

The New Sultan: Erdogan's Consolidation of Power in Turkey.

Prepared by Dr Renad Mansour

Cambridge Security Initiative

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Cambridge Security Initiative:

Sir Richard Dearlove
Professor Stefan Halper
Dr Peter Martland
Dr Alan Dawson

Abstract

The focus of this paper will be the current political tension in Turkey. It analyzes Ankara's internal political dynamics, specifically Erdogan's centralization of power vis-à-vis opposition movements, which include a rivaling Islamist movement inspired by Fethullah Gulen, Turkish nationalist parties seeking to maintain the old establishment, and Kurdish parties pursuing greater political and social rights and representation. Two of these opposition groups, the Gulenists and the Kurds, object to Erdogan's consolidation of power. Then, this paper will examine Turkey's regional and international relations, and the move away from a "Zero Problem" policy. This paper ultimately concludes with an analysis of implications for the U.S. and its NATO allies.

Executive Summary

- During President Erdogan's 13-year stint as Turkish leader, he has pursued a successful divide and conquer strategy that has weakened all major political parties and movements, namely Fethullah Gulen's Islamist movement, the "Deep State" establishment Kemalist parties, and Kurdish nationalist parties.
- To overcome the powerful nationalist establishment parties seeking to restrict his AK Party's emergence, Erdogan initially worked with Fethullah Gulen's movement, which had infiltrated the police force, judiciary, media, education and financial sector.
- Erdogan's new "marriage of convenience" allies are the Kemalist establishment, which is weaker now. He no longer fears that the establishment can bring him down or imprison him, as it did when he was the mayor of Istanbul.
- The main political fault line in Turkey will continue to be Erdogan versus the Gulenist movement. The latter is by nature is not a well-defined or systematic entity. Since 2013, Erdogan has begun purging the Gulenist movement under the mantra, "you're Gulenist until proven otherwise".
- The failed 2016 coup has given his AK Party the opportunity to further consolidate domestic power by increasing the purge effort against purging the strongest opposition. In the first ten days following the coup, the government arrested 67 000 people.
- Since the 2015 elections, Erdogan has been working to counteract the electoral success of the HDP, a party seeking to represent the Kurds in parliament. As a result, the ceasefire with the PKK had broken down and the Kurdish conflict has resumed.
- Due to the new electoral realities, it is likely that Erdogan will continue to work against the Kurdish attempt for institutional representation. Although the HDP expressed its condemnation of the 2016 failed coup, Erdogan will continue to view institutionalized Kurdish politics as a threat.
- Erdogan has become an illiberal democrat – he believes that showcasing his popular support (he continues to win elections) is the way to claim legitimacy and a free hand to pursue his centralization of power.
- During the coup attempt of 2016, masses came out to express their support for Erdogan and the AK Party.
- Following the so-called Arab Spring in 2011, the "Zero Problems in the Neighbourhood" Policy has fallen apart.
- Ankara's reluctance to fully combat the Islamic State at times has now meant that the organization has grown and become a threat to Turkey – which is under pressure to support the anti-Islamic State coalition.
- Erdogan's purges, in response to the 2016 coup attempt, also have implications for Turkey's regional policy – particularly in Syria and Iraq – where it can no longer exert much direct military influence.
- The U.S.-Turkey relationship is currently strained. A Turkish diplomat in Moscow stated, "our relations with the US are the worst in 50 years." Washington's harbouring of Gulen and cooperation with the PKK-linked PYD in Syria continue to be a fragile aspect of the relationship.

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- An emerging policy for Erdogan is to balance the strains in the U.S. relationship by reaching out to Russia, which became the first country he visited following the 2016 coup attempt.

Introduction

On 15 July 2016, a faction within the Turkish Armed Forces that referred to itself as the Peace at Home Council (*Yurtta Sulh Konseyi*) moved to stage a coup d'état against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government. The group managed to seize temporary control of several key areas in Ankara, Istanbul and other major cities. Initially, it enjoyed minor successes, as they temporarily seized the Disaster Coordination Centre and the state-run Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) in order to cut off media broadcasting, the governor of Sakarya's office and the Istanbul Greater City Municipality. It just missed, by less than an hour, capturing the fleeing president at his hotel in Marmaris.

