



Turkey's Future under Erdogan

A series on Turkey's future

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Introduction:

Institutions are the pillars of society, holding up various interdependent elements within a unified system. When these pillars are eroded and destroyed, society collapses along with it. A lack of faith in the institutions which bind together a state will ultimately undermine the very core of the state itself, placing it in a precarious position. When political, judicial, and social institutions are corrupted by cronyism, sectarianism, and petty politicization, the results can be disastrous. In modern Turkey, the institutional pillars – the inbuilt checks and balances of the state – are all but gone. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has sabotaged and subverted these mechanisms and all obstacles to consolidating his own personal power throughout the course of his extended tenure in office. In an attempt to situate himself at the center of the Turkish socio-political sphere, Erdogan has declared a veritable holy war on the media, academia, minority groups, and any political opponents who dare to say otherwise. Under the guise of combating terrorism and corruption, Erdogan has sought to dispose of all those who may aspire to see him hold left with anything short of supreme authority. The catastrophe Erdogan is creating for the people of Turkey demonstrates the dangers of strongman politics.

The New Turkey: the Economics of Erdogan's Sultanate



In 2002, the former Mayor of Istanbul, Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his newly founded Justice and Development Party (AKP) swept the Turkish general elections and won a majority of seats in the Turkish Parliament, riding a wave of discontent with the policies of the ruling Democratic Left Party (DSP). Immense budget deficits, uncontrolled inflation, and an overreliance on foreign direct investment led to a financial crash in 2001. Coupled with a deflated currency and spikes in unemployment, Turkey sought an alternative. By 2003, Erdogan, who was previously unable to head the government due to previous criminal convictions, became Prime Minister, and the stage was set for 15 years of rule. Erdogan embarked on a campaign to rebuild the Turkish economy through government spending projects, attraction of foreign investment, and consistent faith in low interest rates. Turkey came out of the storm of the 2001 collapse with a rapidly rising GDP, spurred on by low interest rates and incentives for business startups. These measures at first appeared to be beneficial for the Turkish economy, however, in the long run, they engendered an oncoming fiscal storm for the country.

Erdogan has dutifully pursued his policy of deregulation and low interest rates even past the point of recovery from the crash. The result was been runaway economic growth and skyrocketing inflation. Previously under Erdogan, inflation occurred only once, in 2011, was below 5%. In early 2014, the Turkish Central Bank, in defiance of Erdogan, [hiked interest rates overnight](#) from 7.75% to 12%, as a radical measure to combat the increasing devaluation of the lira. In response, Erdogan was quoted that as saying he is “as always... against a hike in interest rates”. The policies pursued by Erdogan for most of his rule have been geared towards stimulating short-term growth, however that level of expansion is not sustainable, a fact the Erdogan (who became President of the country in 2014 after 11 years as Prime Minister) seems to conveniently ignore or explicitly deny. Coming out of the 2008 Recession, Turkey hit rates of GDP growth previously unheard of, [measuring as the highest performer](#) in the Organization for Economic Cooperation & Development (OECD) in 2010 and 2011. The spike in expansion following the recession was not a long-term phenomenon, with Turkish growth [showing signs of slowing by 2013](#). Increasing government spending and subsidies, along with artificially low interest rates became a tool to keep the economy running at an unnatural pace. The irony, of course, is that a similar reliance on foreign investment and a refusal to control interest rates were some of the factors which provoked the 2001 financial crisis which brought Erdogan to power.

The population of Turkey, despite the ostensible explosion of wealth, has seen mixed results from the policies of President Erdogan. Unemployment has been [a persistent problem in modern Turkey](#), hovering around 10% for most of Erdogan's reign. The unemployment for young people has proven to be more abysmal, even with the government-touted economic growth of the past 15 years. From 2001-2015, youth unemployment rose from 12% to 20%, with a spike to 28% in 2009. Private savings among the population have [sat at historic lows](#). Furthermore, perhaps the most alarming trend of the Erdogan regime's financial policy has been the exacerbation of income inequality and the distribution of wealth. In 2000, Turkey's wealthiest 1% of the population owned 38% of wealth, while in 2014 that number rose to 58%. Under Erdogan, [the rich of Turkey have gotten richer, while the poor have gotten comparatively poorer](#), despite booming economic expansion. Inequality reduces social mobility, breeds crime, and puts strain on the welfare systems of a nation, none of which bode well for long run socio-economic projections. The startling jump in inequality and rise in unemployment show that despite the superficial growth of the Turkish economy, that wealth has not been effectively distributed to the population. The combination of a failure to distribute existing wealth and an unwillingness to control inflation through raising interest rates has made the situation in Erdogan's Turkey volatile and fundamentally unstable.

L'état, c'est Erdogan.

It is not uncommon in Turkey's history for economic difficulties to lead to military coups. It is also not unusual for the economy to overheat due to increased government spending after such military intervention. It is also not uncommon for Turkey to cover current account deficits with short-term external borrowing, steadily increasing the debt.

The difference this time? [The coup failed](#), and rather than reset the leadership, the opposite occurred – the AKP leadership cracked down and consolidated its own power by using and renewing state of emergency laws to rule by decree, bypassing parliament and oversight and purging over 100,000 people from the military, police, media outlets, schools, and businesses, firing or arresting those seen as oppositional to the leadership. The result with one man holding most of the power: increasing cronyism, patronage, graft, and decreasing property rights, rule of law, education, and prospects for Turkey's younger generations.

