
 MDC The Moshe Dayan Center
for Middle Eastern and African Studies  TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

TURKEYSCOPE

INSIGHTS ON TURKISH AFFAIRS

EDITORS: HAY EYTAN COHEN YANAROCAK & CENG SAGNIC

Vol. 1, No. 6, April 2017

Contents

From the Editors	1
An Even More Troubled Alliance: Turkish-American Problems in Contemporary Perspective	2
Beyond Turkey's Referendum: Prospects on Shifting Post-Referendum Alliances	5
Notes	9

From the Editors

Dear Friends,

The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies is proud to present the April 2017 issue of our monthly publication, *Turkeyscope*. In this issue, Nick Danforth, from the Bipartisan Policy Center in Washington D.C., analyzes the future of US-Turkey relations after the constitutional referendum in Turkey. The second article, written by Ceng Sagnic, discusses the potential for shifting political alliances in the post-referendum Turkey.

Sarah Jacobs contributed to this issue as assistant editor.

An Even More Troubled Alliance: Turkish-American Problems in Contemporary Perspective

Nick Danforth

For a candidate whose opponents regularly accuse him of Islamophobia,¹ Donald Trump gained a remarkable following among members of Turkey's Islamist government.² With Trump's victory in November, some enthusiasts in Ankara even imagined he would usher in a new era of Turkish-American friendship. Following US missile strikes in Syria, Trump's immediate call to congratulate Erdoğan on his disputed referendum victory has undoubtedly reinvigorated this optimism.³ Nonetheless, there is still reason to fear that relations between the US and Turkey will remain strained.

In part, the Turkish government's optimism about Trump reflected a shared worldview. President Erdoğan, like Trump, cast himself as the champion of the common man against the global liberal elite. On a more pragmatic level, this optimism reflected Turkey's hope that the Trump administration would do more to accommodate a number of the Turkish government's key interests. Specifically, Ankara considered Trump more likely than Obama or Clinton to curtail US support for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan* – PKK)-linked Kurdish forces in Syria (the YPG) and to extradite the Pennsylvania-based cleric Fethullah Gülen.⁴

Since Trump took office, it has become clear that while these expectations were not unfounded, they are unlikely to be fulfilled. On both the YPG and Gülen, Trump's team appears more open to meeting Turkish demands than Obama's team had been. However, practical and political obstacles continue to prevent Washington from actually delivering what Ankara wants most. Given the many challenges that the Turkish government currently faces, both domestically and in Syria, they may be forced to grudgingly accept whatever Trump is willing to give.⁵ Crushed expectations and continued divergence on matters of Turkish national interest – not to mention the potential impact of new US policies targeting Muslim immigrants, airlines, or political movements – will only intensify the already deep stress on Turkish-American relations.

At the same time, changes in Turkey's domestic and regional political spheres will make it increasingly difficult for Ankara to preserve Washington's current level of support. As Turkey becomes more autocratic and its strategic priorities continue to diverge from Washington's, it will become problematic for Turkey's diplomats and friends to point to shared values or interests as a foundation for the US-Turkish alliance. Moreover, Erdoğan's ideals, political interests, and temperament prevent him from being the kind of pro-Western dictator Washington likes. To the contrary, as Turkey becomes increasingly implicated in improperly lobbying the Trump administration, the country's reputation may suffer in Washington.

Barring a significant strategic shift – such as escalating confrontation between the US and Iran, or significantly worsening instability in Turkey – bilateral relations between Washington and Ankara are unlikely to fulfill either side's hopes.

Trump's response to Erdoğan's highly-contested referendum victory – first calling to congratulate him amidst accusations of fraud, then inviting him to the White House – certainly vindicated Erdoğan's hope that the new administration would be less concerned with democracy and human rights than the previous one. Although this eliminates one obstacle to improved relations, many obstacles remain.

In northern Syria, it appears that following a somewhat extended 30-day review of Obama's counter-ISIS policy, the new administration will inevitably announce that it is moving ahead with pre-existing plans to march on Raqqa with the PKK-linked YPG.⁶ Having already sent US soldiers to the contested region of Manbij in order to forestall any possibility of a Turkish attack against the YPG there, Washington made it clear that it will not tolerate any Turkish efforts to forcibly disrupt US cooperation with its new Syrian Kurdish partners.⁷ In contrast to Obama's policy, elements of Trump's approach may sweeten this bitter pill for Ankara: a greater on-the-ground role for US troops could lessen the need to transfer heavy weapons to the YPG, and the post-combat occupation of Raqqa could include an expanded role for Turkey. Barring any further evidence that the new administration will seriously oppose Assad, Erdoğan might grudgingly accept these concessions on the Syrian Kurds as his best realistic option. But the fundamental tension between the US and Turkey in regard to the Syrian Kurds will remain.