However, they began facing resistance when Erdogan issued a video message from his cell phone aired on Turkey's national television which inspired a counter coup. Citizens loyal to Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) took to the streets arresting military personnel affiliated with the coup. In a matter of hours, then, the Peace Council's plan fell apart. According to a text message thread, Major Celebioglu told the fighters to "do what it takes to stay alive," meaning "Surrender. Or Flee."

Although significant, as this paper will discuss, this coup can be placed as part of a series of military coups (successful and unsuccessful) that have defined the political system in the modern state of Turkey. As a form of check on the government, the military has been, uniquely as a member of NATO, an autonomous institution with a mandate to serve as the "guardian of Turkish democracy" and to defend the principles of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founding father of the modern Turkish republic. These principles, referred to as Kemalism, include republicanism (*cumhuriyetçilik*), populism (*halkçilik*), nationalism (*milliyetçilik*), secularism (*laiklik*), statism (*devletçilik*), and reformism (*devrimcilik*).

To defend these principles, the military intervened, either physically or through "recommendations", on several occasions in modern Turkish history: in 1960 to arrest the president, prime minister, and senior officials; in 1971 to restore the economy and force the prime minister to resign and in 1980 to restore order. In the post-1970s era, Turkey experienced significant political instability with eleven prime ministers, and military governments for three years and again in 1997, to force a series of demands, including a headscarf ban, through a memorandum and then the military forced the prime minister to resign.

After a period of military quiescence in the post millennial period, the next attempted coup was against Erdogan's government in 2016. However, with this attempted coup, and for the first time in Turkey's long history of military interventions, tens of thousands of citizens risked their lives to protest against the military on the street. Moreover, it marked the most bloodshed in any military intervention.

Erdogan: From Outsider to Sultan

The root causes of the current crisis are ramified and have direct links to Erdogan's strategy that developed from one of survival (2003-2007) to one of centralized power (2007-present).¹ 2007 was a critical year for Erdogan's consolidation of power vis-à-vis the Kemalist establishment. At the time, he was pushing for an Islamist leader, Abdullah Gul, to become president. The military establishment, backed by nationalist parties in parliament, opposed this move; they rejected the idea of Turkey having an Islamist president with a wife who wore a headscarf. To stop the nomination, they boycotted the parliamentary vote on the presidency. In what became known as the e-memorandum, the armed force general staff warned that the military is the defender of secularism and would act if needed – hinting at another coup. To overcome the e-memorandum, Erdogan decided to again invoke populism, by calling early elections. After a sweeping victory for his AK Party, he had the majority needed to push for his candidate, Gul, to become president. After this, Erdogan began his consolidation of power, which the armed forces were unable to combat.

A brief sociological analysis reveals Erdogan's emergence from humble political servant to illiberal democratic consolidating absolute power. He comes from a pious and poor family and grew up in working-class Kasimpasa neighbourhood of Istanbul. Reflecting on his poor background, Erdogan claimed, "I was shaped by that mud."² Erdogan was also known for his religious piety. During an era in which political Islam was emerging in Turkey as a reaction to the forced Kemalists secularism, he became a disciple of Islamists leader Necmettin Erbakan and his National Order party. He even named his son, Necmettin Bilal, after this his first political idol. Political Islam has and continues to define Erdogan's ideological stance.

Emerging onto the political scene in the 1990s, Erdogan became the mayor of Istanbul following the local elections of March 1994, when he won some 25 percent of the popular vote. He positioned himself as a pragmatic leader who could tackle the city's water, pollution, and traffic problems by enhancing government services and cleaning up the streets. According to a journalist, the "standard mantra used by Erdogan supporters to characterize his term is one in which corruption was replaced by honest administration and city services were actually delivered. This view enjoys much popular resonance."³

Although emerging quick and building his profile, Erdogan was no match for the Kemalist establishment, which was bent on denying Islamists a chance to emerge from the political sidelines. After three years in power, the Islamist ideology began to seep

¹ For more, see Georges Fahmi, *Institutionalizing Religion: Islamic Religious Authorities and Support for Democracy in the Middle East*, PhD Dissertation (Florence: European University Institute, June 2013).

² <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/11/magazine/the-erdogan-experiment.html?pagewanted=all>

³ <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/11/magazine/the-erdogan-experiment.html?pagewanted=all>

more and into his leadership style. Eventually, in December 1997, he recited a poem: "The mosques are our barracks, the domes our helmets, the minarets our bayonets and the faithful our soldiers." He even pushed for the poem to be published in classroom textbooks.⁴ The reaction of the Kemalist establishment was swift and for "inciting violence", the mayor was sentenced to ten months in prison, forced to resign his post and banned from participating in parliamentary elections.