Turkey was not long ago counted among the promising MINT (Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria, Turkey) countries, a group of emerging markets seen as ripe investment opportunity. Since the coup, Moody's, a credit rating agency, [downgraded Turkey](#) to sub-investment grade: Ba2, or junk. According to Moody's "The government appears still to be focused on short-term measures, to the detriment of effective monetary policy and of fundamental economic reform."

In 2016 following the coup, GDP fell for the first time since 2009, but in an attempt to still look like investment worthy, [Turkey revised its calculations to make its macroeconomic prospects look healthier](#), though it did nothing for people's everyday lives in Turkey as the lira continued to lose value.

Turkey's economy in an artificial boom, but will have a very real bust

While many report Turkey's booming economy, the growth is being forced down by the top, rather than the markets. Massive infrastructure projects as well as local business ventures are being funded by enormous foreign currency loans. With businesses charging in depreciating lira, but having to pay interest and loans in increasingly expensive dollars and euros, many firms are looking at liquidation, bankruptcy or collapse, the [private sector's foreign debt equal to a third of the economy](#). Unemployment, which should be at a low during a time of economic growth, remains steady.

But the enemy of Turkey's economy is not rising debt or the plunging lira, but rather increasing cronyism, patronage, and graft. Since the most recent elections in which Erdogan won the presidency once again, a post that has recently been given a wealth of increased powers, [he has named his son-in-law finance minister, and has the power to appoint central bank rate-setters](#), which does not bode well for responsible governorship.

[Erdogan has criticized the Central Bank for raising interest rates](#), forcing politics onto the situation, even threatening to take over the Central Bank, to keep rates from being raised and frightening away investors, despite the promise of low rates. Now, however, under the new increased powers of the president, Erdogan has the legitimized ability to appoint central bank governors himself, making it much easier for him to direct and control monetary policy. Since Erdogan believes that interest rates as a cause rather than a cure for inflation and has used his position as president to make [direct appeals to Turkey's citizens to exchange any savings they had in dollars and euros to Turkish lira](#).

Under Erdogan's one-stop-shop for economic policy, he has continued to borrow without restraint, continued to raise debt levels to new and worrying heights, inflation and the economy growing and growing without restraint in the short term to achieve political goals at the expense of the country's long-term economic health.

Erdogan has not allowed the Economic and Social Council to convene since 2009. The Council was a coalition established in 1995 by center parties from both right and left who gathered representatives from labor, public and private sectors to enable good governance. Since Erdogan proclaimed the state of emergency, he has made economic decisions mostly by decree, bypassing deliberations by parliament. [The Turkey Wealth Fund](#) (TWF) was stillborn. Created in the fog immediately following the 2016 coup (but actually *with* cabinet approval) and run by Mehmet Bostan and other advisors backed by Erdogan and his family, it has accomplished nothing but draw criticism and suspicion. Sovereign wealth funds are usually created by states who have surpluses, usually from natural resources. Turkey is in debt, and created the fund by transferring \$160 million of public assets with no results to show for it, though it was supposed to fund public investment, it appears to have only taken resources away. The TWF is exempt from the Court of Accounts oversight, which audits public administrative bodies. The lack of transparency around the fund makes it easily misused for political purposes or allow favored companies to profit at the expense of others, and monetize state assets without oversight, rather than solve structural problems. There was progress with fund leadership and Singapore's urban-planner, Surbara Jurong to create an industrial hub in the Kurdish majority area of southeastern Turkey, but deal has yet to be finalized.

Property rights, considered a pillar of economic development, are also uncertain since the coup, [with 879 businesses worth over \\$11 billion in assets having been seized by the government](#) in the months following the coup, with party loyalists taking over the running of these firms. This visible seizure of property and overt cronyism causes uncertainty among international investors who view this erosion of rule of law.

Turkey is over dependent on short-term investments to address its deficits, but with foreign investment withdrawing from an increasingly unstable economic system, Erdogan will need to look elsewhere to fuel his economy. Meanwhile, Turkish citizens still face ruinous high prices and levels unemployment.

Consumer confidence, or lack thereof, is an indicator of economic performance, and it does not matter if Erdogan takes a leaf from Putin's playbook and blames it all on a western plot to emasculate Turkey, or if they rework the books again to make it look as if the economy is doing better than it is; the people of Turkey will not see their quality of life improve, they will not be able to afford to consume at the same levels as in the past.

More importantly, students will not have the opportunities their parents did. Under the state of emergency, the president gave himself the power to appoint university presidents, this following the purge of thousands of academics, taking away the autonomy of education and crippling their ability to conduct independent research. Turkey's Science Board said in [statement](#), "Allowing a central authority ... to decide on how every institution—especially universities where specialization is at the highest level—should conduct its affairs means to entrust the entire country to the supposed infallibility of a single individual in a world where economy and technology advance at an immense pace... This goes against democracy and rationality."

Not only will education fail to be what the people of Turkey need in order to keep up economically and technologically, but nor will they have access to a free press, essential for a functional democracy and political accountability.

Turkey, according to [Moody's](#), cannot improve or even maintain its current rating without "pursuing credible macroeconomic policies supportive of financial stability and sustainable growth within an adequately transparent and predictable policy-making environment."

The long-run outlook for the economy does not look good, not because of the current economic problems, which could be recovered from, but the erosion of the integrity and independence of institutions. Without this integrity and independence, without parliamentary deliberation that is necessary for a transparent policy-making environment, without returning to rule of law instead of state of emergency decrees, the economy, along with the state, will fail.

