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From the Editors

Dear Friends,

The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies is proud to present the October 2017 issue of our monthly publication, *Turkeyscope*. In this issue, *Kurdistan24* Washington D.C correspondent Dr. Laurie Mylroie contributes with an article focusing on Turkey's policy towards the September 2017 independence referendum held by the Kurdistan Regional Government, and also provides a broader analysis of the positions of the United States and Russia. The second article, by Dr. Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak, analyzes the latest crisis between the United States and Turkey, traces the roots of the rift between Turkey and the West, and seeks to serve as a guide in understanding the current Turkish foreign policy conception.

Ben Mendales contributed to this month's issue as an assistant editor.

Ankara's Muted Response to the Kurdistan Region's Independence Referendum and the International and Regional Context

Laurie Mylroie

As the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) proceeded to hold the September 25 independence referendum, many analysts anticipated a strong response from Ankara. However, despite harsh and bellicose rhetoric, Turkey's response has been relatively muted. Two weeks after the referendum, Ankara has yet to take significant punitive measures against Erbil.

There were a number of analysts who predicted this outcome, including Ceng Sagnic who explained in the September 2017 issue of *Turkeyscope* why an armed clash between Ankara and Erbil was unlikely.¹ Yet there were others who did not anticipate such a result. Among those who didn't was the U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS, Brett McGurk. McGurk has assumed a key role in formulating U.S. diplomacy toward the Kurds, despite his limited personal experience with the region. Moreover, the future of the Kurdistan Region, as well as that of Iraq, seems to be well outside of his original mandate. Indeed, on the eve of the referendum, McGurk took the virtually unprecedented step of threatening one ally, the Kurdistan Region, with hostile action by another, specifically Turkey.² Nonetheless, Ankara's response was—and remains—restrained.

However, Baghdad's reaction, and that of its ally, Tehran, may prove different. The U.S. took an unusually harsh stance toward the referendum, and senior figures from the George W. Bush administration, including former United States Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker have warned that the U.S. might, inadvertently, be encouraging regional parties to take military action against the Kurdistan Region.

Turkey's Position before the Referendum

Initially, Ankara's response to the KRG's expressed determination to proceed with the independence referendum was rather low-key.

In early June, the KRG announced the date of the referendum. In late August, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu visited Erbil to meet with Kurdish President Masoud Barzani. Çavuşoğlu said the referendum "was not a good idea," but he also stated that Turkey would not undertake one of the more dramatic options it could use to oppose the vote, such as imposing a blockade of the Kurdistan Region.

"This [referendum] is nothing to do with our trade with this Region," Çavuşoğlu said.³

In contrast, the U.S., specifically McGurk, grew ever-shriller in criticizing the referendum as September 25 approached. That criticism culminated in a visit to Baghdad and Dohuk, whence McGurk and his entourage traveled on September 14 to meet Barzani—who then proceeded to reject McGurk's "alternate plan" to the referendum.

That outcome was not hard to predict. The referendum was to occur in 11 days and campaigning was well underway, with rallies drawing crowds of tens of thousands throughout the Kurdistan Region. It is indeed unlikely that any political leader could back down from such a position.

McGurk exuded an imperial condescension, as if he were some European colonial administrator of the 19th century—a criticism of Paul Bremer, head of the first US administration in Iraq, the Coalition Provisional Authority, and with whom McGurk’s experience of the country began, when he was Bremer’s legal counsel.

Following Barzani’s rebuff, McGurk gave a press conference in Erbil, in which he publicly asserted, “This referendum is ill timed and ill advised. It is not something that we can support.”⁴

Dr. Arzu Yilmaz, head of the International Relations Department of the American University of Kurdistan, strongly criticized McGurk, explaining that the significant and unyielding, opposition publically displayed by United States officials “encouraged” Baghdad, Tehran, and Ankara “to harden their rhetoric” against the referendum.⁵

Ambassador Crocker similarly criticized the U.S. stance, saying that the United States was mistaken when it chose “to come down that hard against the referendum at a time when it clearly was going to take place.”⁶

