

A Western Perspective

Turkey and the West after the Failed Coup: Beyond Suspicion?

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ABSTRACT *In the wake of the events of July 15, mutual suspicion is an accurate description of relations between Turkey and the U.S., and Turkish-Western relations as a whole.¹ Going beyond suspicion remains a challenge, and ultimately a necessity. It will not be an easy challenge to meet. The essential logic of Turkish-Western cooperation has been reinforced by developments in Turkey's region. But developments in Turkey, Europe and, not least, the U.S., suggest that the sense of shared values and long-term purpose has declined.*

A Defining Moment

Turks of all political persuasions rightly view the failed coup attempt as a watershed moment, and a searing experience for the country. At least 240 people died in these events, with over 2,000 injured. The fact that the attempt occurred in a country with NATO's second largest military establishment, when most Turks and international partners assumed that the time of coups in Turkey had long past, shook assumptions about the stability of the country. Western governments, analysts and opinion shapers were overwhelmingly supportive of Turkey's democratically elected government and

the primacy of civilian over military rule. But Washington and Brussels were clearly taken aback by the brazen nature of the coup attempt. Western foreign policy bureaucracies are, by nature, cautious and often slow to respond. They are ill suited to producing the kind of prompt congratulatory messages flowing from Tehran or Moscow. In the case of the EU, any response requires painstaking multinational coordination. There is a default tendency to gather facts and understand what is actually happening before issuing statements. In the case of July 15th and its immediate aftermath, this had the unfortunate effect of encouraging many Turks to believe that American and European leaders

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were half-hearted in their support for Turkish democracy. This was certainly not the intent, and much has been done since that time to reassure Ankara on this score. Nonetheless, suspicion persists on the Turkish side. It draws on a long tradition of Turkish anxiety about national sovereignty and the intentions of great powers.

American policymakers will be especially sensitive to continued allegations that Washington was somehow involved in or aware of the coup. The most creative of these conspiracy theories have been directed at senior U.S. military officials, but even scholars and analysts have not been immune. The extent to which these ideas hold currency, even among sophisticated Turkish observers, is dismaying to friends of Turkey, and is especially corrosive at a time when security and defense cooperation is becoming more essential. Officials in NATO circles have been troubled by the sudden disappearance of Turkish military and civilian colleagues from positions of responsibility, and there

are certainly concerns about the effect of sweeping personnel changes on Turkish defense capacity and habits of cooperation with allies. But this should not be taken as tacit support for coup plotters. The culture of civilian control over the military is deeply ingrained in Western defense establishments. This point cannot be emphasized too strongly.

Some Open Questions

Western observers remain uncertain about what exactly happened on July 15th. The notion that the Gülen movement played a role, perhaps a leading role in the attempt is widely accepted. But many remain unconvinced about the movement's ability to attempt a putsch without some degree of support from other quarters, from opportunists, or from individuals fearing a prospective purge. It may surprise many Turks, but until these dramatic events most of the Western political and policy establishment, even well-informed individuals, had never heard of Fetullah Gülen or his network. It remains an esoteric issue on both sides of the Atlantic. Even among American and European experts on Turkish affairs, there has been little consensus on the nature of the movement or its activities. To the extent that the Turkish government pressures transatlantic partners to shut down Gülenist institutions abroad and to extradite alleged plotters, the demands for direct evidence of Gülenist subversion will grow. Ankara will need to respond to these demands in a convincing manner. The



From right to left: President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, PM Binali Yıldırım, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu (leader of the main opposition party, CHP), İsmail Kahraman (speaker of the Parliament) and Devlet Bahçeli (leader of the MHP) gathered at the rally in Yenikapı, İstanbul to protest against the July 15 coup attempt, on August 07, 2016.

AA PHOTO / KAYHAN ÖZER

gap between Turkish expectations and Western legal process is likely to remain, and risks continued friction.