Turkey's Military: From Iron Fisted Guardian of Secularism to Tool of Islamist Expansionism



This section of the report discusses the modern Turkey's long history of military coups, often executed with the stated goal of preserving the secular state envisioned by modern Turkey's founding father, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. Following the most recent coup attempt, the failed effort of July 15, 2016, and the subsequent expansion of the Turkish president's powers both in practice and in law, the role of the military and strength of the institution has radically changed.

A timeline of Turkey's military coups

1960:

During his ten-year rule, Prime Minister Adnan Menderes and his ruling Democratic Party (DP) grew increasingly authoritarian and departed from Kemalist principles by loosening secular laws. The ruling party created a committee (composed entirely of Democratic Party loyalists) with broad powers to investigate the opposition's activities. For three months, when the committee was due to produce its report, no political activity (outside the assembly) was allowed and press activity was severely restricted.

Law professors from prominent Istanbul and Ankara universities decried the commission as unconstitutional, but this denunciation was considered 'political activity' and disciplinary action was taken against them, resulting in student protest. The government used the army to suppress the student demonstrations and closed down the universities, and the press was still banned from reporting these events. The use of the military to put down the protests led to a silent demonstration by War Academy cadets. On May 27, 1960, at three o'clock in the morning, the army took over Ankara and Istanbul's government buildings, arrested Democratic Party deputies and ministers, and even Prime Minister Menderes and President Celâl Bayar. The symbolic head of this coup, General Cemal Gürsel, assumed power.

The National Union Committee was formed, though its members and purpose was ambiguous, despite being essentially being in control of policymaking. A period of purges followed, including 147 university professors, but outcry against this saw them reinstated to their positions. A new constitution was written which created a new system of government that would, in theory, prevent one party from obtaining a monopoly on power, as the Democratic Party, which was official dissolved in September 1961, had done. Intending to counter-balance the national assembly with other institutions, the new constitution created the senate and require all legislation to be passed through both chambers. The senate would be elected, and an independent constitutional court created to determine the constitutionality of legislation, universities and media were granted autonomy, and a bill of civil liberties was drafted and included in the constitution. Also, the National Security Council (MGK) was created, guaranteeing the military a strong role in government.

1971:

Known as the "Coup by memorandum," the 1971 coup was preceded by an economic recession, instability, and violence by the left and right. Then Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel led a party that was fracturing into splinter groups, losing the parliamentary majority and leaving the legislative process paralyzed and ineffective. Having lost control, unable to curb the increasing violence in the streets or pass financial legislation to combat the crisis, the government was given an ultimatum by the armed forces on March 12, 1971: end the anarchy and create a strong and credible government in the Kemalist spirit or the army would perform its constitutional duty and take over. Prime Minister Demirel instantly resigned. The head of the caretaker government installed by the generals was Nezat Erim from the right wing of the Republican People's Party (CHP). Erim put together a cabinet of technocrat outsiders, hoping to pass social and economic reform, but efforts were met with opposition. Meanwhile instability continued and on April 27, the National Security Council proclaimed martial law in all the major cities and in 11 provinces. Erim's right wing government using this enhanced power to persecute the oppositional left, or anyone with liberal or progressive tendencies. 5,000 journalists, professors and other leading intellectuals were arrested along with all the leading membership of the Workers' Party of Turkey, which was shut down after supporting the 'democratic aspirations of the Kurdish people.' Erim's cabinet made the constitution less liberal, changing 44 articles, limiting the civil liberties of Article 11, ending the autonomy of the universities, television, and radio, restricted freedom of the press, and

the powers of the constitutional court. Furthermore, the National Security Council was given the power to give unsolicited advice to the cabinet. The political structure gradually regained power because of the military's reluctance to assume power outright itself.

1980:

The economy continued to stagnate following the previous coup, inflation soared and import substitution industrialization left Turkey's foreign reserves dangerously low. There was a quick succession of 11 prime ministers, and violence was at an all-time with an average of 10 political assassinations a day. After months of consideration on how to proceed, the National Security Council headed by General Kenan Evren, announced a coup d'état on September 12, 1980. The National Security Council dissolved parliament, the government (including all mayors and municipal councils), political parties and suspended the constitution. With their eight-point plan, the generals ostensibly expressed a desire to return to a democratic political system, but did not specify a time by which that should come about. The generals stated that they were saving democracy from the politicians. The most visible result shortly following the coup was economic. Largely attributed to Turgut Ozal (who would eventually become prime minister and later president) the Turkish lira was allowed to float freely, and foreign investment was encouraged along with the general liberalization of the Turkish economy. Politically-motivated violence had also decreased by more than 90%, but at the cost of human rights. Not only were terrorists arrested, but also teachers, university professors, trade unionists, journalists, lawyers, and in general anyone with openly leftist (or sometimes Islamist) opinions. At the height of the purges, 122,600 people had been arrested, and, even two years after the coup, 80,000 were still imprisoned. Fifty people were executed, and hundreds died suspiciously or under torture.

The National Security Council created an assembly to rewrite the constitution. This version essentially reversed the 1960 constitution, handing more power back to the executive, limiting freedoms for the press, trade unions, and of individuals. The new constitution was put to a referendum, which required parliamentarians to vote or lose their voting privileges for five years and pay a fine. A decree banning criticism of the new constitution preceded the referendum, the results of which were 91.4 percent in favour. Only the Kurdish majority region in Turkey's southeast had a majority of "no" votes.