Erdogan faced the so-called deep state throughout his political emergence. The forces, committed to the Kemalist principals, served as the check on his power. In response, Erdogan stated that in Turkey there was a "white" and "black" Turk dichotomy and, because of his Islamist ideological underpinnings, put himself under the black category, which made him an outsider.

Popular support, however, has fuelled Erdogan's legitimacy throughout his political career. At his lowest moments, when his leadership has been questioned, he has relied on displays of popular support to regain authority. For instance, thousands accompanied Erdogan on his way to prison as a convicted ex-mayor. He once claimed, "those who claim to respect democracy, why don't they respect the vote of the people." 17 years later, when individuals attempted a coup against his leadership in 2016, Erdogan inspired millions to march for the sake of Turkey's unity. To limit the checks and balances by the deep state or democratic forces, then, Erdogan uses populism. Indeed, he enjoys the support of millions, which then fuels his consolidation of power via undemocratic means.

A diplomatic cable written by former U.S. Ambassador Eric Steven Edelman in January 2004, less than a year into Erdogan's premiership, offers revealing insights into the leader's character. According to Edelman, there are five noteworthy traits.⁵ Each characterization, although not exhaustive, has revealed itself during moments during Erdogan's 13-year premiership and presidency.

1. "Overbearing pride."

His pride was on clear display when he as president stated, in May 2016, "I am the head of executive, legislative and judicial bodies [...] They have not gotten used to this yet, but they will."⁶

2. "Unbridled ambition stemming from a belief that God has anointed him to lead Turkey. During the AK Party Congress in 2003, Erdogan used Quronic discourse to allude that he is on a God-appointed mission."

⁴ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-13746679>

⁵ https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/04ANKARA348_a.html

⁶ <http://news.nationalpost.com/full-comment/terry-glavin-if-assad-gets-a-pass-for-mass-murder-in-syria-erdogan-is-free-to-go-about-his-post-coup-witch-hunts>

Following the 2016 coup, Erdogan expressed his belief that God had given him this gift, and as such, allowed him to follow through with the radical purge of his opponents, as described above. Indeed, Islamist discourse has remained a legitimizing factor in the president's speeches and comments.

3. "An authoritarian loner streak which prevents the growth of strong and skillful advisors."

While several of his aides and advisors have resigned, the most noteworthy was Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's resignation.⁷ Many argued that Erdogan became wary of Davutoglu, who began criticizing Erdogan's plan to make Turkey a presidential system in order for him to consolidate power. Davutoglu claimed that Turkey would rebound "when a prime minister more closely aligned with President Erdogan takes office."⁸

4. "An overweening desire to stay in power."

Connected to the split from Davutoglu, Erdogan attempted to overcome the term limits assigned to the prime minister by initiating a process whereby he would become president, and then shift executive power to the presidency.

5. "A distrust of women."

While distrust may be too strong a word, Erdogan's leadership has featured a major gender gap. Following the 2011 elections, he chose to only include one female, Fatma Sahin, who became the Minister of Family and Social policies, in his cabinet. He has also made controversial statements concerning the role of women in society. He told the Hurriyet newspaper that "a woman who refuses maternity and gives up housekeeping faces the threats of losing her freedom. She is lacking and is a half [a person] no matter how successful she is in the business world."⁹

From these five personality traits, Edelman concludes that Erdogan is "seriously vulnerable to miscalculating the political dynamic [...] and vulnerable to attacks by those who would disrupt his equilibrium."

However, while these characteristics have indeed defined Erdogan's stint in power, they have in actuality had the opposite effect from Edelman's prediction. Rather than harm, they have thus far helped Erdogan consolidate his power vis-à-vis the Kemalist establishment. In sum, his confident use of popular support, couched in religious discourse, and his ability to divide and rule any emerging oppositional front has pushed

⁷ <https://www.ft.com/content/0a2ef39c-12bf-11e6-839f-2922947098f0>

⁸ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36213401>

⁹ <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/turkey-s-president-erdogan-calls-women-who-work-half-persons-n586421>

the leader to successfully overcome his "black Turk" disadvantage and to become a Sultan-esque ruler.

