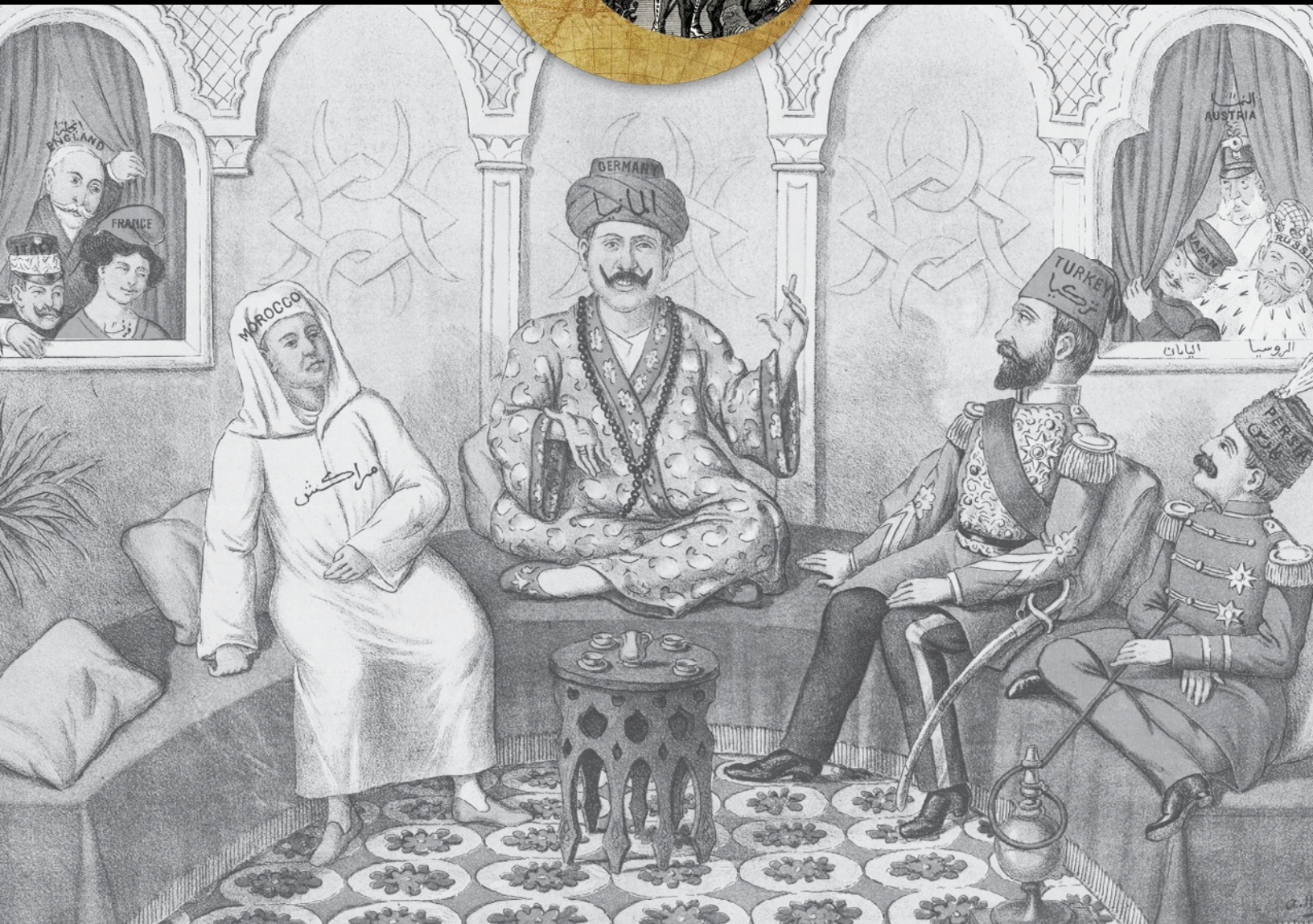


STRATEGIKA

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Conflicts Of The Past As Lessons For The Present

JULY 2018



TURKEY AND THE WEST

IN THIS ISSUE

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CONTENTS

JULY 2018 • ISSUE 52

BACKGROUND ESSAY

The New Sultan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey
by Soner Cagaptay

FEATURED COMMENTARY

Is Turkey No Longer Part of the West?
by Paul A. Rahe

Erdogan's Turkey and NATO
by Austin Bay

RELATED COMMENTARY

EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS

Discussion Questions

Suggestions for Further Reading

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The New Sultan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey

By Soner Cagaptay

The failed coup of July 15, 2016 has irreversibly transformed Turkish politics. Although the coup attempt was thankfully thwarted, the path that Erdogan chose to take after the coup—using the state of emergency powers he was given to go specifically after coup plotters, to embark instead on a much broader campaign against all dissidents, many of whom possessed no ties to the coup in any form—highlights an unfortunate truth about the country: Turkey is in a deep crisis.

The country is polarized between supporters and opponents of Erdogan, who has won successive elections in Turkey since 2002 on a platform of right-wing populism. Erdogan has demonized and cracked down on electoral constituencies that are not likely to vote for him, a strategy that has dramatically worsened polarization in Turkey, which is now sharply split between pro- and anti-Erdogan camps: the former, a conservative and Turkish-nationalist right-wing coalition, believes that the country is paradise; the latter, a loose group of leftists, secularists, liberals, and Kurds, thinks that it lives in hell.