A Troubled Context

Recent events in Turkey have unfolded against a backdrop of strained relations with Western partners. The recognition of Turkey's critical geopolitical position has hardly diminished. If anything, it has increased sharply in light of the collapse of the regional order around Turkey, the open-ended conflicts in Syria and Iraq, deteriorating relations with Russia, and the refugee crisis affecting Turkey and its neighbors. At the same time, American and European perceptions of Turkey's AK Party government have been at a low ebb for some time. Turkey is not the only country affected by resurgent nationalism, populist politics, and erosion of the rule of law

and media freedom. But the acceleration of these tendencies in Turkey are widely noted and discussed, and as a NATO member and EU candidate, Turkey's perceived drift toward authoritarianism matters.

Turkish political figures, not least President Erdoğan, have been overtly critical of the West in ways that inevitably complicate relations. Washington and Brussels have also been highly critical of Ankara, for reasons noted above. The rhetoric on all sides—perhaps most evidently between Turkey and the EU—has taken on a tone of brinkmanship that does not bode well in an environment with much practical business to be done. This is all the more significant as public opinion has come to play a central part in relations, and as populist politics work against the traditional foundation of expert opinion and the views of the strategic establishment,

both generally mindful of the logic for Turkish-Western cooperation.

Growing Concerns about Turkish Stability

American and European support for Turkish democracy only reinforces growing concerns about Turkish stability in the wake of the coup attempt, as democratic practices and institutions are increasingly constrained. The U.S. and Europe are stakeholders in Turkish prosperity and security. After more than a decade of dynamism and development, the outlook is now very uncertain, and is made even more uncertain by precarious regional and global conditions. These concerns pre-date the events of July, and have been growing for some time. The collapse of the *de facto* cease fire with the PKK, and the deepening Kurdish insurgency and violence in the southeast and elsewhere, jihadist terrorism, growing polarization in Turkish society and politics, and the proliferation of groups with grudges against the state, are all part of the equation against the background of an extended state of emergency. These internal sources of insecurity interact with deepening chaos on Turkey's borders. Taken together, these elements do not augur well for the stability of the country. Terrorism and political violence can have an isolating effect on a country that has benefited greatly from globalization. Tourism and investment have been affected by these conditions, and the potentially disruptive economic effects of the on-going

seizures of Gülenist assets (likely to have disproportionate implications in Anatolia and the southeast of the country) have yet to be felt. The sweeping post-July 15th purges across the state, the military and the private sector suggest a system increasingly focused on survival in the face of multiple challenges. One way to interpret the failed coup and its aftermath is to see it as the most dramatic and violent episode in a long running struggle for mastery over Turkish society, politics and the economy.

The Foreign and Security Policy Outlook

Turkey's internal scene has become more troubled just as the regional order in the Middle East and the Black Sea has collapsed. The net effect of these developments may well be to increase the imbalance between the security and non-security dimensions of Turkish-Western relations. Historically, this imbalance has been most pronounced in Turkish relations with the U.S., where foreign and security policy ties have been at the core of the relationship, and economic and other ties have remained relatively underdeveloped. With Europe, Turkey has traditionally maintained a more balanced partnership, with substantial financial, trade and people-to-people ties, alongside geopolitical interests. The large Turkish communities in Europe are another, structural link. But migration, terrorism and the conflict in Syria have pushed security issues, broadly defined, to the center in Turkey's relations with Europe.

The chaotic conditions on Turkey's borders may well be the new norm. The war in Syria could prove open-ended, and the country as a whole may never be reassembled along pre-conflict lines. The same may be said of Iraq, and indeed, of Ukraine. If so, this will have structural implications for Ankara's relations with the West. Under these conditions, Turkey is not simply a partner in crisis management, but essentially a permanent *glacis*, a barrier against instability emanating from the south and southeast. While this underscores Turkey's long-term geopolitical significance, it also reverses many of the guiding assumptions of Turkish policy over the last decade. In this new reality, the Middle East and Eurasia are no longer promising places for Turkish diplomatic and commercial activism, but sources of risk. In this sense, Turkish and Western perceptions about Turkey's neighborhood may actually be converging, even if policy approaches may differ.