And The Rest: Erdogan's Broad Opposition

Erdogan's methods of centralizing power and the consequences flowing from it invited broad opposition, which includes not only the nationalist front that he has been fighting from his early days in political office, but also Islamists loyal to Gulen and Kurdish nationalists. His style uses an imitation of 19th century Bismarck, who believed in a "no eternal friends no eternal enemies" way to use people. This age old tactic of despots has been replicated by others in the past.

An Opposing Islamist Trend: The Gulen Movement

Today, Erdogan's strongest rival comes from within his own Islamist camp. After concluding that the Gulen Movement, referred to post-coup as the Gulenist Terror Organization (Fetullahci Teror Orgutu or FETO), was responsible for the 2016 failed coup attempt, the president has embarked on a campaign to squash his major rival.

With its leader in exile the Gulenist movement has become international, with schools in some 150 countries. *Time* magazine even included Gulen as one of the most 100 influential people in the world. It's estimated that his followers range from 3 to 6 million worldwide.¹⁰

Before analyzing the reach of Fethullah Gulen, it is important to understand his ideological difference with Erdogan. On the question of political activism, the two major Islamist trends come from very different schools of thoughts. As discussed above, Erdogan follows the Necmettin Erbakan School, which is a version of political Islam that calls for the establishment of political parties in order to achieve immediate change at the top. This is in line with several other movements in the Middle East, such as Hassan al-Banna's Muslim Brotherhood.

Gulen, however, is part of a moderate Sufi-inspired school. He is a follower of Said Nursi, who believed in a more long-term effort to bring about political change by changing society. Gulen objected to Erdogan's politicization of Islam. A follower once asked Gulen, "why don't we create a political party?" Gulen replied, "if we create a political party and compete in elections, we may win 25 percent [...] but if we move inside social institutions, we can have 100 percent." A video leaked featured Gulen telling followers, "you must move in the arteries of the system without anyone noticing your existence, until you reach all the power centers [...] you must wait until such time as you have gotten all the state power, until you have brought to your side all the constitutional

¹⁰ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/04/turkey-fethullah-gulen-cleric-opposition-erdogan-akp.html#ixzz4GpDue8qM>

institutions in Turkey.”¹¹ This entriest approach is reminiscent of the Fabians and Trotskyism, a mentality indicative of the Gulenist movement, which has shied away from institutional political involvement, i.e. sending representatives to the parliament, but has brought under its sphere of influence the education, media, and banking sector, as well as infiltrating the civil service, judiciary and police force.

Despite the current rivalry and ideological divergence, the rise of the Gulenist movement parallels the rise of Erdogan and the AK Party. The two were in fact political allies - again the Bismarckian parallel. Beginning in the 1990s, both groups faced a strong external threat: the Kemalist establishment, or deep state. As such, both viewed working together as a necessary step to overcome the military, which served as the guardian of Kemalism; according to both, the military no longer needed to play a role in domestic politics. From this mutual understanding, the Gulenists provided the AK Party with educated and trained personnel. Moreover, Gulenists within the police force and judiciary played an important role in pursuing court cases against military officers – a process that weakened the deep state and facilitated the emergence of Erdogan and the AK Party. In short, both movements worked together to weaken the deep state in Turkey but for different ends and to advance their own political advancement.

Yet, this cooperation was merely a marriage of convenience and fell apart as soon as both Islamist sides grew powerful vis-à-vis a weakened military establishment. Ultimately, Erdogan has seemingly achieved the upper hand in his purge of Gulenists following the 2016 failed coup, which he accused Gulen of masterminding – despite questions of whether this fits within the Gulenist bottom-up mindset of bringing about political change, as described above.

Although it was a military coup, organized by certain parts in the armed forces, Erdogan's government has, for the most part, responded by focusing on his rival Gulen. This includes focusing on the education sector, where the Gulenist movement has for decades been building schools to bring about change through education. In the first 10 days following the failed coup, Erdogan's government suspended some 67,000 individuals; 42,000 of these were in the Ministry of National Education.¹² The government also closed down 1,043 private schools, 15 universities, and 109 student dormitories.

While the attempted coup catalyzed Ergodan's consolidation of power vis-à-vis the removal of the Gulenist opposition, it was merely a continuation of a trend dating back several years – beginning officially in 2013, when there was a push to expose the corruption of Erdogan's family and inner circle. This included tape released of Erdogan

¹¹ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/04/turkey-fethullah-gulen-cleric-opposition-erdogan-akp.html#ixzz4GpDue8qM>

¹² <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/05/fethullah-gulen-race-top-over-turkey-erdogan-secularism-schools/>

allegedly telling his son to hide the money. At this point, with a weakened Kemalist establishment, the two former Islamists allies faced off against each other.