Similarly, Trump will likely prove unable to deliver Erdoğan's desired legal verdicts in the cases of Fethullah Gülen and Iran sanctions-buster Reza Zarrab.⁸ The Turkish government has consistently exhibited intense interest in both cases. Erdoğan has personally pressed for the extradition of Gülen⁹ and the release of Zarrab, a Turkish-Iranian businessman with corrupt ties to the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – AKP), currently jailed in New York for a gas-for-gold scheme which helped Iran evade US sanctions.¹⁰ Indeed, in both cases Turkish interests have sought to collude with the Trump administration in order to secure a favorable outcome. While in the pay of a Turkish businessman with ties to the AKP, Trump's former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn held secret discussions on extra-legal means to extradite Gülen. More recently, it emerged that Trump's former adviser Rudy Giuliani had met with both Erdoğan and Trump officials after being hired to secure a “diplomatic solution” in the Zarrab case.

The results of these efforts remain to be seen. Flynn, of course, subsequently resigned in connection with an unrelated scandal, and the revelation of his lobbying activities are unlikely to advance the legal case against Gülen. However, Giuliani's efforts on behalf of Zarrab may yet succeed – although here too, their exposure has created a potentially counter-productive backlash; the judge in the trial is now demanding more information on Giuliani's role, and political opposition to any sort of backroom

arrangement may grow. Moreover, having already presented the US legal system as no more independent than Turkey's, Trump's team will have difficulty with Ankara if they ultimately fail to deliver the promised results. Faced with this outcome, Turkey will suspect political betrayal, and the administration will struggle to explain that their hands were tied by the legal system whose integrity they sought to compromise. In the long term, Turkey's reputation in Washington might also suffer due to its involvement in these scandals. Buying influence and cutting deals could produce some short-term results, but being associated with the least popular aspects of an unpopular administration will ultimately pose challenges for Turkey.

Beyond these strategic and structural sources of tension, there are also ideological, political, and personal factors that will make these differences more explosive and intractable. Erdoğan and Trump share a political style that relies on pugnacious populism, creating an ever-present possibility for rhetorical escalation in any disagreement. Moreover, Erdoğan's eagerness to present himself as a champion of Islam in the face of a putatively hostile West could quickly run afoul of the abiding anti-Islamist – not to say anti-Islamic – ideological orientation of many in the Trump administration.

Moreover, among America's many authoritarian allies in the world, Erdoğan is unique in the intensity with which he champions his democratic credentials.¹¹ Ironically, this could present complications not faced by more candidly undemocratic partners: With the AKP eager to defend its democratic credentials instead of shifting bilateral conversations to stability, security, or other pragmatic topics, Turkey will receive more criticism from the US press and Congress. At the same time, with Western countries consistently criticizing the caliber of Turkish democracy, Erdoğan will be forced to respond with a steady stream of anti-Western rhetoric. The more Erdoğan calls European leaders Nazis and accuses Americans of trying to kill him, the more likely it is that the level of diplomatic awkwardness will achieve strategic dimensions.

However, there are still factors that could reshape US-Turkish relations and render much of this analysis moot. First, the Turkish government has made an effort to present itself to the new administration as a potential partner in countering Iranian expansion in the Middle East. If, as is quite possible, the Trump administration moves toward a broader confrontation with Iran, and if Turkey is truly willing to cut its ties with Tehran and play the role of partner, many current bilateral complications could be subsumed in a new strategic alignment.¹² Second, if instead of authoritarian stability, Erdoğan's rule pushes Turkey toward violent chaos, Washington could feel paradoxically forced to back Erdoğan's government, however grudgingly, to keep the country from splintering. It is grimly telling that at this point, a crisis in Turkey could actually help improve the current state of US-Turkish relations.

Nick Danforth is a Senior Policy Analyst at the Bipartisan Policy Center in Washington D.C. focusing on national security, Turkey, and the Middle East.