More alarmingly, terror groups such as the hard-leftist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and the jihadist Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) are taking advantage of this chasm in Turkey, adding bloodshed and sharpening the divide even further. Between summer 2015 and the end of 2016 alone, Turkey suffered 33 major ISIS and PKK terror attacks, which killed almost 550 people. To make things even worse, international actors, from the Assad regime in Damascus, which Ankara tried to oust during the Syrian civil war, to Russia and Iran, which support Assad, are eager to see Erdogan fall and Turkey spiral into chaos.

In short, Turkey is in crisis. Could it implode under such pressure? It certainly could, and, if it did, it would be nothing short of a disaster. Turkey occupies a crucial position—geographically and ideologically—between Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia. It is the oldest democracy and largest economy between Italy and India; its implosion would plunge the world into chaos far greater in scale than that currently raging in Syria and Iraq.

But can Turkey walk away from such an unfortunate future? Any answer to this is impossible without a full understanding of Erdogan's ascendancy and political aspirations. The Turkish president is one of the most influential statesmen of our time. He and the party he leads—at first *de jure*, currently *de facto*—have won five parliamentary elections, three sets of nationwide local elections, two presidential elections by popular vote, and two referenda between 2002 and early 2018.

But what will Erdogan's enduring legacy be? Buried under all the criticism, his record has many positive elements, namely, his successful delivery of economic growth and improved living standards. This is Erdogan's bright side. When Erdogan's AKP came to power in 2002, Turkey was a country of mostly poor people; it is now a country of mostly middle-income citizens. Life has improved across the country, and citizens enjoy better infrastructure and services overall. In 2002, Turkey's maternal mortality rate was roughly comparable to prewar Syria's; now it is close to Spain's. In other words, Turks used to live like Syrians; now they live like the Spaniards. This is why Erdogan remains wildly popular and wins elections, even though Turkey's per capita income has inched up only incrementally since that "miracle" surge between 2002 and 2008.¹ Going forward, the economy will be Erdogan's Achilles heel. If Turkey continues to grow, Erdogan's base will continue to support him.

In any case, and barring economic meltdown, Erdogan will go down in history as one of Turkey's most memorable, effective, and influential leaders, likely ranking alongside Ataturk, who believed that the secular, Westernized political system he built in the twentieth century would never be torn down.

Secularism has been a hallmark of Ataturk's reforms and legacy in Turkey. Ataturk, an officer in the Ottoman military, was a product of the late Ottoman Empire: he was decidedly secularist and pro-Western. His attempt at the radical Westernization and Europeanization of Turkey was his response to the collapse of the empire, dubbed the "sick man of Europe." He believed that the Ottomans had failed because they had not secularized and Europeanized enough. If Turkey could become as powerful as the European countries of the day, which included many of the world's great powers, then it might avoid the dark fate of the Ottoman Empire, which was dismembered by the European states at the end of World War I. Ataturk wanted to make Turkey completely European so it would become invincible again.

The theme of making Turkey great again would be picked up by later generations of Turkish leaders, most recently by Erdogan, whose recipe to this end would be to make the country a powerful Middle Eastern nation able to compete with the Europeans and other great powers.

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire continues to shape Turkey's view of its place in the world, creating myths and goals that resonate in the Turkish psyche. Nations that were great empires never forget that fact, and they often have a malleable, exaggerated sense of their glory days, and a story about why they are no longer an empire—a combustible blend of pride in an idealized past, grievance over greatness lost or stolen, and readiness to be inspired (less flatteringly, vulnerability to manipulation) by effective politicians.

Having governed Turkey for sixteen years, from 2002, Erdogan has amassed powers sufficient to undermine Ataturk's legacy and, were they alive, make those original Kemalists question their absolute confidence in their system. He has dismantled Ataturk's secularism in just over a decade and has done so with little mercy for his opponents. He has flooded the country's political and education systems with a rigidly conservative form of Islam and pivoted Turkey away from Europe and the West. This is—paradoxically—Erdogan's "Ataturk" side. Of course, Erdogan does not share Ataturk's values, just his methods. Just as Ataturk shaped Turkey in his own image following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Erdogan is shaping a new country, but one that sees itself as profoundly Islamist in politics and foreign policy—to make it a great power once again.

Erdogan is an anti-Ataturk "Ataturk." Having grown up in secular Turkey and faced social exclusion at a young age due to his piety and conservative views, Erdogan is motivated by deep-rooted animosity toward Ataturk's ways. And yet he has dismantled Ataturk's system by using the very tools that the country's founding elites provided him with: state institutions and top-down social engineering—both hallmarks of Ataturk's

reforms. Erdogan has used Ataturk's means and methods to replace even Ataturk himself. The end product is that now Turkey discriminates against citizens who do not first and foremost identify themselves through Islam, more specifically conservative Sunni Islam, the branch to which Erdogan belongs.