After 2013, the president started targeting and marginalizing the judiciary, media, and civil society – much of which was affiliated to the Gulenists. Erdogan even referred to it as a “civilian coup” against his government and began purging alleged Gulenists from the police force and judiciary. He also took control of the leading Gulen-affiliated bank, Bank Asya, as a way to control the wealth amassed by the movement. He also began shutting down Gulen-affiliated college preparatory schools inside and outside Turkey.

With a post-coup weakened military establishment, it is our view that the main political fault line in Turkey will continue to be Erdogan versus the Gulenist movement, which by nature is not a well-defined or systematic entity. Due to this, Erdogan has followed a mantra, “you’re Gulenist until proven not”. For instance, following the coup, all of the 1,577 university deans were asked to resign in order to ensure that they do not have Gulenist connections. Once they are vouched for, they may return to their posts.

The Kurdish Question: Guerrilla Warfare Versus Institutional Politics

Another political fault line that will continue to complicate Erdogan's, or any Turkish leader's, consolidation of power is the Kurdish question. The conflict with Abdullah Ocalan's Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has seen between 30,000 to 40,000 people killed since fighting began in 1984.

Erdogan's relationship with Turkish Kurdish representatives has been mixed. As prime minister, he made several overtures to position himself as a solution to the decades-long problem. He became the first prime minister to claim that “the state has made mistakes about the Kurdish issue.” As part of the “Democratic Initiative” (Demokratik acilim sureci) of 2009, the AKP rights for to the Kurds. Generally, this included recognition of the Kurdish identity and an end to assimilation or denial, as well as greater freedoms of language and socio-economic opportunity. More specifically, the plan called for the legitimization of political communication in Kurdish, and the right for prisoners to speak Kurdish, for 24-hour private television stations to broadcast in Kurdish, for universities to teach in the Kurdish language, for residential areas to change their names based on local demands, and for better access to agricultural areas.

Even before the initiative, his promises to work against the denial of Kurdish social and political rights – a policy pursued by the Kemalist establishment – won Erdogan and the AKP popularity in Kurdish areas. Moreover, the AK Party, following the 2007 elections, served as the institutional political representative of the Kurds. It doubled its votes in

the Kurdish areas (east and southeast) from 26 percent in 2002 to 53 percent.¹³ The Kurds, wary against the nationalist parties, expressed their support for Erdogan's stated commitments to solve the Kurdish problem by granting more social and political rights and freedoms, as well as economic opportunities and prosperity. Again, in the 2011 parliamentary elections, Erdogan's AKP was able to win a majority of seats in the Kurdish provinces.

The two 2015 parliamentary elections (in June and November), however, changed the dynamic and served as a turning point in the AKP-Kurd relationship. It also exposed a divide within the Kurdish camp: one side believed that change and enhanced Kurdish rights and freedoms could only come through an institutionalization of the movement through representation in parliament and other government agencies; another side, however, believed that the military struggle had to continue as the deep state would never allow genuine Kurdish representation.

Leading up to the elections, the pro-Kurdish political movement established itself as the main political representative of the Kurds – challenging the AKP position. The Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), led by Selahattin Demirtas, began mobilizing a high number of Kurds, as well as other pro-democracy political forces, for a platform that demanded a peaceful end to the Kurdish conflict. As a result, the June 2015 election was a major success for the HDP, which won 13 percent of the national vote. The significance was in surpassing the 10 percent threshold: for the first time in its history, the Kurds were meant to have their own political representation in Turkey's parliament. This was an important victory for a segment of the Kurdish movement that advocated for institutional change and quieted the other segment that advocated for violent struggle.

For the AKP, this loss of the Kurdish vote meant a loss of the majority status in parliament. The party only won 40 percent of the popular vote and lost 53 seats in parliament. At a time when the Gulenists continued to pose a threat against his mandate to change the constitution, Erdogan did not want to lose absolute control of the legislative branch.

