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Turkey's Imbrolios

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Turkey, long-considered one of the region's strongest states, is facing unprecedented challenges. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who harbors far-reaching ambitions, faces a political stalemate following a series of domestic and foreign policy failures. The sweeping victory that the Justice and Development (AKP) party achieved in the November 2015 elections fueled Erdoğan's hope that he would finally realize his vision of transforming the Turkish government into a system with executive presidential authority. But the AKP policy towards the Assad regime in Syria, beginning in 2011, has led Turkey into a number of interlocking domestic, regional, and international conflicts. The interdependent nature of these conflicts makes finding solutions especially difficult, thus further muddying the waters for Turkey.

Domestically, the Kurdish challenge is the most serious it has been since the 1990s. During that period, Turkey's domestic security threat perception consisted of two factors: Islamism and Kurdish ethno-nationalism. But since 2002, when the Islamist AKP rose to power, the government's threat perception has revolved mainly around the Kurds. The government's anxiety rose further following the outbreak of turmoil in Syria and the Kurdish success in gaining control over the territory along Turkey's southern border. Turkey views this development as an inherent danger and a compound threat on two levels. First, in less than four years, an autonomous Kurdish entity has emerged on Turkey's southern border, a development that reached a new peak with the declaration of a Kurdish Federal Region in Syria in March 2016. Second, as a result of the intimate ideological, political, and organizational ties between the Kurds in Syria and the Kurdish movement in Turkey, there is a growing fear in Ankara that political gains by the Kurds in Syria will have a spillover effect on the Kurds in Turkey. Ironically, Kurdistan of Syria (Rojava), which took its ideological and organizational inspiration from the Kurds in Turkey, has turned into a model for Turkey's Kurds.

Turkey is fighting Kurdish forces on three separate, but nonetheless interconnected fronts: internally, in southeastern Turkey; in the Qandil Mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan – the base of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK); and, in Syrian Kurdistan. After the collapse of the three-year peace talks with the PKK in the summer of 2015, the war between the PKK and Turkey’s security forces was reignited in the heart of Turkish Kurdistan's cities. The PKK's attacks on security forces led to a harsh crackdown and curfews in towns and city districts, exacting a heavy toll on the region’s population and infrastructure. Three months ago, Erdoğan claimed that the number of PKK members killed had reached 3100,¹ while the toll on Turkish security forces, according to Turkish official sources, was more than 420 since July 2015.² Turkey’s objective is to eradicate, once and for all, its Kurdish problem and sever the Gordian knot between the Kurds in Turkey and the Kurds in Syria. Erdoğan recently declared that the PKK faced two choices: surrender to the state or be neutralized.³ But this all-out war, to which the world has turned a blind-eye, is likely to generate the opposite outcome: cementing the resistance of the Kurdish opposition movement in Turkey. One indication to that effect was the two recent terrorist attacks in the heart of Ankara, which shocked the Turkish public to the core and shattered its sense of public security.

As for the Kurdish front in Syria, in June 2015, Erdoğan warned that he would never allow a Kurdish state to be established in Syria. But much to his chagrin, the Kurds on Turkey’s southern border had great success fighting the Islamic State (IS), received military support from the West and Russia, and even opened a Kurdish office in Moscow. Moreover, the Kurds aspire to connect the cantons of Syrian Kurdistan and achieve territorial contiguity, and even an outlet to the Mediterranean Sea. Erdoğan tried to sabotage these efforts by supporting Islamic groups in Syria, first among them the Islamic State, but the Kurds have come out of these battles on top. What’s more, Erdoğan was forced to swallow the bitter fruit of his actions when the Islamic State began carrying out terrorist attacks in Turkey, the most recent of which targeted a group of Israelis on March 19 in Istanbul , killing three and injuring eleven. Beyond the harm done to the lives of innocent people, the attacks have dealt a heavy blow to Turkish tourism.

The AKP government earned its political capital from Turkey’s economic success during the country’s bonanza decade that followed the AKP’s rise in 2002. But in recent years, the economic boom has stalled. The recent terrorist attacks and the crisis in relations with Russia have hurt tourism, which made a significant contribution to Turkey’s state revenues. The worsening of relations with Russia

¹ [“Turkey’s president says 3,100 PKK terrorists killed,”](#) *Anadolu Agency*, December 31, 2015.

² Kadri Gursel, [“Why Erdogan can’t end PKK war,”](#) *Al Monitor*, April 5, 2016.

³ [“Erdogan gives PKK ultimatum, surrender or be ‘neutralized’,”](#) *Rudaw*, April 4, 2016.

and some of Turkey's neighboring countries as well, along with the worldwide economic slowdown, has hurt the Turkish economy. In addition to economic challenges, Erdoğan has antagonized broad segments of Turkish society, despite the AKP's electoral success. Liberal groups that supported Erdoğan during his initial rise to power were dealt a harsh blow following the "Gezi Park" events in the Spring of 2013, when the Turkish authorities forcibly suppressed all forms of civil society opposition. There has also been an ever-expanding crackdown on the media, marked by the arrest of journalists and takeovers of newspapers that dared to criticize the corruption of Erdoğan and his supporters. Erdoğan has also targeted his one-time Gülenist protégés,⁴ but this is likely to foment political unrest that may one day weaken the hegemony of Turkey's ruling party. The military, which was excised from the political arena and sent back to the barracks, was another of Erdoğan's victims. Many Turkish generals that held positions in high command were jailed by Erdoğan and yearn for the day when they can return to politics and reverse the balance of political power in their favor. Recently there was even an attempt within the AKP, led by former President Abdullah Gül, to curb Erdoğan's power, but it was unsuccessful.⁵ Overall, Erdoğan's Turkey continues to move towards autocracy.