Beyond Turkey's Referendum: Prospects on Shifting Post-Referendum Alliances

Ceng Sagnic

Turkey concluded its constitutional referendum on April 16, with the proposed constitutional amendment passing by a narrow margin amid fraud allegations by the opposition. The ruling party-led camp for constitutional change won 51.4 percent of the votes, while the secularist-Kurdish alliance's votes received 48.5 percent of the votes. From the perspective of the current government's critics, Turkey's democracy has come to a sharp end. In the wake of a referendum barely won, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan will assume control over the state's judiciary, legislative, and executive branches. In contrast, the government and President Erdoğan himself maintain that the new system will not only empower the parliament, but will also ensure the country's stability as it faces external and internal threats to its national security and territorial integrity.¹³

The fate of modern Turkey's democracy is still dependent on post-referendum policies of both the government and the opposition, as both camps have been strengthened and unified by the referendum process. Given that the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* - AKP) could not secure a significant majority for its referendum victory – with the opposition bloc receiving only 2.9 percent less votes than the AKP-MHP alliance – the referendum results have weakened AKP's conservative nationalist partner, the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* - MHP). In the months ahead, Turkey's post-referendum politics may prove more important for the country's 94 year-old democracy than the results of the recent referendum.

The AKP-MHP Alliance

The constitutional referendum process commenced in late January, with the Turkish parliament's passage of an 18-article bill on amendments to the constitution, proposed by the AKP-MHP bloc.¹⁴ However, the rapprochement between the two parties, once locked in a fierce dispute, traces back to 2016. Responding to the failed coup of July 15-16, 2016, the ultranationalist MHP pledged unconditional support to AKP. According to pro-AKP media outlets, the aggressively energetic MHP-linked Grey Wolves, also called Idealist Hearths (*Ülkü Ocakları*), stood shoulder to shoulder with AKP supporters as street clashes with perpetrators of the failed coup erupted across the country.¹⁵ MHP explained that the party was taking a stand against the disruption of the democratic process by a military coup, rather than supporting AKP. However, critics of the party saw this rapprochement with AKP as a mechanism for MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli's strategy to use the ruling party's support to suppress opposition within his party.

In mid-2016, the ideological shift in AKP's discourse towards an ultra-nationalist rhetoric constituted the backbone of an enhanced rapprochement with MHP. The two parties began using the same rhetoric as they responded to challenges posed to national security by Kurdish territorial gains in Syria, and post-coup authoritarian measures implemented to suppress the secularist opposition. More precisely, rhetorical changes occurred only in AKP's discourse, while MHP maintained its well-known nationalist position, with a slight shift to accommodate AKP's seemingly authoritarian ambitions.

It remains unclear whether AKP's rapprochement with MHP was ultimately motivated by securing Devlet Bahçeli's support for the proposed constitutional bill – particularly because Bahçeli was the first leader to reject the possibility of forming a coalition government with AKP after the June 2015 elections.¹⁶ However, shortly after the failed coup attempt in 2016, AKP was able to transform its close relationship with MHP into a majority parliamentary bloc, supporting the passage of the proposed 18-article bill. Calculations for the prospective referendum started after this point, with a simple mathematical approach: MHP and AKP votes combined against the possibly united bloc of opposition parties.

AKP's mathematical rationale for the constitutional referendum was quite simple. In the November 2015 elections, the ruling party had received 49.49 percent of the votes and MHP had received 11.90 percent.¹⁷ Based on the assumption that the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi* - HDP) and the secularist-Kemalist Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* - CHP) would vote against the pro-Erdoğan constitutional amendment, AKP could achieve a substantial majority of over 55 percent "Yes" votes through an alliance with MHP. Meanwhile, unlike previous years, the Turkish government was no longer in peace talks with the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan* - PKK), nor was it entrenched in any political situation requiring pluralist rhetoric that would make an alliance with MHP impossible.

As apparent from the referendum results, the parliamentary alliance that granted success to the AKP-MHP bloc failed to garner over 55 percent of the referendum votes. "Yes" votes hovered slightly below the 51.6 percent that President Erdoğan had received in the 2014 Presidential Elections, exhibiting no MHP support.¹⁸ The results implied two possibilities: either MHP or AKP supporters had betrayed their party and voted against the constitutional amendment. The second possibility was immediately dismissed by AKP-linked media, leading to cynical quips on social media that Devlet Bahçeli might have been the only MHP supporter to have voted "Yes" in the referendum.