Following this, in the summer of 2015, the Kurdish conflict erupted – breaking a ceasefire that had lasted since March 2013. According to International Crisis Group, over the past year, some 1,700 people have been killed, including 307 civilians, 582 security force members, 653 PKK militants, and 209 "youth of unknown affiliation". It has been one of the deadliest chapters in the history of the state's conflict with the PKK.¹⁴

¹³ <http://arsiv.setav.org/public/HaberDetay.aspx?Dil=tr&hid=7318&q=the-akp-and-the-kurdish-issue-what-went-wrong>

¹⁴ <http://blog.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/2016/07/20/turkey-s-pkk-conflict-the-rising-toll/>

This conflict instigated internal bickering in the Kurdish movement. Those who favoured violent conflict pointed to Erdogan's unwillingness to abide by the election result as a justification that institutional politics do not work.

Unable to form a majority, Erdogan called for new elections in November of the same year, with a hope that the Kurdish conflict could rally votes from the ultra-nationalist supporters in the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). This calculation paid off: the AKP were able to win back 59 seats in parliament and almost 50 percent of the national vote. The MHP, however, lost 40 seats. Nonetheless, the HDP, although losing 21 seats, maintained the 10 percent threshold by winning 10.76 percent of the vote.

Erdogan won back a majority in parliament and therefore had no further use for the Kurdish vote – as his allegiance was now with the ultra-nationalist voters. As such, the Kurdish conflict continues. The ruling party continues to equate the conflict with the PKK with the HDP parliamentary process, and as such hopes to strip the institutional base of the Kurdish movement. More critically, on 20 May 2016, the parliament passed legislation that would lift an immunity clause for MPs. The HDP view this measure as Erdogan's attempt to weaken its newly acquired representation in the legislature. Legal proceedings as Demirtas have already begun.

Due to the new electoral realities, it is likely that Erdogan will continue to work against the Kurdish attempt for institutional representation. Although the HDP expressed its condemnation of the 2016 failed coup, Erdogan will continue to view institutionalized Kurdish politics as a threat. For instance, he refused to invite the HDP to a unity rally in August 2016. Working against the segment of the Kurdish leadership that prioritizes institutionalized politics however, strengthens those who support violent-struggle. In short, then, it is likely that the conflict will continue in the near-to medium-term future.

The Nationalist Establishment: From Existential Threat to Electoral Ally

For Erdogan, the Gulenists and the Kurds have grown too strong. In a policy of “divide and conquer”, his mandate is to use his electoral alliance with the CHP and the MHP to weaken the Gulenists and the Kurds. In doing so, he has completed a 180-degree turn: his main enemies now are the Gulenists and the Kurdish leaderships – both of which were allies in his emergence as prime minister and then president. However, in the process both groups grew too strong and as such threatened his ambitions as leader. As witnessed in the second election of 2015, Erdogan's new allies are now the nationalists and the Kemalist establishment – the very same group he worked to undermine throughout his career. In parliament, they will work with the AKP to pass policies. On 25 July 2016, he held a historic meeting with the leaders of the CHP and MHP. A week later, he invited them to a “democracy rally” at Yenikapi Square in Istanbul.

The post-coup environment has left the establishment weaker and thus easier to deal with – without fear that it can bring him down or imprison him, as it did in 1999. The MHP is undergoing an internal crisis and internal dissent is clear, with many questioning the alliance to an Islamist party. The CHP, too, is undergoing change after the coup. On 15 July 2016, the CHP leader Kilicdaoglu stated, “there is a new Turkey now [...] if there wasn't a republic, Erdogan wouldn't be the president. Yildirim wouldn't be the prime minister. Kahraman wouldn't be parliamentary speaker. I wouldn't be the leader of CHP.”¹⁵ The priority of the CHP and MHP, therefore, is to ensure that the Gulenists do not successfully pursue a coup that could eliminate the Kemalist ideology.

Turkey in the Region: A “Zero Problems with Neighbours” Policy?

The Erdogan administration defined its external affairs mandate as a Zero Problems with Neighbours Policy. According to Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs,

“Turkey attaches special importance to seeing its positive outcomes in her immediate vicinity, that is to say, in her relations with neighbors. In this context, the discourse of “zero problem with neighbors” is a slogan summarizing Turkey's expectations with regards to her relations with neighboring countries. Turkey wants to eliminate all the problems from her relations with neighbors or at least to minimize them as much as possible.”¹⁶

Davogltu, who was foreign minister from 2009 to 2014 and then prime minister until 2016, formulated much of this vision. In an article for *Foreign Policy*, he wrote that Turkey's 2023 vision, or objectives, were to achieve the conditions for EU membership, strive for regional security and economic integration, play an influential role in regional conflict resolution, among other goals.¹⁷ Under this policy, Ankara pivoted its focus to the region, in an effort to gain better political influence and to enhance its economic situation.