However, Erdogan has a problem: whereas Ataturk came to power as a military general, Erdogan has a democratic mandate to govern. And what is more, Turkey is split almost down the middle between pro- and anti-Erdogan camps. Despite these facts, Erdogan desperately wants to change Turkey in his own image in the way that Ataturk did, and herein lies the crisis of modern Turkey: half of the country embraces Erdogan's brand of politics, but the other half vehemently opposes it. So long as Turkey is genuinely democratic, Erdogan cannot complete his revolution.

This has given birth to Erdogan's dark, illiberal side: in order to push forward with his platform of revolutionary change against a split society, he has subverted the country's democracy. Exploiting his popularity, he has eroded democratic checks and balances, including the media and the courts. Instead of delivering more liberties for all, he has cracked down on his opponents and locked up dissidents, providing disproportionate freedoms for his conservative and Islamist base. Although he has won elections democratically, Erdogan has gradually become more autocratic, ensuring that the political playing field is uneven in order to prevent power from escaping his hands.

He has accomplished this by playing the "authoritarian underdog." Building on his narrative of political martyrdom under the secularist system in the 1990s, Erdogan now portrays himself as a victim who is grudgingly forced to suppress those conspiring to undermine his authority. He has intimidated the media and the business community through politically motivated tax audits and by jailing dissidents, scholars, and journalists. And his police regularly crack down on peaceful opposition rallies. Accordingly, although Turkey's elections continue to be free, they are increasingly not fair. Erdogan's electoral strategy has created deeply entrenched polarization in Turkey: his conservative base, constituting about half of the country, has zealously rallied around him in his defense; the other half of the country, brutalized by Erdogan, holds a profound resentment for him. Increasingly, there is little common ground between these constituencies.

Yet, Erdogan wants to shape all of Turkey in his image. Erdogan's personalization of power and domination of political and civil institutions has rendered Turkey politically brittle, in a state of permanent crisis. He has achieved enormous success in elections by demonizing and politically brutalizing various demographic groups that will not vote for him. When combined, these groups make up nearly half the Turkish electorate, and there are still plenty of enemies waiting for him to fall from power. Erdogan knows that his actions have left him with no graceful way to exit the scene. What's more, when

POLL: Our present relationship with Turkey is best characterized as:

- ☐ Turkey is now a de facto enemy given its Neo-Ottoman trajectory under the anti-democratic Erdogan.
- ☐ Turkey should leave NATO and be treated as a neutral nonbelligerent such as Egypt or Jordan.
- ☐ Keep quiet and hope that Erdogan is a passing fad and not an indication of permanent political change.
- ☐ The United States must work with Erdogan on an ad hoc, realist basis when common interests arise.
- ☐ The United States should urge EU status for Turkey and strengthen ties even with Erdogan.

Erdogan does leave office—and one day he will—there will be few institutions left standing to keep the country together.

Turkey can exit its crisis only through a new constitution that provides broad freedoms for all citizens. Remember, the secularist system that created Erdogan was one that protected freedom from religion, but not freedom of religion. Erdogan has turned the tables. Moving forward, in order to make sure that the rights of both Turkey's pious and secular halves are respected, the constitution will need to guarantee both forms of religious freedom. A new liberal charter would also allow Turkey to solve its Kurdish issue by guaranteeing broad rights for everyone, including the Kurds. If Turkey can make peace with its Kurds, then it can also make peace with the pro-PKK Kurds in northern Syria, a welcome development that would in turn endow Ankara with a cordon sanitaire against instability, jihadism, sectarian conflict, and civil war, all of which are likely to hail from Syria and threaten Turkey for decades.

If Erdogan shepherds in a new constitution that brings together the country's disparate halves and opens the path for peace with the Kurds, he may leave behind a positive political legacy as well. Erdogan must recognize that the time for Atatürk-style revolutions—involving top-down social engineering in Turkey (or, for that matter, anywhere else)—has passed. The Turkey that Atatürk shaped in his own image in the 1920s was nearly 75 percent peasantry. Barely 11 percent of Turks were literate, and moreover, many of these more educated people supported Atatürk's agenda. Contemporary Turkey, which Erdogan hopes to shape in his own image, is 80 percent urban and 97 percent literate.

It is unlikely, and probably impossible, that Erdogan will be able to impose his vision of rigid conservative Islam on the whole of Turkish society, a *mélange* of social, political, ethnic, and religious groups, many of whom oppose Erdogan's agenda. Despite Erdogan's efforts to create a class of crony Islamist capitalists, the bulk of the country's wealth is still aligned with TÜSIAD (Turkish Business and Industry Association), Turkey's Fortune 500 club that is wedded to secular, democratic, pro-Western and liberal values. Turkey is simply too diverse demographically, too big economically, and too complicated politically for one person to shape it in his own image against the background of a democratic system and competing political forces.² Democratically, Erdogan cannot have his political cake and eat it too. In other words, he can continue to shape Turkey from the top down only by ending democracy. Erdogan won the June 24th elections only after running a completely unfair campaign, and then only with a thin margin of four points. He knows that when left to its democratic devices, Turkish society would vote him out. It is "rational" for Erdogan to become more authoritarian going forward to avoid being ousted, whether or not he was once a "committed democrat."