Turkey's military intervention in Syria, and continued presence in northern Iraq are hardly surprising given the nature of the risks Turkey faces, and the country's historic interests in these areas. But how long will Turkish forces stay? Even if Ankara is successful in keeping Kurdish fighters to the east of the Euphrates, and in keeping ISIS from mounting rocket attacks on Turkish territory, conditions in Syria in particular may require an extended series of interventions, if not a permanent military presence. There are parallels with the situation

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in northern Iraq from the mid -1990s onward. And as in the Iraqi case, it is possible to imagine the gradual establishment of a Turkish *modus vivendi* with the Syrian Kurds in the interest of developing a sustainable buffer zone across the border. This would certainly simplify the vexing problem of reconciling Western, and especially American strategy with Ankara interests. But the conditions for this do not yet exist. In the meantime, realities on the ground, above all, the centrality of Kurdish militias in the fight against ISIS, continue to compel American cooperation with the YPG. Given the intensity of Turkish concerns about the PKK, and Ankara's unshakeable conviction that the PKK and YPG are two sides of the same separatist coin, this source of tension in U.S.-Turkish relations is likely to persist, regardless of the change of administration in Washington.

The perceived decline of Turkey's Western vocation and inclination toward a form of non-alignment in international affairs, have done lit-

tle to reassure Western leaderships in recent years. This has taken on deeper significance as the growing friction with Russia shows little sign of abating. Few would suggest that Turkish relations with Moscow and Eurasian partners are in any sense a viable alternative to NATO. Yet, for over a decade, Ankara has been seeking diversification in its foreign policy, and perhaps hedging against the perceived erosion of Western ties. The October 2016 round of high-level talks between Turkey and Russia, including new agreements on construction of the Turkish Stream pipeline and civil nuclear power, may raise some concerns in Washington and Brussels. If Turkey reopens negotiations with Russia on procurement of an advanced air defense system, this would surely complicate NATO's commitment to surveillance and defense around Turkey. On the other hand, NATO partners will welcome steps to reduce military risks between Turkey and Russia, especially as their forces are operating in close proximity in Syria. Overall, the prospect of a return to structural antagonism between Russia and the West is likely to confront Ankara with a series of uncomfortable choices in the years ahead, pitting commercial interest against longer-term security anxieties –and alliance pressures.

Western Dynamics

Developments on the Turkish side are not the only variables in the Turkish-Western equation. Europe, too, has become a place of popu-



U.S. Vice President Joe Biden with İsmail Kahraman (Speaker of the Parliament) inspect the bombed Parliament building on August 24, 2016.

AFF PHOTO / STRINGER

list politics, re-nationalized policies and security shocks. Seasoned European observers are now openly asking whether the EU will survive in a post-Brexit environment. Certainly, the EU is in no mood for new large-scale enlargements. Movement toward a multi-speed Europe could well offer new opportunities for Turkey and new ways for Turkey to “fit.” But this evolution is far from inevitable, and a protracted period of European uncertainty and drift will leave Ankara with a weak and unpredictable partner in Brussels. As Secretary of State John Kerry suggested in an October 4, 2016 speech hosted by GMF in Brussels, the U.S. can live with a range of European arrange-

ments, as long as they are functional. In this sense, Ankara and Washington should have similar concerns.

The July 2016 NATO summit in Warsaw understandably focused heavily on the challenge posed by Russia to

would have a transforming effect on the prospects here, and on many other fronts. It would be one item of good news in an otherwise dismal regional outlook. It would also help to improve Turkey's troubled image in the West.

Early impressions suggest that the Trump administration will place more emphasis on Ankara as a partner in counter-terrorism

security in the East. But the Alliance will also have to deal with threats emanating from the south, from the Mediterranean and its Middle Eastern and African hinterlands. This is in many respects a more complex strategic problem, and it is hardly possible to envision a NATO strategy to address it without Turkey – arguably the most exposed Alliance member, and the place where the Eastern and Southern challenges meet. At the same time, NATO and the EU are committed to working more closely together. Even tentative moves in this direction will have important implications for Turkey. Ankara will need to reconcile political reservations with a shared stake in the possible benefits, especially in Turkey's neighborhood, where hard and non-traditional security risks are intertwined. A Cyprus settlement