Case Study: Ankara-Erbil Political and Economic Relations

An example of this pivot is the development of relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq. In 2003, Ankara refused to speak directly with the Kurdistan Region. Ten years later, in November 2013, it signed a historic oil and gas agreement with the KRG.¹⁸ According to the energy deal, the Kurdistan Region agreed to transport

¹⁵ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/chp-leader-this-is-a-new-turkey-after-plot.aspx?pageID=238&nID=102577&NewsCatID=341>

¹⁶ <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/policy-of-zero-problems-with-our-neighbors.en.mfa>

¹⁷ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/05/20/turkeys-zero-problems-foreign-policy/>

¹⁸ Al-Hurra, “Turkiya wa-Kurdistan al-‘Iraq tawqa’an ‘aquda lil-naft wal-ghaz [Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan Sign a Contract for Oil and Gas],” 29 November 2013, Available at

420 000 bpd of crude oil to Turkey via a newly built pipeline.¹⁹ The KRG agreed to export two million barrels of oil per day and 10 billion cubic metres of gas per year to Turkey, via pipelines.²⁰

During these years, Turkey worked on its economic relations with the Kurdistan Region. By 2013, the sub-state became Turkey's third largest export market.²¹ Oil and gas exports via trucks went from 749,567 Barrels of Oil Equivalent (BOE) in 2012 to 12,327,687 BOE in 2014. The KRG also increased exports, via a newly built pipeline, from 491,121 BOE in 2013 to 10,383,641 BOE in 2014 (only January to August).²² Although the projections of exports were eventually hurt by weakened relations with the central government and an economic crisis linked to a fall in the price of oil, the MNR nonetheless reported that the KRG exported 452,145 bpd in January 2016. These exports went to Turkey via Kirkuk-Ceyhan Oil Pipeline.²³

Ankara also wanted to improve its political influence via relations with Erbil. For instance, following 2011, it worked with the Kurdistan Region's leadership to limit PKK influence in Syria by delegitimising the PKK-linked Democratic Union Party (PYD). Using proxies, therefore, became a way to maintain influence in Syria.

The Decline of the Zero Problems Policy

As evident in the KRG example, to some extent, the policy facilitated successes. Successes also included, for instance, expanding economic links with Arab states and Iran, lifting visa restrictions with its neighbours, and helping to mediate conflicts such as between Syria and Israel or the Palestinian Fatah and Hamas parties.

However, following the so-called Arab Spring in 2011, the no problems policy began to fall apart. In Egypt, for instance, Erdogan's support for Mohammad Mursi, who was swiftly deposed and jailed, complicated Turkey's relations with the Sisi regime that

<<http://www.alhurra.com/content/Iraqi-kurds-and-turkey-seal-oil-deal/238077.html>> (Last accessed 04/09/2015).

¹⁹ KRG, "Kurdistan Oil and Gas Factsheet," The Review: Kurdistan Region of Iraq (Erbil: Invest in Group, 2013), 34.

²⁰ Hemeyra Pamuk and Orhan Coskun, "Exclusive - Turkey, Iraqi Kurdistan clinch major energy pipeline deals," 6 November 2013, Available at <<http://uk.reuters.com/article/2013/11/06/uk-turkey-iraq-kurdistan-idUKBRE9A50HN20131106>> (Last accessed 04/09/2015).

²¹ Sonar Cagaptay, Christina Bache Fidan, and Ege Cansu Sacikara, "Turkey and the KRG: An Undeclared Economic Commonwealth," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 16 March 2015, Available at <<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkey-and-the-krq-an-undeclared-economic-commonwealth>> (Accessed 23/09/2015).

²² KRG MNR, "Production Report: Jan – Aug 2014," August 2014, Available at <<http://mnr.krg.org/images/monthlyreports/Final%20Version%20Jan%20-%20Aug%20Production%20Report.pdf>> (Last Accessed 24/02/2016).

²³ KRG MNR, "Monthly Export Report: January 2016," 4 February 2016, Available at <http://mnr.krg.org/images/monthlyreports/EXPORTs/MNR_Monthly_Export_Report_January_2016.pdf> (Last accessed 24/02/2016).

followed. In Syria, staunch opposition to the Asad regime and later a prioritization of squashing the Kurdish opposition in Syria pinned Ankara on the side of salafi jihadist Islamist movements, as its borders became the gateway for foreign fighters and funds that would facilitate the Islamic State and other groups – leading many to question Turkey's relations with such groups.