Erdogan ought to be interested in avoiding this scenario for his own sake. The Turkish president wants to make his country a great power. He has made Turkey a middle-class country, and it now has a chance to become an advanced economy if he builds an information society driven by value-added production, including software and information technology. In other words, Erdogan's Turkey can continue to rise if it transforms itself from a country that exports cars (its chief export) into one that is a hub for Google. Turkey's capital and creative classes will flee if the government continues on its current path, and international capital and talent will avoid it if Turkey's leaders cannot provide unfettered access to the internet and ensure freedoms of expression, media, assembly, and association, and respect for individual rights, environmental concerns, urban spaces, and gender equality—key demands of the Gezi Park protestors and Erdogan's critics on the political left and right. If Turkey remains an open society, it will continue to rise. If it ceases to be democratic, it will not.

Turkey's growth and Erdogan's political fortunes are closely linked. They are also connected to the global economy and the freedoms available to citizens of most developed countries. In fact, the economy is Erdogan's vulnerability. Although Turkey's economy has grown significantly in size since 2002, it is still small enough to be woefully exposed to potential international shocks. Take note of the global downturn that nearly wiped out South Korea's economy in 1997, at a time when that country's economy was roughly

comparable in size to that of Turkey in early 2017. It was an economic collapse that brought Erdogan to power in 2002, and a similar economic collapse could mean the end of his reign.

If Erdogan fails to listen to this advice, he will expose the country to conflict between its pro- and anti-AKP blocs, and ISIS and PKK attacks and foreign enemies will only exacerbate the ensuing crisis. On this unfortunate trajectory, Erdogan will further embrace authoritarian nationalism.³ This is the “muddle through” scenario whereby Turkey remains in a permanent state of crisis and social conflict. Regrettably, there is a chance that things could get even worse. While Erdogan strives to shape Turkey in his own image, cracking down on that half of the country that opposes him, his opponents will work tirelessly to undermine his agenda: violence will beget violence. Turkey’s domestic polarization will expose it to the machinations of its foreign enemies: Moscow, which will work behind the scenes to undermine Erdogan’s revolution; Damascus, which will take advantage of its ties with radical Turkish leftists to hurt Erdogan; and, last but not least, the jihadists, who will ultimately challenge Erdogan’s brand of Islamism from the far right. Coupled with these external threats, the country’s crisis could catapult Turkey into a dangerous civil war. In this scenario, Erdogan would be remembered as the “failed Sultan” who brought about the breakdown of modern Turkey. The choice is Erdogan’s to make.

1 “Turkey: GDP per capita (current US\$),” World Bank (website), n.d., <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=TR>. For a good and concise analysis explaining the dynamics that drove Turkey’s economic growth between 2002 and 2008 and the slowdown of this growth since, see Daron Acemoglu and Murat Üçer, “Why Turkish growth ended: an institutional perspective,” Centre for Economic Policy Research (website), November 18, 2015, <http://voxeu.org/article/why-turkish-growth-ended>.

2 “Gross domestic product 2015, PPP,” World Bank (website), October 11, 2016, http://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP_PPP.pdf.

3 Halil Karaveli, “Erdogan’s Journey,” *Foreign Affairs*, December 2016, 131; Timur Kuran, “Turkey’s electoral dictatorship,” Project Syndicate (website), April 10, 2014.



SONER CAGAPTAY is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. He has written extensively on US-Turkish relations, Turkish domestic politics, and Turkish nationalism, publishing in scholarly journals and major international print media, including the *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Jane’s Defense Weekly*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Atlantic*, *New Republic*, and *Newsweek Türkiye*. A historian by training, Dr. Cagaptay wrote his doctoral dissertation at Yale University (2003) on Turkish nationalism. He has taught courses at Yale, Princeton University, Georgetown University, and Smith College on the Middle East, Mediterranean, and Eastern Europe.



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Is Turkey No Longer Part of the West?

By Paul A. Rahe

Almost a century has passed since the Ottoman Empire was dismembered and Mustafa Kemal set out to build the modern Turkish state on its ruins. Twenty years ago, no one in the West would have called into question the achievement of the man who eventually, with considerable justice, styled himself Atatürk ("Father of the Turks"). But many now fear that the political and cultural revolution he instigated in the 1920s will be overturned and that Turkey will cease to function as normal nation state, turn on the West, and try to upend the existing order in the eastern Mediterranean, the Balkans, and the Middle East.

Atatürk's ambition as a statesman was breathtaking. He wanted to reconfigure what was left of the Ottoman Empire as a nation state on the European model, and this required that he drag the population of Anatolia and of what remained of the Ottoman Empire's European holdings into a new and unfamiliar world incompatible with traditional Islam. To this end, he effected the abolition of Sultanate, then the Caliphate, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and the religious schools. Taking the Third Republic of France as a model, he confined religion to the private sphere, put Sunni Islam on a leash, and instituted secular schools. He purged Turkish of Arabic loanwords and substituted for the Perso-Arabic script hitherto employed the Latin alphabet. He abolished the religious courts, and, in place of the shariah, he established a legal system modelled on the law codes of Switzerland, Italy, France, and Germany. He suppressed the religious brotherhoods, outlawed the fez, and he brought women into the public sphere. He enfranchised them, saw to it that there was a common curriculum in the schools for both girls and boys, and encouraged their entry into the professions. At the same time, he did everything within his power to encourage the people of his new republic to think of themselves first and foremost as Turks, not Muslims.