1997:

Known as the "postmodern coup" the National Security Council sent a memorandum to Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, the leader of the Islamist Welfare Party. On February 28, the National Security Council gave the cabinet 'unsolicited advice' (read: demands) to curb Islamists' influence on the economy, education and on state institutions. Importantly, it demanded eight years of compulsory education in state schools, aiming to prevent students from attending religious schools (which produced far more students than it could absorb back into religious institutions) and thereafter entering the state's secular institutions. The cabinet officially agreed, but in practice did very little, and after six weeks of increasing tension between the army and the Welfare Party, the National Security Council put forth an ultimatum. Erbakan withstood a vote of no confidence, but his party started to hemorrhage members after several days of pressure by judges, trade unions, and the army's dismissal of Islamist officers. On June 18, Erbakan stepped down. A new government was formed and, to a degree, implemented the reforms the army had demanded. Attempts to suppress Islamists continued, banning Erbakan and the Welfare Party, and arresting one of its members, Recep Tayyip Erdogan (the current president of Turkey), the mayor of Istanbul, for inciting religious hatred.

Meanwhile, Islamists regrouped, forming the Virtue Party which then took the largest number of seats in parliament. It would eventually meet the same end as the Welfare Party, and for the

same reasons. Out of the Virtue Party, and the newest financial crisis, came Erdogan's Justice and Development Party, which won an absolute majority in the country's parliament in 2002.

(For even more information on modern Turkey's history, see works by [Erik Zürcher](#) and [Carter Vaughn Findley](#), used as references for this section.)

2016:

On the night of July 15, 2016, shots rang out across Turkey as a faction of the military [launched a coup attempt](#) to remove the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The rebelling officers styled themselves as the 'Peace at Home Council', and cited the erosion of secular democracy and the tarnishing of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's legacy as the reasons for their putsch. Erdogan's government insisted the officers were acting on orders of Islamist cleric and one-time friend of Erdogan, Fethullah Gulen. Regardless, the result was a failed coup, prevented by loyalist police and military forces with broad support from pro-Erdogan citizens in the streets. The surprise was not that the coup was attempted, but that it failed. The events of July 15-16 left 265 dead, 2,185 wounded, 15,000 detained, and Erdogan, who survived the attempt, with a broad mandate for suppression. The failed coup was a watershed moment for Erdogan's Turkey, with the president famously calling it "a gift from God" which would allow him to build a "New Turkey". This new Turkey would be built in Erdogan's image and his vision of a Turkish state, significantly divorced from the ideals laid out for it by Kemal Atatürk.

In the immediate aftermath of the coup, Erdogan declared a state of emergency and embarked on a punitive campaign of purges, arrests, and dismissals from the military, press, civil service, academia, and business sector. The purge would chiefly target the military, under the pretense of removing the Gulenist and anti-government elements responsible for the coup. Despite the Turkish government claims, outside observers have cast doubt on Gulen's role in the coup. The EU's intelligence sharing body (IntCen), [in a leaked document](#), were revealed to have concluded that the coup was hastily organized by disparate elements of the military to pre-empt a planned purge of military officers by Erdogan. Irrespective of the truth of the matter, Erdogan succeeded in removing his opponents and their supporters from the echelons of the military. About 40% of Turkey's military leadership was dismissed for alleged ties to Gulenist and anti-government groups.

The effects of the attempted coup and the subsequent purges cannot be understated, however the true consolidation of power for Erdogan came 2 years to the day after the failed coup. After proposing massive changes to the Turkish governmental system, including a centralization of power in the president, and winning the subsequent presidential election conducted concurrently with these purges, Erdogan engaged in [sweeping reorganization](#) of the Turkish military and its leadership. Erdogan appointed former Chief of the General Staff and noted loyalist, General Hulusi Akar as his defense minister, while simultaneously putting the General Staff under control of the defense ministry, and restructuring the semi-autonomous Supreme Military Council (SMC) of Turkey. The SMC was a committee of ranking generals and admirals which determined promotion and assignment of military leadership; it will be now be an appointed council of ministers and generals, chaired by the President. The new status of the SMC breaks with a longstanding tradition, and concentrates military decision making and promotions under the aegis of Erdogan and his supporters. With Akar as defense minister and Erdogan's [son-in-law as finance minister](#), a position which will enable him to sit on the new military council, the military leadership of Turkey is now securely under the thumb of the president. Coupled with the dismissals of dissident and rival leaders, this consolidation of power in the hands of Erdogan neuters the Turkish military's potential to resist the strongman's changes, and begs the question: what will the future bring?

Per law and practice, the Turkish military has lost its ability to act as a check on the country's government. Speculation in a time of such upheaval is always difficult, however the future of Turkey's military will without a doubt be an integral component of the future of the entire nation. The question becomes whether or not this recent trend of executive dominance over military leadership will become normalized. The continued push for a military totally loyal to Erdogan and his agenda will have a noticeable effect on the composition and quality of the armed forces, with increasing emphasis being placed on loyalty and subordination to the country's head of state and ideology. Already, NATO Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti [has remarked](#) that the cull of secular pro-Western officers in the organization's Turkish staff has "degraded" the quality of the alliance, by removing those with "a great deal of experience". The replacement of experienced officers with longstanding ties to the West by far less experienced junior servicemen not only weakens the overall quality of the military, but also undermines the bond between NATO and its easternmost member. This destabilizes an [already fraught relationship](#) between the increasingly authoritarian state and NATO, as Turkey courts the idea of closer ties with Russia. Once lauded as one of the most modernized and skilled militaries in the Middle East, Erdogan's purges have left the Turkish armed forces [a shell of its former self](#). The rabid pursuit of total loyalty within the armed forces selectively purges those with conflicting ideologies. The homogenization of the Turkish armed forces not only limits the pool from which soldiers can be selected, but in the long term, will contribute to Erdogan's vision of an Islamist military.

