of right-wing populism. Erdogan has demonized and cracked down on electoral constituencies that are not likely to vote for him, a strategy that has dramatically worsened polarization in Turkey, which is now sharply split between pro- and anti-Erdogan camps: the former, a conservative and Turkish-nationalist right-wing coalition, believes that the country is paradise; the latter, a loose group of leftists, secularists, liberals and Kurds, thinks that it lives in hell.

Erdogan is one of the most influential political leaders of our time. Buried under all the criticism, his record has many positive elements, namely, his successful delivery of economic growth and improved living standards. This is Erdogan's bright side. When Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, Turkey was a country of mostly poor people; it is now a country of mostly middle-income citizens.

In any case, and barring economic meltdown, Erdogan will go down in history as one of Turkey's most memorable, effective, and influential leaders, likely ranking alongside Ataturk, who believed that the secular, Westernized political system he built in the early twentieth century would never be torn down.

Having governed Turkey for 16 years, from 2002, Erdogan has amassed powers sufficient to undermine Ataturk's legacy. He has flooded the country's political and education systems with rigidly conservative Islam and pivoted Turkey away from Europe and the West.

However, Erdogan has a problem: whereas Ataturk came to power as a military general, Erdogan has a democratic mandate to govern. And what is more, Turkey is split almost down the middle between pro- and anti-Erdogan camps. Despite these facts, Erdogan desperately wants to change Turkey in his own image in the way that Ataturk did, and herein lies the crisis of modern Turkey: half of the country embraces Erdogan's brand of politics, but the other half vehemently opposes it. So long as Turkey is genuinely democratic, Erdogan cannot complete his revolution.

This has given birth to Erdogan's dark, illiberal side: in order to push forward with his platform, he has subverted the country's democracy. Exploiting his popularity, he has eroded democratic checks and balances, including the media and the courts.

Although he has won elections democratically, Erdogan has gradually become more autocratic, ensuring that the political playing field is uneven in order to prevent power from escaping his hands. Erdogan's personalization of power and domination of political and civil institutions has rendered Turkey politically brittle, in a state of permanent crisis.

Erdogan ought to be interested in avoiding this scenario for his own sake. The Turkish president wants to make his country a great power. He has made Turkey a middle-income country, and it now has a chance to become an advanced economy if he builds an information society driven by value-added production, including software and information technology. In other words, Erdogan's Turkey can continue to rise if it transforms itself from a country that exports cars (its chief export) into one that is a hub for Google.

Turkey's capital and creative classes will flee if the government continues on its current path, and international capital and talent will avoid it if Turkey's leaders cannot provide unfettered access to the internet and ensure freedoms of expression, media, assembly, and association and respect for individual rights. If Turkey remains an open society, it will continue to rise. If it ceases to be democratic, it will not. The choice is Erdogan's to make.

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