Atatürk failed in one particular. Islam was resilient. Every time that he allowed or encouraged the introduction of competitive party politics, one of the parties drifted in the direction of traditional Islam, and on two separate occasions he found himself forced to return to one-party rule. When his hand-picked successor Ismet İnönü repeated the experiment under American pressure after World War II and genuinely free elections began to take place in 1950, the same development took place, and over the next fifty years this

propensity led to repeated interventions in public life by Turkey's fiercely Kemalist military.

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, however, the Kemalist establishment gradually gave ground in the hopes of reaching an accommodation with Islam. New mosques were built, the schools set up to train religious teachers were greatly expanded in number, and a blind eye was turned toward the resurgence staged by the religious brotherhoods. For a time, in the 1980s when Turgut Özal dominated Turkish politics, it looked as if Muslim piety could be reconciled with secular politics and the Kemalist aspiration that Turkey join Europe and become part of the West.

But in November 2002—thanks to misgovernment and corruption on the part of the center-right parties, to a series of recessions that bedeviled Turkey in the 1990s, and to an unpopular austerity program imposed on the country by a center-right coalition in 2001—the newly founded Justice and Development Party (AKP) received more than one-third of the votes—which, thanks to a constitutional provision barring from the assembly splinter parties with under 10 percent of the vote, unexpectedly gave it a commanding majority in Turkey's parliament. Led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Abdullah Gül, who had been adherents of the hardline Islamist Welfare Party, the AKP presented itself as a moderate party sympathetic to Islam, hostile to corruption, committed to free markets, and intent on negotiating Turkey's entrance into the European Union; and for some years it governed in this spirit, fueling a period of rapid economic growth and winning one election after another.

As time passed, however, the AKP moved unobtrusively in an Islamist direction while Erdoğan concentrated power in his own hands. The man was a brilliant practitioner of salami tactics with a gift for exploiting the antagonisms that had come to divide his compatriots. At the outset, he neutered the opposition parties of the center right. Thereafter, with firm support from Turkish liberals and from the adherents of the charismatic religious teacher Fethullah Gülen, he cowed the Kemalists who had hitherto dominated the bureaucracy, the courts, and the military, then drove them from public life. Thereafter, he discarded the liberals and suppressed much of the opposition press. And, finally, he sidelined Gül and his other rivals in the AKP; crushed, then purged his onetime allies in the Gülenist movement; and secured constitutional changes that transformed Turkey into a presidential republic. Now, thanks to his election on 24 June to that republic's transformed presidency, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is a virtual dictator—a neo-Ottoman Sultan, authorized to rule by decree, who is unchallenged and unchallengeable, perched atop a country that in recent decades has become an economic powerhouse and a force in the world.

There can be no doubt that relations between Turkey and its erstwhile partners in Europe and on the North American continent will continue to be prickly, as they have been for some time. Erdoğan's self-regard knows few limits, and he enjoys throwing his weight around. Moreover, he takes delight in bullying the Europeans and in sticking a finger in the eye of the Americans. On the world stage, he parades as the defender of Muslims everywhere. Within the Arab world, he provides support to the Muslim Brotherhood. He plays footsie with the mullahs of Iran and with Vladimir Putin of Russia. And, at 64, he is apt to be around for at least ten to fifteen years—long enough, some suppose, to allow him to reverse the revolution wrought by Atatürk.

There are, however, constraints. Erdoğan is already using Turkey's schools and universities to indoctrinate the country's young in the rubrics of traditional Islam. He may outlaw the production and sale of alcohol and prohibit women from dancing with men. He may force Turkey's secularist intelligentsia into exile; and in 2023, on the hundredth anniversary of its abolition, he may well restore the Caliphate and assume the office himself.

I doubt, however, that in Turkey shariah will once again become the law of the land, that Arabic script will replace the Latin alphabet, and that girls will be expelled from the schools and women will be driven from the public sphere. Such an upheaval is beyond Erdoğan's capacity. Almost half of his compatriots hate their new Sultan, and Turkey is now a middle-class land characterized by universal literacy. Thanks to its dependence on the global economy, it is increasingly open to outside influences; and young Turks are apt to become restive if too severe a regimen is imposed.

Turkey also faces geopolitical constraints. It is situated in a dangerous and unstable corner of the world, and in the east it is faced with a Kurdish insurrection that has worsened on Erdoğan's watch. Moreover, although its neighbors are happy to play the Turks against their NATO allies, their ambitions are incompatible with those of Erdoğan. Thanks to the Sunni-Shiite divide, the Islamic revivalists in Iran and those in Turkey will eventually be at daggers drawn. Russia has always been Turkey's enemy. And the Sunni Arab world ranged along much of Turkey's eastern border is a quagmire. Erdoğan may fancy himself the Commander of the Faithful, but the faithful outside Turkey are not going to accept his command. The country he leads is increasingly isolated, and it does not have the wherewithal to go it alone—especially since the Turkish economy is highly dependent on investment from abroad and on foreign trade. Almost anything ambitious that Erdoğan attempts beyond Turkey's borders is likely to end in tears.