The Kurdish Factor

Ironically, the AKP-MHP bloc's narrow success in the April 16 constitutional referendum was facilitated by Kurdish voters, from the predominantly Kurdish-

populated southeast. Although there are no numerical records of the amount of votes from each party, results in the southeast indicated that a substantial portion of the HDP's base voted "Yes." Referendum results from the Kurdish cities of Ağrı, Bitlis, Van, Muş, Hakkari, Tunceli, Şırnak, Bingöl, Siirt, Diyarbakır, Şanlıurfa, Batman and Mardin were 10 to 20 points lower than the percentage of votes for the pro-Kurdish HDP in the last elections. To be more precise, the AKP-MHP bloc received 450 thousand more "Yes" votes from Kurdish cities than the parties received in the last elections in this region. Nonetheless, regardless of increased votes for the AKP-MHP-led "Yes" bloc, the "No" camp had an absolute victory in the Kurdish region.¹⁹

Considering that the AKP-MHP bloc won the referendum with a very narrow margin of 2.8 percent, the roughly one percent extra contribution from the Kurdish region may have played a decisive role. Additionally, although it is almost impossible to assess the distribution of "Yes" or "No" votes in western Turkey, where the results are not determined by ethnic votes, the "Yes" camp also won in predominantly Kurdish-inhabited districts of Istanbul, such as Bağcılar.²⁰

The HDP had two consecutive and considerable elections victories in the Kurdish region of the southeast in 2015. In the June 2015 elections, the party got 13.1 percent of the overall votes, allowing the party to overcome the electoral threshold for parliament of 10 percent for the first time, with the highest number of votes the Kurdish movement had ever gained in Turkey.²¹ In the snap elections of November 2015, HDP votes were reduced to 10.7 percent, but this was still enough to get over the threshold that had prevented Kurdish parties from entering parliament since the early 1990s.²²

During the period preceding the constitutional referendum, HDP adopted a strictly anti-presidential system approach, campaigning for the "No" camp in the Kurdish region and throughout the country. Parallel to the AKP-MHP bloc's strategic reliance on previous election results, the HDP sought to assume a key role in blocking the proposed constitutional amendment by maintaining its 2015 margins, especially in the Kurdish southeast. However, the pro-Kurdish party appears to have overlooked the thematic differences between its campaigns for the elections in 2015 and the referendum in 2017 – an oversight which might have resulted in the dip in HDP votes among the Kurdish minority. In contrast to the election campaigns of 2015, HDP's "No" campaign failed to appeal to the Kurdish nationalist pragmatism indigenous to the Kurdish southeast. It fell short of promising stabilized relations with the central government in the event of a ballot box victory, a promise which had gained the party the Kurdish middle-class vote in the 2015 elections. In other words, in 2015, the Kurdish middle-class of the southeast was convinced that a strengthened HDP position in the parliament would bolster peace talks with the government, as AKP would have retained its authoritarian monopoly after the elections. In 2017, the assumption that AKP and Erdoğan would continue to rule the country after the referendum remained unchanged, but a victory for the "No" camp did not promise the stabilization of state-Kurd relations.

Turkish Democracy at Crossroads: Post-referendum Era

The narrow margin win for the AKP-led “Yes” bloc in the referendum could still contribute to Turkish democracy, despite concerns that President Erdoğan will choose a more autocratic path in the post-referendum era, disregarding the 48.5 percent of “No” votes. The "No" bloc's significant success in attracting almost half of the voters is likely to strengthen the opposition - if not unite it - while AKP and Erdoğan consolidate their control over state institutions. As AKP's image of invincibility has been significantly damaged by the referendum results, in the upcoming elections of 2019, the opposition may have better chances of forming a consolidated front challenging Erdoğan's AKP. Although AKP may still require MHP's parliamentary support to pass a large number of transition laws in the next two years, the ruling party may be loath to rely on ultranationalists, considering the AKP's vested interest in maintaining votes from the non-HDP-aligned Kurdish middle class.

The AKP-MHP failure to achieve significant success in the referendum will not necessarily produce a rapprochement between the AKP and the pro-Kurdish HDP, but it will definitely diminish the nationalist tone the government directs at the Kurdish minority. Referendum results and ongoing internal disputes have a strong potential to further weaken the MHP, if not disintegrate it. Non-HDP Kurds could gain a stronger position in the current political equilibrium by simply replacing the MHP as an effective ally for the AKP in the next elections. Such a pragmatic relationship between middle class Kurds and the AKP may fall short of renewing the peace talks with PKK, but would limit the pressure imposed by the AKP on the HDP since 2015.

None of the aforementioned prospects for the post-referendum era in Turkey can protect modern Turkey's democracy if, while consolidating control over the state, AKP and Erdoğan incline towards a more authoritarian rule.