The future is anything but certain, however the severe undermining of the Turkish military's quality and autonomy suggests, in the long run, Erdogan will have limited obstacles to maintaining his control over the security apparatus of the state. The rising generation of military leaders is younger, less experienced, and more eager to prove themselves. They have come to power in the shadow of Erdogan and his purges, a constant reminder of what happens to those who challenge the strongman. While the Turkish military has long been used for cross-border attacks against Kurds (e.g. Operation Northern Iraq in 1992, Operation Hammer in 1997), the Turkish armed forces, once the guardian of Turkey's official secularism, are now fighting alongside radical Islamist militias [against Kurds](#) in northern Syria. With loyal henchmen in key positions of power, successful elimination of dissident elements and expanded dominion over security decision making, sovereignty unconditionally belongs to Turkey's president, and the military will continue to kill and shed blood in Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and perhaps elsewhere to forcibly promote his Islamist agenda beyond Turkey's borders.

Erdogan's caliphate: The Re-Emergence of Turkish Political Islam



The history of religion and its institutions in Turkey is seemingly cyclical. Today's Republic of Turkey, now approaching its centenary, was once the center of the Ottoman Empire, an Islamic empire – Islam was the state religion and the leader of empire, the Sultan, also bore the title of caliph (i.e., successor to the prophet Mohammed). Islam was central to identity within the Ottoman empire, the population of which included numerous ethnic groups speaking a variety of languages. The conflict between modernity and tradition has always been noticeable in what is now Turkey, a state that sits both geographically and culturally [between West and East](#). This conflict has created fault lines within Turkish society which have been consistently apparent throughout the modern history of the nation. Even prior to the founding of the Republic of Turkey, these divisions were pronounced, and had a strong impact on political dynamics of the country.

Until quite recently, the modern Republic of Turkey, founded in 1923 following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, was dominated by a legacy of secularism, known in Turkish as *laiklik*, derived from the French, *laïcité*. More than anyone else, one man, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, was behind the rise of secularism following the dissolution of the Islamic Empire that had endured for centuries. In founding a nation-state, the Republic of Turkey, on the ashes of Ottoman Empire, Atatürk immediately took drastic steps to enforce a secular order – he pursued reforms which abolished religious courts, dismantled the caliphate, and ostensibly included provisions for the rights of non-Muslim minorities in the new constitution and in various amendments put forth. This an attempt to force a push for “modernity,” modeled on a conception of the European nation-state. In Atatürk's new nation-state, ethnic Turkish identity was the glue that held together the new republic – and the identities of the various minorities (e.g., the Kurds) within Turkey's borders were disregarded, or even denied altogether, and the primacy of Turkish ethnic identity and the Turkish language aggressively and forcibly promoted. Atatürk suppressed the voice of the Islamic community, and enforced regulations and rules many found difficult to understand, or even distasteful. The script of the Turkish alphabet was changed from a modified version of the Arabic alphabet (used by many non-Arab majority Muslim groups) to a Latin script. The language used

in the Muslim call to prayer was even changed from Arabic to Turkish, though this change rolled back in 1950. To some, the Kemalist reforms would be hailed as the hallmark of Turkish progress, while to others it would be a retreat from the classical values of the Turkish people, in favor of a foreign ideology. Urban, educated, pro-Western Turks in favor of Ataturk's reforms would become known as White Turks. Conversely, the traditionally working class – rural, religious Anatolians, many of whom opposed the reforms, were labelled Black Turks. This socio-economic and cultural divide permeates Turkish society, and has stood as the background to many major religious policy discussions of the past hundred years. The precedent set by Ataturk would face challenges on many different occasions, however it would not be until the turn of the 21st century that political Islamists would be able to [fully undermine Kemalist secularism](#) in the highest echelons of government.

The dominance of the White Turkish, secular nationalists prevailed until the 2002 elections, conducted on a backdrop of collapsing coalition governments and a grave financial crisis, in which Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) swept the general elections, receiving 66% of seats in the assembly. This event marked a radical departure from the norm in Turkish politics. The newly formed AKP was an amalgamation of several moderate to farther right factions, including the Virtue Party (FP), an Islamist party which had [been banned by the state](#) for violating the rigid secularism of the Turkish constitution. Erdogan himself became a symbol to Turkey's religious population after being [sentenced to 10 months in jail](#) for "inciting hatred" after reciting a religious and nationalistic poem replete with military imagery at a rally during his tenure as mayor of Istanbul. The lack of faith in the ruling secular government coalition affected a swing towards new parties and new visions. While the rise of the AKP was welcomed by some as representing a refreshing slide away from an older, more inflexible position on religion rooted in the ideals of the past, Erdogan's party continuously pushed the boundaries of the established secularist order for nearly two decades in government, transforming Turkey and its core ideology. Buried in larger reform packages, Erdogan has loosened the restrictions on religious expression and participation in politics including a [controversial ban on headscarves](#) for government officials, subtly undermining longstanding practices and institutions. The weakening of the secular Turkish state that had existed for decades did not happen overnight, but rather occurred one small step at a time. It has been driven by fanning the flames of Turkish nationalism, while dousing the secular principles which were historically the foundation of the Turkish nation-state. This process is ongoing, and is clearly one of the most important macro-developments in Turkish society during the 21st century, and has resulted in significant volatility.

The Camel in the Tent

There is a story of a camel and its owner travelling in the desert. One night, as the owner was sleeping inside his small tent, the camel, who had been tied up outside, asks if he might warm his nose inside the tent, as it is a cold night. The man agrees and goes back to sleep. A bit later, the camel asks if he might rest his head inside the tent. The owner, seeing that there is enough room for the camel's head says yes, and goes back to sleep. Slowly, the camel eventually asks for more and more space inside the tent until it is entirely inside, crowding the owner completely out. The camel, who gradually crept inside, was impossible to move back out again once it was there.