The coming period will see a series of critical elections and referenda, in France, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands. All could be consequential for relations with Turkey at a time of intense focus on relations between Islam and the West, immigration, trade, security, and the future of open societies more generally. It goes without saying that a sharp turn toward inward-looking, populist politics would greatly complicate Turkish-Western relations, with an identity driven worldview alongside a series of tactical interests in cooperation with Ankara. In essence, the EU approach is already one of "privileged partnership," even if both sides avoid this vocabulary. This is most visible in the wrangling over the refugee readmission and visa liberalization agreement. In all likelihood, elements of this arrangement will prove durable, even if implementation falls short of what both sides would wish. In fact, the most serious issue in relations between Ankara and Brussels today is not the future of the refugee "deal," but rather rapidly mounting European worries about Turkey's domestic evolution. In the wake of the latest wave of media closures and prosecutions, and the arrest of HDP leaders, there is now a very real possibility that EU accession negotiations will be suspended. Once suspended,

these negotiations may be difficult to restart –especially if xenophobic populist parties gain ground in Europe.

At a time of disarray in Europe, the future direction of American policy becomes even more consequential for Turkey. The behavior of a Trump administration toward Ankara and Turkey's neighborhood is hard to predict, and as with any transition, will depend in large measure on the policy inclinations of foreign and security policy appointees. Unilateralism –rather than isolationism– and a highly personalized approach are likely to be the order of the day. A Clinton administration would have been more predictable by almost any measure. There will be little risk of disengagement, but there will be continued pressure to reconcile American and Turkish approaches on the ground in Syria and elsewhere. Early impressions suggest that the Trump administration will place more emphasis on Ankara as a partner in counter-terrorism, with less attention to questions of democracy and rule of law inside Turkey. The administration's approach is likely to be bilateral rather than NATO-centric, with tough measures of cooperation. This will be a high-stakes, realist game for Turkey, without the traditional flywheel of alliance relations and affinity.

Beyond the post-election transition, Turkey will be affected by some underlying trends in American foreign policy. These include mounting disenchantment with Saudi Arabia, just as Ankara has developed closer ties

with the kingdom. Despite much speculation, there is probably little prospect of a general American disengagement from the Middle East. But there is every possibility of a relative shift in strategic interest from the Gulf to the Levant and the Mediterranean as centers of risk. All of this argues for more interaction with Turkey, not less, but this interaction could remain difficult and prone to bilateral friction when interests do not align.

What Next?

The events of July 15, 2016 hold a lesson about the dangers of complacency, and the speed with which things can fall apart. It is a lesson with wide application for Turkey and its Western partners. This analysis suggests that Turkish-Western relations, never easy, are headed for a rough but highly consequential period. There will be no shortage of attention to Turkey, but with the possible exception of a Cyprus settlement, much of this attention is likely to be negative. Quite apart from the open-ended conflicts in the neighborhood, policymakers, strategists and investors will be focused on the issue of Turkish stability *per se*. Western governments and observers will remain concerned about the style and substance of Turkish politics, above all, the declining scope for open debate and mounting sectarian and communal frictions. At a time of pronounced internal and external security challenges, many Turks will bridle at this criticism. It is probably unavoidable, but hardly new

in the long sweep of Turkish-Western relations.

At the same time, the Turkish-Western policy agenda has never been more diverse or critical to the interests of all sides. Mutual suspicion and mistrust will coexist with a degree of realism given the evident need for Turkish-U.S.-European cooperation on the most pressing issues of the day, from counter-terrorism and refugees to regional security and dealing with Russia. As many analysts have observed, these conditions are likely to foster an extended period of transactional diplomacy in relations between Turkey and the West, driv-

en in large part by internal developments –on both sides. What is lost in this atmosphere is a sense of longer-term direction, convergence and Turkish-Western relations as a grand strategic project. It is a point that could be made with equal force about the current challenge in transatlantic relations as a whole, and one that becomes even more critical in the wake of the American elections. ■

Endnote

1. A decade ago, I wrote a book on precisely this theme. See Ian O. Lesser, *Beyond Suspicion: Rethinking US-Turkish Relations*, (Washington: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2007).

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