Mortality is, of course, the ultimate constraint. Erdoğan is most unlikely to exit the scene voluntarily. But the grim reaper will some day present himself, and Turkish culture and politics is patriarchal. Apart from Atatürk's Republican Peoples Party, no Turkish party has ever survived the demise of its presiding spirit. There will be an opening when Erdoğan is ushered off the stage. There will be an opportunity, and there will be a correction of course. The Turks are not now and never have been a servile lot, and their new Sultan is almost certain to overstay his welcome. Unless Islam really is the answer, the path to modernity charted by Atatürk is apt in the years to come to look more and more attractive. The alternative chosen by Erdoğan is bound to reintroduce into Turkey the pathologies that have for centuries beset the rest of the Middle East.



PAUL A. RAHE is the Charles O. Lee and Louise K. Lee Chair in the Western Heritage at Hillsdale College, where he is a professor of history. He lived in Istanbul from 1984 to 1986 as a fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs. In the 2013–14 academic year, Rahe was a National Fellow at the Hoover Institution. He majored in History, the Arts and Letters at Yale University, attended Oxford University's Wadham College on a Rhodes Scholarship, and attended Yale for a PhD in ancient Greek history. He is the author of *The Spartan Regime: Its Character, Origins, and Grand Strategy* (2016).



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Erdogan's Turkey and NATO

By Austin Bay

The phrase “the struggle for Turkey’s soul” once served as shorthand for the perceived conflict between the country’s secular democratic values and Muslim religious values.

With the July 8, 2018 inauguration of Recep Tayyip Erdogan as Turkey’s president, democratic values and Muslim values now struggle with hyper-empowered Erdogan’s personal political goals and his devilish acquisition of authoritarian power. Pity Turkey’s soul and its citizens. Pity NATO. The political torque Erdogan’s power grab generates could crack the NATO alliance.

The Turkish Ottoman Empire missed the Enlightenment. The sultans made sure it did. Free speech threatens absolute monarchs. The Ottomans’ World War I defeat left a social, cultural, and political vacuum. Out of the postwar chaos, Turkish nationalists, under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, established the Republic of Turkey as a secular state.

Ataturk bequeathed Turkey what his greatest biographer, Andrew Mango, called “the structure of a democracy, not of a dictatorship.” He authored an orientation, not an ideology, creating a political, social, and cultural process that he believed would eventually make Turkey capable of perpetual self-modernization. Ataturk was a political giant and a superb military commander. Eighty years after his death he remains a cult historical and political figure.

President Erdogan is a canny politician and, to be fair, Turkey’s most significant political figure since Ataturk. The green-eyed monster feeds his inner fire; Recep knows he disappears in Kemal’s giant shadow. Not capable of displacing Ataturk the man, he has chosen to replace Ataturk’s state, first under the guise of extending democracy, now behind the façade of maintaining stability. Erdogan also intends to remain in office over twice as long as Ataturk. Turkey 2034 will be an Erdoganist political construct, not Kemalist.

That last paragraph sketches a novelistic interpretation of Erdogan’s motives. It expands on the answer I

gave at Hoover's October 2017 Military History and Contemporary Conflict symposium after Barry Strauss asked me what I thought drove Erdogan—the deep drive that might shed light on his long-term vision for Turkey and help us craft policy responses to his challenge.

Novelistic speculations have numerous weaknesses. However, over the decades Erdogan has supplied plot points and psychologically indicative dialog. We are able to assess action through time. Early in his career Erdogan routinely employed Islamist poetry: "Democracy is merely a train that we ride until we reach our destination. Mosques are our military barracks. Minarets are our spears." That poetry led to his arrest for sedition. After his release he renounced his piously seditious poetry, claiming his fundamentalist views had fundamentally altered. His sudden commitment to Turkish democracy energized his "moderate Islamist" Justice and Development Party's (AKP) 2002 victory over a tired and corrupted Republican Peoples Party (CHP). In 2003 the AKP became Turkey's governing party with Erdogan serving as prime minister.

First he tested Kemal's structure, then he began to dismantle it. Erdogan purged the military of suspected political opponents. A cunning narrative camouflaged his operation. He claimed EU accession rules demanded he strip the military of its political powers and make certain Kemalist military coups entered history's dustbin. Sometime in 2008, as Erdogan began pursuing the Ergenekon conspiracy of "secular fundamentalists" and other secret nationalist vigilante organizations, I finally realized whatever explanation du jour Erdogan offered for his actions, the dismantling scheme always expanded his personal power and influence.

The bizarre July 2016 coup follows the same pattern. The Turkish people defeated the coup. Ironically, Erdogan remains in office today because Turkish citizens (across Turkey's complex political and ethnic spectrum) courageously defended their hard-won democracy—a democracy nine challenging decades in the making. In its aftermath, however, Erdogan used emergency powers to purge Gulenist Islamists and his political opponents. He dismantled elements of the democratic system that saved him and his government.

In 2017 a referendum he engineered ratified major changes in Turkey's constitution—amendments empowering him. From 2002–2014 Erdogan cursed and belittled Turkish nationalists. Since 2015, when he faced a tough election and needed political allies, nationalist tropes have riddled his political poetry. Now his pious AKP has politically wed the ultranationalist Gray Wolves of the MHP (Nationalist Movement Party). The AKP-MHP pious-wolf alliance won 53 percent of the votes cast in June 2018's snap election and now controls parliament. During the election, opposition candidates suffered harassment. State media limited coverage of opposition party events.