At first, the loosening of the strict laws aimed at enforcing secularism, e.g., letting women with headscarves attend university, were applauded, and Erdogan was praised worldwide for being a role model for the establishment of democracy in a Muslim-majority country. As Erdogan gained popularity and power, he more confidently steered Turkey towards political Islam, and showed increasing disregard for democratic checks and balances on his own authority.

In 2014, following the introduction of new school entrance exams, [thousands of students were placed in religious *imam hatip* schools, whether they wanted to be there or not](#). In the five years leading up to this change, the number of *imam hatip* schools increased by 73 percent, many of

these have been by transforming normal schools into religious ones, limiting secular education and creating, by force, more religiously educated graduates. But now, the government is going one step further. The Ministry of Education has drafted [a new school curriculum](#) to be enacted September 2018 which eliminates classes on evolution and even on Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and İsmet İnönü (another founding figure of secular Turkey), exposing the new administration's religious agenda. Despite lagging behind other similar countries in terms of test scores, the Ministry of Education's new goals for the proposed curriculum are geared toward moral values and a national mindset.

The time has passed where one could hope that breaking down the strict secular rules would provide an opportunity for religious freedom in Turkey. It is increasingly plain that Erdoğan's Turkey dislikes pluralism. From his treatment of the Kurds (often labelled as nonbelievers due to their opposition to his policies) to his heightened general rhetoric on a moral 'us' versus an immoral and/or foreign 'them' on topics ranging from economic to foreign policy, he is openly leading Turkey down the path to an institutionalised state religion, stoking concerns of a rise of a neo-Ottoman sultanate.

This ideological distance of newly Islamist Turkey from the west does not necessarily mean diplomatic distance as well – Saudi Arabia's economic and diplomatic ties to the West are quite strong – but together with uncertainty over Turkey's economy, its military role in Syria and its evolving relationship with Russia, Turkey's position in the world political and military dynamic could permanently change. Indeed, NATO member Turkey, once considered a steadfast ally of the US on the periphery of the Middle East, now seems to be moving increasingly close to Russia as well as Iran.

Like a camel's nose in a tent, it was notable but perhaps not entirely alarming to allow Islamism to slip into the state apparatus by repealing a number of draconian secularist measures. These reforms eventually allowed Erdoğan back into government. Years of incremental changes and an increase in the number of religious schools, followed by the introduction of a new curriculum in mainstream schools, will lead to a populace with a religious and nationalistic education. This populace will continue to fill more and more public sector jobs, including the military, once a bastion of Turkey's secular democracy.

Erdoğan's Islamist camel will push its way into the tent, forcing out Turkey's founding principles just as they intend to push them out of the curriculum. Black Turks are now part of the ruling elite, leaving secularist intellectuals with fewer places in the public sphere, their voices increasingly suppressed under a populist wave that will be extremely difficult to oppose. Atatürk was at the helm of a radical revolution to implement secularism at the country's founding, and took drastic, brutal actions to enforce its new secular laws. Step by step, the country moves implacably and irreversibly towards a new Turkey with Erdoğan as its founding father who has replaced Kemalist republicanism and secularism with Islamism, and promoted nationalism and taken populism to a new level. Where Kemalism espoused revolutionism, Erdoğanism, despite the seemingly sudden actions following the 2016 failed-coup, has effectively used gradualism to secure a place in government that is now nearly impossible to oppose. Meanwhile, the Kurdish ethnic minority within the country, which endured decades of oppression under Turkey's secular political and military elite, now see their cities razed and elected leaders and activists arbitrarily detained by the judicial authorities and security forces controlled by Turkey's new Islamist establishment. The founding secular order of the Republic of Turkey may be nearly finished, but the Kurdish people, who were for decades victimized by an order that enforced secularism and Turkish ethnic primacy, unfortunately have no reason to expect any respite from violent subjugation at the hands of the Turkish state.

Turkey's transition to one man rule: The weakening of the republic's institutions under the new Islamist order



Judiciary:

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the newly born Turkey of Kemal Ataturk was founded in 1923 largely on principles and provisions adopted from European nation-states. It was, from its foundation, envisaged as a Turkish ethnic nation-state, despite the presence of the Kurdish people and other indigenous groups living within the new country's borders. The first major legal reforms were instituted in 1926, drawing from the Swiss Civil Code, the French Legal Code, and the Italian Penal Code. There have been frequent changes to the law of land, most notably the adoption of the Turkey's Constitution of 1982, following the 1980 Turkish coup d'état, the third coup in the history of the republic. The Constitution of 1982, which remains in effect to this day, affirmed the independence of the courts as well as the rights of the accused.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in the 2002 Turkish elections, in which they swept the parliamentary elections riding a wave of discontent fueled by the perceived government failure to handle the [2001 financial crisis which shook Turkey](#). There was initially optimism that Erdogan's more open position on religion, based on his own very public religious fervor, would liberalize Turkey's rigidly secular code of law. However, Erdogan's focus on reducing repression of religious expression in society did not translate to a desire to let others whose world views clashed with Erdogan's also enjoy freedom of expression. As Erdogan increased his hold on Turkey's government, and then ascended to the presidency, he drifted towards authoritarianism, and began to exercise greater personal control over the judicial system. Disputes between the judiciary and Erdogan's government boiled over in 2013 with a major corruption scandal involving the sons of at least three cabinet ministers. Prosecutors alleged that the ministers' sons had been involved in a gas-for-gold scandal using state owned enterprises and their resources. The issue [became inexorably linked to Erdogan as the three cabinet ministers resigned abruptly](#) in the wake of the scandal. Erdogan denounced the arrests and the entire investigation as a foreign plot enabled by the followers of Turkish cleric Fethullah