John Hannah, former National Security Adviser to Vice-President Dick Cheney, expanded on that critique, noting the vehemence of the U.S. opposition to the plebiscite as he recalled:

*the bile that U.S. diplomats spewed at Barzani in private conversations with me in the weeks leading up to the referendum. I was taken aback by the intense frustration and anger directed at a critical wartime ally and longtime, loyal U.S. partner whose history of oppression and even genocide at the hands of other nations leaves it with — if nothing else — an almost unimpeachable moral case for self-determination.*⁷

In further display of a misplaced imperial mentality, McGurk assured senior U.S. officials, as well as Baghdad, Ankara, and Tehran, that he could get the Kurdish leadership to postpone the referendum, as Michael Pregent, an Iraq scholar at the Hudson Institute, has explained.⁸

Turkey’s Position after the Referendum

. Voter turn-out was high during the referendum, and the results were overwhelming—92.7 percent in favor of independence. Significantly, it was not marred by any major acts of violence, even in the ethnically mixed areas of Kirkuk province, as Crocker noted.⁹

One would expect Turkey to have a good understanding of political currents and popular sentiment on its southern border. Nonetheless, and despite its own close ties with the KRG, Ankara evidently believed McGurk’s assurances that the referendum

would be postponed. Following the vote, Erdoğan asserted that he had expected “until the last moment” that Barzani, whom he accused of “treachery,” would postpone it.¹⁰

Erdoğan condemned the KRG in the harshest terms, calling the referendum a “threat to national security” and warning that Turkey would close the border.

“It will be over when we close the oil taps, all [their] revenues will vanish, and they will not be able to find food when our trucks stop going to northern Iraq,” the Turkish President threatened.¹¹

The following week, Erdoğan visited Iran. The Turkish Chief of Staff had just been there, fueling speculation that Tehran and Ankara might join in military measures against the Kurdistan Region.

But Turkey has not yet attempted to punish the Kurdistan Region. Indeed, Ankara’s actions against Erbil have been relatively minor so far, and the passage of time only adds to the impression that Turkey plans no major moves.

What Explains Ankara’s Restraint?

Apart from the referendum, relations between Ankara and Erbil are not antagonistic. In the years following the 1991 Gulf War, the Kurdistan Region emerged as an independently functioning political entity, and in those 26 years, Turkey and the Kurdistan Region have worked out a *modus vivendi*.

The two parties get along for many reasons, including Turkish trade with the Kurdistan Region; its economic investments there, which have benefitted both parties; its reliance on Kurdish oil; a mutual wariness of Shi’i Iran; and a common opposition to the PKK, to cite some of the most important factors.¹²

These considerations have prompted some knowledgeable observers to suggest that the harsh language that Ankara directed against the KRG was mere rhetoric all along that was meant primarily for Turkish domestic consumption.¹³

It is also possible that as the threats to the Kurdistan Region grew more heated in the days after the referendum, US officials began privately to urge restraint in a meaningful fashion.

There is also the Russian factor. Unlike Washington, Moscow has refrained from criticizing the independence referendum. Following the vote, Russian President Vladimir Putin publicly cautioned Turkey against carrying out its threats to shut off Kurdish oil exports, while describing the referendum as an internal Iraqi affair.

“Our statements are somewhat careful and cautious since we don’t want to aggravate or blow up the situation,” Putin said, as he explained Russia’s position, and did so in a way that could also be understood as an indirect criticism of the US stance.¹⁴

While Ankara will most likely refrain from taking serious action against the Kurdistan Region, Tehran and Baghdad are another story. On October 11, the Kurdistan Region Security Council warned that elements of the Hashd al-Shaabi, which include Iranian-directed units, were mobilizing for “a major attack” on the Kirkuk region, in

conjunction with some Iraqi forces.¹⁵ At the same time, former US ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, warned that the commander of Iran's Quds Force, Qassim Sulaimani, was now in Iraq, and "active US engagement" was "needed to prevent conflict."¹⁶

Dr. Laurie Mylroie received her Ph.D. from Harvard University and was an Assistant Professor there, and an Associate Professor at the US Naval War College, before taking up policy analysis in Washington DC. Currently, she is a Washington DC correspondent for Kurdistan24, where she covers the Pentagon and State Department.