However, Ankara's reluctance to fully combat the Islamic State at times has now meant that the organization has grown and become a threat to Turkey – which is under pressure to support the anti-Islamic State coalition. From this, then, the Islamic State has begun attacking civilians in Turkish cities, such as the Istanbul airport bombing, which killed 42 people. As such, the regional instability has now engulfed Turkey.

Erdogan's purges, in response to the 2016 coup attempt, also have implications for Turkey's regional policy – particularly in Syria and Iraq. The military purge's focus on the Second Army (Malatya), which is referred to as Turkey's "invasion force", positioned on the border with Syria and mandated to invade neighbouring countries, has complicated Ankara's ability to engage militarily in bordering states.²⁴ The purges have jailed the Second Army's commander, Adem Huduti, and chief of staff, Avni Angun. In short, Turkey can no longer influence Syria and as such will have to rely more on local actors, such as salafi-jihadi opposition groups, or international actors, such as Russia.

Conclusion. Implications for the U.S. and the West

The U.S.-Turkey relationship is currently strained. However, for the U.S., Turkey remains an important NATO ally. Its Incirlik Air Base, in Adana, is a key site for the U.S.-led coalition effort against the Islamic State in both Syria and Iraq.

However, from the U.S. perspective, several of Erdogan's policies and decisions in the region are problematic. First, Washington criticizes Turkey's role in not strictly monitoring its borders – allowing foreign fighters to enter the Syrian arena. Moreover, Turkey's support for certain salafi-jihadi groups during the Syrian civil war, including at times Jabhat al-Nusra, has been problematic for the Obama administration. Erdogan has also built relations with the region's various Islamist groups, which are even at times housed in Turkey. For instance, members of Hamas, which the U.S. has designated as a terrorist organization, continue to reside in Istanbul.

From the Turkish perspective, the relationship with Washington has been similarly problematic. A Turkish diplomat in Moscow stated, "our relations with the US are the worst in 50 years."²⁵ First, Washington's harbouring of Fethullah Gulen, who is now wanted in Turkey, continues to irritate Erdogan. Following the failed coup of 2016,

²⁴ <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2016/07/partial-assessment-of-turkeys-post-coup.html>

²⁵ <https://www.ft.com/content/bbcd39ba-5b0d-11e6-9f70-badea1b336d4>

Washington's refusal to extradite Gulen will further intensify this predicament and fuel anti-Americanism in the pro-AK Party media. Erdogan questioned this policy by asking, "what kind of strategic partner are we, that you can still host someone whose extradition I have asked for?"²⁶ Second, Washington's cooperation with the PKK-linked PYD in Syria also irritates Ankara, which worries that Kurdish autonomy in Syria can facilitate further unrest at home vis-à-vis the PKK – by both giving the designated terrorist organization a safe haven to launch activities and a model to pursue self-determination. Third, Washington's criticism of Erdogan's centralization of power, including his purge of Gulenists and his attempt to lift parliamentary immunity to target Kurdish represents, troubles Ankara.

An emerging policy for Erdogan is to balance the strains in the U.S. relationship by reaching out to Russia. Yet, Turkey-Russia relations have been strained for the most part of 2016. In April, the Turkish armed forces shot down a Russian pilot. Russia then began supporting the PKK-linked PYD in Syria in the fight against the Islamic State. Recently, as Ankara-Washington relations worsen, Erdogan is reaching out to Moscow to balance and guarantee insurance. For instance, he recently stated that it was a Gulenist soldier who shot down the Russian pilot. More critically, in August 2016, Erdogan decided to visit Russia, rather than a NATO ally, following the coup.

In sum, as Erdogan continues to consolidate his power domestically, he is also recalculating his regional and foreign policy. His calculation is partly based on a sudden lack of manpower to influence the neighbourhood, as well as Turkey's waning relationship with U.S. and NATO allies. This does not mean, however, that Turkey will leave NATO or cut off ties to the U.S. For Ankara, enhanced relations with Moscow provide another bargaining chip vis-à-vis Washington and its allies. Erdogan, therefore, is seeking to also consolidate his international standing.

²⁶ <https://www.ft.com/content/bbcd39ba-5b0d-11e6-9f70-badea1b336d4>