Gulen, who held positions in the police and judicial system. The result was the reassignment of over 100 judges and prosecutors nationwide, [bringing the corruption probe to a grinding halt](#). This confrontation would foreshadow Erdogan's heavy handed policy towards the judiciary, and set a precedent for political manipulation in the legal system. In 2016, after a failed coup attempt, which President Erdogan once again labelled a Gulenist plot, the state cracked down heavily on any and all elements of opposition in the government and society – including those who unambiguously condemned the coup even prior to its failure, such as the country's leading Kurdish politicians. This campaign by Erdogan included a two year [purge of over 4,000 prosecutors and judges](#), resulting in 1 in 4 Turkish judicial officials being dismissed or arrested. This decision effectively sterilized the judiciary, leaving it in the full control of Erdogan and his AKP. The arrest of judges led to widespread condemnation and [public protests by disaffected citizens](#). Following the 2017 constitutional referendum of questionable legitimacy in which Erdogan won sweeping new powers as executive president, major changes were also affected on an already undermined court system. The government [reshuffled 3,320 judges and legal staffers](#) and reformed the Board of Judges and Prosecutors (HSK). Under the new constitution, the HSK's membership was reduced from 22 to 13, while presidentially appointed members were only reduced from 4 to 3, allowing the president to exert far more effective control over the board which manages the many prosecutors of Turkey while simultaneously handling the disciplinary measures of the courts. The vicious purges and confounding shuffles of the judiciary in Turkey have led to a serious lack of qualified judges and prosecutors so much so that new regulations even allow for [administrative judges to be confirmed without an undergraduate legal degree](#).

In the long run, this erosion of one of the most fundamental parts of the state system can only have negative outcomes for Turkey. The politicization of legal proceedings virtually guarantees unfair rulings, and a necessary bias towards supporters of the AKP and President Erdogan. A judicial system devoid of just rulings can hardly be called justice at all. Erdogan's voracious desire for a presence in all elements of government and state undermines the entire notion of Turkish democracy, and an unfair legal system is a vital part of the success of his takeover. If judicial officials are able to challenge the legality and constitutionality of the president's measures, then there is a conceivable chance that he would be forced to limit his ruthless expansion of power. To preempt this challenge, Erdogan has taken multiple steps over the course of his time in leadership to essentially enervate the checks established to prevent such a takeover from occurring. These steps were once limited to confronting and harassing the judiciary, but more recently the stain of criminality has been enshrined as a constitutional element of Turkish society. This strengthens Erdogan's position, and, in a longer-term sense, paves the way for future tyrants and strongmen to dominate the political sphere. Without the necessary checks, there is less and less to prevent the future rise and present continuation of the march toward authoritarianism. Erdogan has been emboldened by his apparent success in centralizing his own power, and is now seemingly willing to take greater risks for greater rewards. This was clear during the post-coup crackdowns as well as the 2017 referendum, and will undoubtedly continue to become evident as Erdogan's hold on the judiciary and its members becomes increasingly solidified.

Political Parties:

Turkey's history surrounding political expression has been rocky at best, and the nation has a history of [military coups during time of political upheaval](#). Perhaps at no time was this more evident than the late 1970's, in which far-left and far-right elements clashed across Turkey, with thousands being killed between 1976 and 1980. Street fights and attacks occurred daily between supporters of the Turkish communist party along with similar left-wing Marxist-Leninist groups and the right-wing ultranationalist Grey Wolves, the armed wing of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). Many Kurdish groups, predominantly left-wing in political orientation, participated in these struggles to achieve independence or cultural rights for their people from Turkey, a prospect

which terrified many on both sides of the Turkish political spectrum – who, then and now, are unaccepting of expressions of any degree of Kurdish self-determination, even outside of Turkey's own current borders. In 1980, political gridlock and economic disasters engendered a political crisis which saw the military step in, and effectively dissolve the democratic government with the ostensible goal of ending the ongoing infighting. After three years of military rule, civilian rule, albeit with strong military oversight, was re-established and elections were held, however, the message was clear, the ruling elements in the military would not tolerate certain brands of politics.