Through Turkish Eyes: How the West Lost Turkey

Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak

The aftermath of the Ergenekon probe, where the Turkish Armed Forces (Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri – TSK) was then eliminated as a political player, and the nomination of Ahmet Davutoğlu as Turkey’s foreign minister in 2009, indicated a gradual but drastic change in the direction of Turkish foreign policy. While many in Turkey, and abroad, accused Ankara of changing its foreign policy alignment from West to East, the Turkish government denied such claims. Despite this denial, it was very evident that Turkey’s Western-oriented foreign policy - driven by the TSK – had been replaced by an independent, neo-Ottoman diplomacy. This strategic choice manifested itself in 2010, when Turkey voted against sanctioning Iran in the United Nations Security Council.¹⁷ Inevitably this non-Western stance, later combined with anti-Israel and anti-European rhetoric, paved the way for a turbulent relationship between the West and Turkey in general and between Washington and Ankara in particular.

The depth of the deterioration in relations between Turkey and the US has been highlighted by the arrest of Metin Topuz, a US Embassy staffer of Turkish origin, on espionage and terrorism charges, and by the US response of suspending the issuance of non-immigrant visas to Turkish citizens by the US Embassy in Ankara. The Turkish government, for its part, retaliated by banning altogether the issue of visas to American citizens.

In the past, there have been a number of well-known bilateral diplomatic crises, such as the Johnson Letter, the US embargo following Turkey’s military intervention in Cyprus, and the Turkish parliament’s 2003 rejection of US military passage to Iraq. Yet, while past US Presidents may have punished the Ankara administration, they did not impose sanctions on the Turkish people. The Trump Administration has broken this pattern, and has thus contributed to relations reaching an unprecedented new low. Moreover, the act has further humiliated Turkey as a state and will inevitably strengthen the overwhelmingly anti-US public sentiment in Turkey, which has increased from 71% to 82% following Trump’s inauguration.¹⁸

Despite mutual NATO membership, the arms trade, intelligence sharing and the US army base in Incirlik, it is no secret that both countries have had many disagreements when it comes to the Middle East and Turkey itself.

Relations between the United States and Turkey, and between the West and Turkey more broadly, began to decline following the May 2013 Gezi Park protests. The increasing criticism coming from Western capitals such as Washington and Berlin was not interpreted to reflect sincere advice given by political partners. Having ignored the cases of police brutality and the violations of civil and environmental rights, Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP) regarded the protests as an attempt to topple their legitimate government.

Therefore Western criticism of alleged human rights abuses and restrictions of the right to demonstrate were interpreted as an attempt to destabilize the prospering Turkish state.¹⁹

Under the strong influence of the Gezi Park protests, the Erdoğan administration's negative attitude vis-à-vis the United States and the West grew even further in the aftermath of the military coup against Muslim Brotherhood affiliated President Muhammad Morsi in July 2013. The Western recognition of al-Sisi's government was seen as a warning sign by Erdoğan, who identified himself with Morsi by describing the Egyptian coup perpetrators as if they had been potential Turkish coup perpetrators against his own government.²⁰

Erdoğan and his supporters were further alarmed when Fethullah Gülen orchestrated the December 17, 2013 corruption case. Despite much concrete evidence to the contrary, the AKP circles viewed the corruption charges made against the government officials as a fabricated political plot by Pennsylvania based Fethullah Gülen to influence municipal elections then being held. In other words, by not extraditing Gülen to Turkey and by instead hosting him in the United States, the American administration was seen as the number one suspect seeking to influence the election results.²¹

This negative image immediately began to be reflected by Turkey's national security policy. On September 26, 2013 the Turkish Undersecretariat for Defense Industries (Savunma Sanayi Müsteşarlığı – SSM) granted the China Precision Machinery Import-Export Corporation (CPMIEC) a \$3.4 billion bid to supply Turkey with its first anti-ballistic missile battery. The fact that Turkey was openly seeking to diversify its sources of arms by acquiring non-NATO inventory was an apparent declaration of mistrust of the United States and NATO.²² As expected, NATO protested this purchase. Following diplomatic pressure, on November 13, 2015 the SSM declared the Chinese bid void because the Chinese technology was allegedly insufficient for the project. While Turkey declared its intention for launching its own national anti-ballistic missile system, it also did not hide its interest in Russia's S-400.²³