In the foreign relations sphere, Turkey is embroiled in an unprecedented number of conflict, which helps to explain its eagerness to normalize relations with Israel, after they were severely damaged following the Mavi Marmara crisis in 2010. In addition to its failures in Syria, Turkey has poor relations with the largest Arab state, Egypt, as a result of Erdoğan's support for the now-banned Muslim Brotherhood. Its relations with other Arab states have not led to the desired Turkish regional hegemony, either. The financial support Turkey has received from Gulf States, and Saudi Arabia in particular, has declined as the price of oil has fallen. Iran, Turkey's eastern neighbor, has become a threat against the background of the Sunni-Shi'i divide, Iran's growing influence in Iraq and Syria, and its increasing military ties with Russia. Further, with the lifting of international sanctions on Iran in early 2016, in the aftermath of the nuclear agreement, there is a sense of renewed competition for regional hegemony between Iran and Turkey.

In the international arena Turkey's biggest entanglement was with Russia, following the downing of a Russian fighter jet in November 2015, shortly after the AKP's most recent electoral victory. It is possible that the electoral success

⁴ US-based Turkish Islamic leader Fethullah Gülen's *Hizmet* ("service") movement has millions of followers in Turkey and operates a worldwide religious network, with business, philanthropy, and educational interests across the globe. Gülen, once a political ally of the AKP, was targeted by Erdoğan when it was suspected Gülen's supporters were trying to bring down the AKP government by exposing corruption among Erdoğan's inner circle.

⁵ Cengiz Candar, "[Bombshell book exposes Gul's differences with Erdogan](#)," *Al Monitor*, June 16, 2015.

contributed to the hubris that stood behind Erdoğan's decision to bring down the plane. There is no doubt that Russia's involvement in the Syrian War in support of Assad was an anathema to Turkey, but it is doubtful that Ankara would have downed the plane if it had been able to anticipate the reaction of Russian President Vladimir Putin. This miscalculation created serious political and economic damage and revived Turkey's historical fears of the Russian threat, leaving Turkey to contend with Russia on two fronts, on both its northern and southern borders.

The U.S. position regarding Syria, especially in connection to the Kurdish issue, has also hurt Turkey. Turkey hoped that President Obama would crush the Assad regime, enforce the red lines that he set, and even block Russia's intervention there. Not only was Turkey disappointed by the U.S., but the U.S. expressed the view that Turkey was weak and an unreliable partner with respect to the war in Syria. Moreover, despite Turkey's repeated requests, the U.S. refused to designate the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its People's Protection Units (YPG), the Kurdish forces fighting the IS in Syria, as terrorist groups.⁶ In fact, the U.S. has been supporting the YPG in Syria since autumn of 2014.⁷ Further, the U.S. prevented the establishment of a "safe-zone" in northern Syria that would provide Turkey with international cover to intervene in Syria and end the budding Kurdish autonomy. The U.S. also expressed its disapproval of the damage done to democratic norms in Turkey by AKP's political repression. All of these issues have created serious friction in the relations between the two states.

Does this constellation of developments herald the downfall of Erdoğan? Not necessarily. How can Erdoğan extricate Turkey from these crises? At the domestic level, Erdoğan hopes to leverage nationalist sentiment, which he revived with the war against the Kurds and the conflict with Russia, in order to gain support for the referendum that will provide him with executive presidential power and the role he covets as an all-powerful leader.

As for foreign policy, it is worth remembering that Turkey has NATO's largest military force after the U.S., and if it becomes embroiled in another foreign policy adventure, its allies may be forced to intervene on its behalf. The U.S. in particular, and NATO in general, need access to Turkey's Incirlik air base to carry out air strikes in Syria, which is an important point of leverage in Erdoğan's diplomatic maneuvering. Erdoğan is also using the issue of refugees flooding into Europe as a diplomatic card with the West. After Erdoğan threatened to evacuate all of Turkey's refugees to the continent, which terrified Europe, the EU adopted

⁶ There are close ties between the PYD and the PKK. In 1997, the U.S. Department of State designated the PKK a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO).

⁷ Barak Barfi, "[Ascent of the PYD and the SDF](#)," *Policy Analysis*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 2016.

a more conciliatory approach towards Turkey. It offered €6 billion in aid, the prospect of easier travel visas for Turkish citizens, and "re-energized" accession talks to the EU in return for stemming the flow of migrants to Europe.⁸

Ironically, the attempt to reconcile with Israel is part of Turkey's attempt to rehabilitate its image. In the past, Israel was the punching bag that Erdoğan used to rally domestic and regional support. Today the wheel has turned, reconciling with Israel has become a pressing matter for Turkey, and Erdoğan has stopped making disparaging public remarks about Israel. He even sent a condolence letter to Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, following the terrorist attack in Istanbul that killed Israeli citizens. The Turkish media and official spokespersons have made repeated announcements that relations with Israel are on the verge of being normalized, leaving Israeli officials and spokespeople to rein in any such premature enthusiasm. Would Erdoğan be willing to go so far as removing Hamas' offices from Turkey? Would he waive his demand for Israel to lift its siege on Gaza? If so, it will indicate the depth of Turkey's crises and an important turning point in its foreign relations.

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⁸ Paul Taylor and Alastair Macdonald, "[EU offers Turkey cash, closer ties for migration help](#)," *Reuters*, October 16, 2015.