Dismantling Ataturk's structure has overwhelmingly profited one man: Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The constitutional amendments give the presidency power unchecked by parliament. President Erdogan may wield de facto dictatorial power through 2034, which gives him time to groom a successor. Perhaps that process has begun. Following his inauguration, Erdogan made his son-in-law Turkey's finance minister—no parliamentary approval required. The value of the Turkish lira gyrated, then plummeted.

* * *

Democracy is a kludge term for a clumsy, inefficient, inexact kludge system. Yet democracies, however configured, have a potent competence: they more or less institutionalize political compromise as a means of peacefully resolving differences. Institutionalized compromise means no human being possesses absolute power. At some point power is checked, power is balanced.

Do Turks still value their secular state, the dying democracy? That is a key issue to weigh in assessing Turkey's political trajectory and examining conditions that could make its long-standing NATO membership "impossible." I think the overwhelming rejection of the July 2016 coup indicates they do.

An Erdogan dictatorship—solidifying over time and reinforced with secret police—may be an impossibly disruptive condition for NATO and put Turkish membership into question. It may also be an impossible condition for Turkey, for it seeds future disorder. Erdoganist Turkey lacks democratic balance. Post-July 2018

Erdoganist “big man” Turkey has substituted institutionalized autocracy for Atatürk’s structure and democratic orientation. Atatürk’s democratic structure and the social and political process it promoted have been Turkey’s greatest domestic asset and most valuable foreign policy tool.

Balance would better serve Turkey. Half the Turkish electorate bitterly opposes Erdogan. His initial economic liberalism spurred Turkey’s economy. However, his economic record in the last four to five years is spotty. His political opponents attribute his decision to call June’s snap election to Turkey’s slowing economy. Erdogan concluded an economic dive before 2019’s scheduled election would threaten his bid to secure long-term power. The Gezi Park demonstrations of May–June 2013, which opposed one of Erdogan’s pet development projects, illustrate how grievances can quickly stir nationwide mass antigovernment protests.

At the moment the AKP-MHP alliance looks solid. However, AKP stalwarts and hard core MHP traditionalists hold radically divergent views. MHP ultranationalism all but insures Erdogan will pursue his campaigns against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and Syrian Kurdish militias. Recall when President Donald Trump decided to arm the Syrian Kurds, Turkey threatened to deny US military forces use of the big Incirlik air base in south-central Turkey.

Closing Incirlik would severely impede if not obstruct US and NATO military operations in the eastern Mediterranean, Middle East, and Central Asia. The threat has NATO-wide resonance. Incirlik has several vital operational roles: it is a strategically located forward base, a logistics and training facility, a communication node, an intelligence gathering center, and an international transport hub. Closing Incirlik disrupts surveillance operations that contribute to international security.

Turkey has made it clear that an Independent Kurdistan and PKK terrorism are Turkish “red lines.” In the Syrian Kurd weapons contretemps the threat to close Incirlik sent this diplomatic message: “Washington, these issues matter. Arming Syrian Kurds is a fundamental policy confrontation, not just a disagreement.”

However, future policy confrontations may be even thornier. “Nationalist-Islamist” Erdogan knows Incirlik gives him leverage. Is refusing to allow the United States to use Incirlik an impossible condition for Turkish membership in NATO? The United States provides the decisive slice of NATO airpower; in operational terms, does denying America access to Incirlik equate to a Turkish withdrawal from NATO? Or does it just indicate anger with the United States (e.g., arming Syrian Kurds) if other NATO partners can access the facility? One step further: does denial of Incirlik to all NATO members equate to Turkish withdrawal?

The British sovereign base areas on Cyprus give the United States and NATO an operational alternative if Turkey closes Incirlik. Is there a fallback route connecting the Black and Mediterranean Seas should Erdogan close the Turkish Straits to NATO warships?

The American-Turkish defense relationship matters—or it has mattered. For seven decades US-Turkey defense cooperation, both bilateral and through NATO, has benefited all parties. One of the benefits was the USSR’s defeat. Washington-Ankara had disagreements. Among allies there are always disagreements. Allies are not clients.

Some contemporary troubles beg for allied cooperation, which a strategic game exploring Turkey’s NATO relationship should examine. One example: Russian aggression and instability along the Mediterranean littoral confront NATO and Erdogan’s Turkey with ambiguous, uncertain, and dangerous situations where a balanced, sensible, and strong strategic relationship with credible allies is exceedingly valuable. Allied capabilities and influence can prevent a crisis from becoming a catastrophe. Even a budding tyrant might see the benefit of NATO membership.

Perhaps Erdogan’s consolidation of power will lead to a “transactional relationship” with NATO and the United States. If the F-35A and S-400 weapons deals are indicative, however, the NATO-Turkey transactional relationship will be diplomatically agonizing and militarily suspect.

In June 2018, reflecting the deep concern defense officials have for an Erdogan-led government, the United

States Senate attempted to ban Turkish acquisition of the F-35A Joint Strike Fighter. Turkey intends to acquire 116 of the high-performance stealth aircraft. Two Turkish companies make key F-35A components.

America's Cold War Turkish ally was a Kemalist Turkey whose military could be trusted with American-made F-16 jets. Is Erdogan's military a trustworthy ally?