Despite this, Russian-Turkish relations quickly deteriorated, as a result of the Russian bombardment of Turkmens living in northern Syria, and the Russian Air Force's partial penetration of Turkish airspace. This crisis reached a boiling point when a Turkish F-16 downed a Russian SU-24 warplane in 2015. In the aftermath of the crisis, Turkey was once again disappointed by its NATO allies. While the US and NATO refrained from making a bold statement against Russia, Spain's Patriot batteries in Adana and Germany's Patriot batteries in Kahramanmaraş were withdrawn in the face of Russian and Syrian missile threats. This situation proved to Turkey that it stood alone.²⁴ As a result of this appraisal, Ankara made a strategic decision to mend its relations with Moscow.

The failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016, and the reluctance of Western leaders – first and foremost then-US President Barack Obama and German Chancellor Angela

Merkel – to condemn the coup perpetrators’ actions, have together influenced Ankara’s trajectory. For Erdoğan and his supporters, the failed coup attempt served as a real test for the Western leaders, one which they all failed in the eyes of Erdoğan when they hedged their response and did not immediately condemn the coup. In the eyes of the AKP, some of the Western leaders were prepared to accept the coup, as they had done with ‘Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi’s 2013 coup in Egypt.’²⁵

This led Erdoğan to pay his first visit after the failed coup to Vladimir Putin in St. Petersburg. Both leaders opened a new chapter in their relations, which ultimately paved the way for Turkey’s deployment of its armed forces to Syria with “Operation Euphrates Shield.” With this bold move, Turkey positioned itself in opposition to the US grand strategy in Syria, which regarded the Syrian Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat - PYD) as a legitimate party. However, from the Turkish viewpoint, the same entity is seen as the Syrian continuation under a different name of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan – PKK). In light of this, Turkey did not tolerate the potential formation of a contiguous Kurdish zone in its southern border that it viewed as a “siege” cutting Turkey’s connection to the Arab world. Again, as the patron of the Kurdish PYD the US was seen to indirectly be the enemy by the Turkish public. The countless images of American flags being displayed next to PYD fighters have only further embittered the Turkish public sentiment against the US.²⁶

This picture began to worsen, with the recent Kurdish referendum held in Northern Iraq. It may be said that Turkey suffers from ‘Sevres Syndrome,’ or a belief that the Western powers wish to dismantle Turkey as they did after the First World War. Thus, the Kurdistan Regional Government’s (KRG) desire for self-determination was seen by the Turkish ruling establishment as a part of a long-term Western plot.

In this regard, pro-AKP circles tend to differentiate between the Barzani family and the Kurdish nation. From their perspective, Barzani and his Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) were supposedly bought by the West – more precisely viewed as the British, French, Americans, and the Jews. According to this world view, the West was weakened significantly following the 2008 global economic crisis. Thus, in order to destabilize the prospering economies of “Eurasia” (China-Russia and the four countries neighboring the Kurdish region), the Western great powers planned to open the proverbial ‘Pandora’s Box’ by attempting to create an oil rich independent Kurdistan.

Since Israeli flags are frequently seen in the streets of Erbil, AKP circles portrayed Israel and the Jews as the usual suspects behind the KRG referendum. Indeed, they openly accused the Israeli intelligence agency, the Mossad, of masterminding the whole process.²⁷ The most popular stories floating in Ankara became conspiracy theories that revolved around supposed Israeli ambitions to build a Greater Israel using the Kurds as proxies, and to build a Kirkuk-Haifa oil pipeline in order to exploit the region’s oil resources.²⁸

In this vein, the French-Jewish intellectual Bernard-Henry Lévi appeared as the key figure for the pro-government propaganda machinery in Turkey, and Lévi received the sobriquet of the “New Lawrence [of Arabia].” Photographs of Lévi together with Barzani, or observing Peshmerga forces holding defensive positions, were portrayed as if Lévi had been in fact commanding Kurdish forces in action.²⁹ It should also be noted that in the past Lévi had been painted by the Turkish press as the mastermind of al-Sisi’s coup in Egypt. .