Ceng Sagnic is a junior researcher at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies (MDC) - Tel Aviv University. He serves as the coordinator of the Kurdish Studies Program and editor of Turkeyscope. cengsagnic[at]gmail.com

Notes

-
- ¹ Uri Friedman, "The Coming War On 'Radical Islam,'" *The Atlantic*, November 29, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/11/trump-radical-islam/508331/>
- ² Selim Koru, "Turks for Trump," *Foreign Policy*, November 8, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/11/08/turks-for-trump-erdogan-islamists-democracy/>
- ³ Carol Morello, "Trump calls Erdogan to congratulate him on contested referendum, Turkey says," *Washington Post*, April 17, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-calls-turkeys-erdogan-to-congratulate-him-on-contested-referendum/2017/04/17/f997d306-2397-11e7-a1b3-faff0034e2de_story.html
- ⁴ Ragıp Soylu, "Will Trump review Gülen case and the partnership with YPG?" *Daily Sabah*, November 10, 2016, <https://www.dailysabah.com/columns/ragip-soylu/2016/11/10/will-trump-review-gulen-case-and-the-partnership-with-ypg>
- ⁵ Sam Heller, "Turkey's 'Turkey First' Syria Policy," *The Century Foundation*, April 12, 2017, <https://tcf.org/content/report/turkeys-turkey-first-syria-policy/>
- ⁶ Aaron Stein, "Donald Trump and the War for Raqqa," *The American Interest*, February 2, 2017, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/02/02/donald-trump-and-the-war-for-raqqa/>
- ⁷ Carla Babb, "US Troops in Manbij to 'Deter' Skirmishes Between Turks, Kurds," *VOA News*, March 7, 2017, <http://www.voanews.com/a/us-troops-in-manbij-to-deter-skirmishes-between-turks-kurds/3752065.html>
- ⁸ The same will likely prove true for the case of the Turkish banker who was subsequently arrested as part of the same investigation. Isobel Finkel and Christian Berthelsen, "U.S. Arrests Top Turkish Banker in Iran Sanctions Probe," *Bloomberg*, March 28, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-03-28/halkbank-deputy-g-m-arrested-in-u-s-in-iran-financing-probe>
- ⁹ Denis Slattery, "Michael Flynn, Turkish officials secretly discussed removing exiled Muslim cleric from U.S.," *New York Daily News*, March 24, 2017, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/flynn-turkish-officials-planned-extradite-muslim-cleric-article-1.3008518>
- ¹⁰ Benjamin Weiser and Patrick Kingsley, "Why Giuliani Held a Secret Meeting With Turkey's Leader," *New York Times*, April 20, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/20/nyregion/rudy-giuliani-reza-zarrab-iran-sanctions-case.html?_r=0
- ¹¹ Nick Danforth, "It's Time for Erdogan to Admit He's Not a Democrat," *Foreign Policy*, April 20, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/20/its-time-for-erdogan-to-admit-hes-not-a-democrat/>
- ¹² Editorial Board, "Iran derails Aleppo cease-fire," *Daily Sabah*, December 14, 2016, <https://www.dailysabah.com/editorial/2016/12/14/iran-derails-aleppo-cease-fire>
- ¹³ "Yasama organı güçlendi," *Haber Sitesi*, <http://www.habersitesi.com/tbmm-baskani-kahraman-yasama-organi-guclendi-90879h.htm>
- ¹⁴ "Anayasa Değişiklik Teklifinin 12 Maddesi Kabul Edildi," *Sputnik*, <https://tr.sputniknews.com/turkiye/201701201026863804-anayasa-degisiklik-teklifinin-12maddesi-kabul-edildi/>
- ¹⁵ "15 Temmuz'da Sokağa Onlar Çıktı," *Haber7*, <http://www.haber7.com/guncel/haber/2070986-15-temmuzda-sokaga-onlar-cikti>
- ¹⁶ "MHP koalisyonu reddetti, muhalefete kalacak," *Sputnik*, <https://tr.sputniknews.com/turkiye/201506081015876267/>
- ¹⁷ "1 Kasım 2015 Genel Seçimleri," *Sabah*, <http://www.sabah.com.tr/secim/1-kasim-2015-genel-secimleri>
- ¹⁸ "Cumhurbaşkanlığı Seçimi," *Hürriyet*, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/cumhurbaskanligisecimi/>
- ¹⁹ "Evete Kürt seçmen katkısı," *Al-Jazeera*, <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/al-jazeera-ozel/evete-kurt-secmen-katkisi>
- ²⁰ "İstanbul referandum sonuçları," *CNN Türk*, <http://www.cnnturk.com/turkiye/2017-istanbul-referandum-sonuclari-hangi-ilcede-evet-hangi-ilcede-hayir-cikti?page=14>

²¹ “7 Haziran 2015 Genel Seçimleri”, *Sabah*, <http://www.sabah.com.tr/secim/7-haziran-2015-genel-secimleri>

²² “1 Kasım 2015 Genel Seçimleri”, *Sabah*, <http://www.sabah.com.tr/secim/1-kasim-2015-genel-secimleri/>