Another disturbing transaction: Turkey's 2017 agreement to purchase Russia's S-400 surface-to-air missiles. The United States regards Turkish S-400s as a unique threat to NATO aircraft. Russia might obtain data on NATO air defenses. The S-400 also creates interoperability issues with NATO air defense systems. Turkey could be a nominal political ally but a technological adversary.

Complex and thorny transactions, indeed.

Turkey has traveled its Erdoganist trajectory for two decades. NATO was founded on deterrence and collective defense, but the end of the Cold War didn't end security challenges. In the more difficult challenges cooperation solidified when America took the trouble to lead. America has baggage—but it does not carry Europe's tribal baggage.

Perhaps NATO would benefit from reinvigorated American leadership. Restoring confidence is a step toward healing alliance-threatening divisions. Conceivably, revived US leadership includes an overdue reckoning with Erdogan's authoritarianism.



AUSTIN BAY is an author; syndicated columnist (Creators Syndicate); war game designer (was a consultant in Office of Net Assessments, OSD); adjunct professor at the University of Texas Plan 2 Honors Program; contributing editor, *StrategyPage.com*; radio commentator; developmental aid adviser (Episcopal Diocese of Texas); retired Colonel (Armor, USAR, active duty West Germany, *Desert Storm* and *GWOT*); and consultant (Kemper Engineering Services) in comprehensive planning, strategic assessment, technology application and leadership. In December 2018, Bombardier Books will publish his latest book, *Cocktails from Hell*.

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- Fouad Ajami, "Turkey Between Ataturk and Erdogan" *Defining Ideas* (June 23, 2013). <https://www.hoover.org/research/turkey-between-ataturk-and-erdogan>
- Cengiz Candar, "Fall Of Afrin: Turkey's Vietnam Or Washington's Nightmare?" *Al-Monitor* (March 22, 2018).
- Victor Davis Hanson, "Erdogan's Turkey Is A Dubious Ally" *Tribune Content Agency* (December 3, 2015).
- Victor Davis Hanson, "What Happened To The 'Special Relationship'?" *National Review* (April 17, 2017).
- Lt Col Kurt Helphinstine, "The West Must Embrace Its Anatolian Ally Or Russia Will" *Forbes* (November 1, 2016).
- Barry Strauss, "Uneasy Allies: America, Turkey, And The Kurds" *Military History in the News* (April 22, 2016).

Related Previous *Strategika* Issues:

- "Is our NATO ally Turkey emerging as a regional power that is hostile, neutral, or can remain a partner to American strategic concerns? *Strategika* (Issue 09, Sunday, December 1, 2013). <https://www.hoover.org/publications/strategika/issue-09>

Discussion Questions

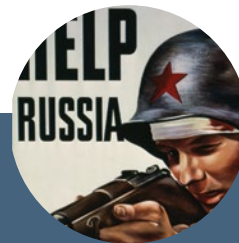
1. Is Erdogan reverting to the traditions and historical Turkish sense of self?
2. Is Erdogan a catalyst for, or a symptom of grassroots, anti-Western sentiment in Turkey?
3. Is Turkey still the Western “window” on the East, and should it enjoy a “special” relationship with the United States?
4. What will post-Erdogan Turkey look like?
5. How exactly is Turkey still strategically valuable to the West?

Suggestions for Further Reading

- Bayram Balci and M. H. Yavuz, eds., *Turkey's July 15th Coup: What Happened and Why* (University of Utah Press, 2018). <https://uofupress.lib.utah.edu/turkeys-july-15th-coup>
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- Lisel Hintz, *Identity Politics Inside Out: National Identity Contestation and Foreign Policy in Turkey* (Oxford University Press, 2018). <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/identity-politics-inside-out-9780190655976?cc=us&lang=en&>
- Jenny B. White, *Muslim Nationalism and the New Turks* (Princeton University Press, 2013). <https://press.princeton.edu/titles/10250.html>

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US Engagement with Russia



Military History in Contemporary Conflict

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Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict

The Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict examines how knowledge of past military operations can influence contemporary public policy decisions concerning current conflicts. The careful study of military history offers a way of analyzing modern war and peace that is often underappreciated in this age of technological determinism. Yet the result leads to a more in-depth and dispassionate understanding of contemporary wars, one that explains how particular military successes and failures of the past can be often germane, sometimes misunderstood, or occasionally irrelevant in the context of the present.

Strategika

Strategika is a journal that analyzes ongoing issues of national security in light of conflicts of the past—the efforts of the Military History Working Group of historians, analysts, and military personnel focusing on military history and contemporary conflict. Our board of scholars shares no ideological consensus other than a general acknowledgment that human nature is largely unchanging. Consequently, the study of past wars can offer us tragic guidance about present conflicts—a preferable approach to the more popular therapeutic assumption that contemporary efforts to ensure the perfectibility of mankind eventually will lead to eternal peace. New technologies, methodologies, and protocols come and go; the larger tactical and strategic assumptions that guide them remain mostly the same—a fact discernable only through the study of history.



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434 Galvez Mall
Stanford, CA 94305-6003
650-723-1754

Hoover Institution in Washington
The Johnson Center
1399 New York Avenue NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005
202-760-3200