All these developments have led Turkey to re-locate its position along the strategic spectrum. While being very much integrated into the Western markets and military supply chain and while still seeking full membership in the European Union – at least on paper – Turkey finds itself more distant than ever to the camp to which it had belonged since the early days of the Cold War. The recent visits of the Iranian Chief of Staff Mohammad Bagheri³⁰ and Venezuela’s controversial President Maduro³¹ speak for themselves. This new strategic picture pushes Turkey away from the West into the arms of Russia and China, where it does not face any criticism over its record of democracy and human rights. By approaching the East, Turkey still seeks to maximize its interests in the West. Without divorcing from NATO and the West, it tries to strengthen its economy by cooperating with China’s “One Belt One Road” vision, which seeks to link China to Europe through trade-routes passing through Central Asia and the Middle East. It simultaneously attempts to protect itself using NATO while seeking to acquire two new S-400 batteries from Russia.

This policy will also have serious ramifications. Moving away from the West will eventually strengthen Islamist and Eurasianist nationalist circles in the country. This may lead to an extensive penetration by these entities into the Turkish state mechanism, which will in turn facilitate Turkey’s rapprochement with Iran and Russia. The rift with the West and Erdoğan’s anti-West rhetoric may open new windows of opportunity and be a relative source of public support at home. Yet it also limits Turkey’s ability to confront the PKK; Ankara will not benefit from US real time intelligence in Syria and Iran as in the past. Inevitably, this negative feedback loop will push Turkey into Russia’s arms even further.

Despite all said above, the core problem for Turkey is that, while there is almost complete mistrust and problematic personal relations between Western leaders and Erdoğan, Turkey cannot trust its historical nemesis Russia. Russia, for its part, cannot easily forget the downing of its warplane. Last, but not least, the Chinese will also not easily trust the Turks due to Turkey’s pro-Uyghur stance on the Xinjiang question. Having said all this, it seems that Turkey will try to maximize its interests by using each party as leverage against the other, while simultaneously acting as independently as possible. Ultimately, Turkey may run the risk of becoming an isolationist state.

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Notes

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- ³ “[Turkey won't close border](#) after Kurdistan referendum: FM,” Rudaw, August 23, 2017
- ⁴ [Press Conference](#) by Special Presidential Envoy McGurk in Erbil, Iraq, September 14, 2017
- ⁵ “[US diplomatic misstep](#) turned Kurdistan referendum into crisis: Analyst,” Kurdistan24, October 10, 2017.
- ⁶ [Amb. Ryan Crocker](#), on Connect the World, CNN, September 28, 2017.
- ⁷ John Hannah, “[The United States Must Prevent Disaster](#) in Kurdistan,” Foreign Policy, October 2, 2017. Journalists for Kurdish media—Kurdistan24, Kurdistan TV, and Rudaw—had a similar experience following McGurk’s August 14 briefing to the State Department press corps. Our questions were so harshly answered that the three of us asked ourselves afterwards, “Just what is going on?”
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- ⁹ Crocker, op.cit.
- ¹⁰ “[Iraqi Kurds must give up on](#) independence or go hungry - Erdoğan,” BBC, September 26, 2017.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² See Sagnic, op. cit., for a more detailed explanation of the nature of Turkish-KRG relations.
- ¹³ Eric Brown, a Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute, made this argument in a Hudson Institute panel discussion, “[Iraq After the Kurdistan Referendum](#): What Next?, October 5, 2017. See also Sagnic, op. cit., and BBC, op. cit.
- ¹⁴ “Putin urges caution on threats to Kurdish oil exports,” Financial Times, October 4, 2017.
- ¹⁵ [Tweet from Kurdistan](#) Region Security Council, October 11, 2017.
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