The role of the military vis-à-vis the government has weakened since the 1980's, though, then as now, right wing nationalist elements play a significant role in the affairs of the state. Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) has historically cooperated and even entered into a formal coalition with the MHP, despite their continued perpetuation of the Grey Wolf street gangs. Indeed, the AKP has adopted increasingly nationalist rhetoric, and seems to have attracted many voters who traditionally supported the MHP. The president has even encouraged his party to [ally with the extreme Turkish nationalist parties](#) in upcoming 2019 elections to ensure control of the executive branch. On the other hand, the Turkish state has only expanded its crackdown on left-wing, moderate, and minority dissident and opposition elements since Erdogan's ascension to power. In 2009, the Turkish constitutional court [banned the Democratic Society Party \(DTP\), the only Kurdish party](#) to sit in the national assembly for alleged links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which demands greater rights for the Kurds of Turkey and initiated a campaign of armed resistance against the Turkish state in 1984, and alleged that the DTP was spreading 'terrorist propaganda'. Connection, sympathy, and even tolerance towards the PKK and its supporters have often been used as an umbrella accusations against pro-Kurdish groups in Turkey, from political parties to cultural and educational institutions, as a justification to delegitimize and eliminate them. In response to the pressures of the Turkish state, many disparate repressed elements of Turkish political life joined together in October 2011 to establish the People's Democratic Congress (HDK) in October of 2011. The Congress was a forum for many minor socialist, pro-Kurdish, environmentalist, LGBT, and union groups to pool their resources and efforts to affect national policymaking, including earning sizable representation in Turkey's parliament, which required that a list's votes exceed a 10% electoral threshold, one of the highest in any parliamentary system, to win representation and be allocated seats in the national assembly. The HDK platform anointed the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) as its political wing approximately a year later, and in general elections since, the group has performed well, exceeding the 10% threshold in the three most recent general elections. This success becomes even more impressive when one considers the [broad state repression the party and its constituents have faced](#). Since the failed coup in 2016, the Turkish government has sought to remove all elements of dissent, peaceful or not. The HDP and its supporters have endured waves of detentions, arrests and intimidation. The party has been refused access to resources such as state television, and, over the past few years, violence and even open warfare has taken place in Kurdish areas of the country, with Turkey using the full might of its modern army against its citizenry. In the run up to the 2018 Turkish elections, the state turned a blind eye to right-wing extremist violence and actively harassed and imprisoned opposition leaders and supporters. In a statement made by Gauri van Gulik, the director of Amnesty International Europe, [Erdogan's government was slammed](#) for "creating a suffocating climate of fear" in the country, as many felt intimidated and unable to freely express themselves politically. The repressive environment was further demonstrated by the imprisonment of the then Co-chairman of the HDP, Selahattin Demirtas in 2016, on charges of terrorism for having presided over the party and criticized Erdogan during a period of when the Kurdish people of Kobani in northern Syria were defending themselves against a siege by the Islamic State (ISIS) terror group, as Turkish forces watched idly. Demirtas would later become the 2018 HDP presidential candidate, campaigning from a prison cell, yet still receiving 8.4% of the popular vote.

The political institutions and parties and opposition parties of Turkey have been some of the foremost targets of Erdogan's crackdown, a fact that should raise red flags to any observer. The

deliberate and visible attempt to undermine the equality of the political playing field indicates a clear desire for the unchallenged dominance of not only the AKP, but of the president's personal power over society. Erdogan has slowly, over the course of the past decade and a half, expanded his influence across Turkey through the clear subversion of democratic structures. Those, such as the HDP, who actively criticize government policy and peacefully demonstrate to achieve their ends, are viewed as threats to the regime. This is not the condition of a democratic state. Political opposition is a check on governmental overreach and abuse. Political challenges are vital parts of a democracy, ensuring that the voices of even the marginalized can be heard and considered. When avenues for peaceful and lawful expression are denied and obstructed, societal pressure builds, intensifying in volatility as time goes on. The current Turkish state under Erdogan is creating problems it will eventually not be able to resolve with force. Force, unfortunately, is the trademark of Erdogan's policy towards dissent – one way in which he is entirely consistent with past rulers of the country. As citizens, especially those minority groups such as Kurds, see their options for expression increasingly limited, more radical measures will seem necessary. When one is unable to make his or her voice heard peacefully and within a democratic framework, and begins to view their state not as a societal unit of which they constitute, but as an oppressing force, a wider array of methods to enact change seems enticing. If Turkey's government continues its radical crackdown on even moderate opposition, it will see more citizens – or at least those unable to emigrate – opting for militancy and subversion, rather than peaceful dissent. The irony is that, in Erdogan's aggressive campaign to stamp out opposition, he will breed more challenges to his authority, to which he will most likely respond aggressively, thus perpetuating a vicious cycle. Furthermore, if Erdogan continues shows that he is unwilling to engage in negotiation and reform peacefully, then the only logical course of action for militant groups and adversarial elements is to attempt to bring down the president and the system he has hijacked and shaped to reinforce one man rule. If Erdogan were, however, to show that he is capable of seeking political solutions negotiated from a position of power, he may stave off more intense challenges. In cracking down on political opposition, Erdogan has opened a Pandora's box he will not be capable of closing. The resultant chaos will be at the expense of not only the government and the militants, but of all of the people of Turkey.

The Academy:

The purge of academia is part of the long-term plan to raise a generation of Turkish citizens with blind devotion to Erdogan's world vision and do not question authority. Schools and universities are the battlegrounds on which Turkey's ideological future depends. Since the coup, [6,021 academics have lost their jobs](#). Some have been arrested, others fled the country, and many remain in Turkey, banned from working and struggling to feed their families. Those teachers who could return to their classrooms in September 2016 following the failed coup, found 2,250 educational institutions closed and [more than half their textbooks gone](#). Those books that remained were expurgated of 'terrorist' content.

Fifteen entire universities and a thousand schools have been shut down, their current students lost as to what to do. University graduates may find their degree no longer counts, their diplomas canceled, and their future prospects, along with those of the professors who taught them, grim.

The academics arrested under terrorism charges began with Gulenists and Kurds (or [academics who signed a petition calling for peace with the Kurds](#)) but spread to liberals and leftists in general, including some of the most prominent and respected scholars in Turkey. The purge of academics to instill a new order is not an uncommon occurrence following a coup, but this coup failed. Even so, the number of scholars to have lost their jobs following this failed coup is 25 times greater than the number of those sacked after all other military coups in Turkey's history... combined.

The fear is that academic standards will erode to further the promotion of nationalistic propaganda, as it did in the 1930s. For example, the “Sun Language Theory” was a pseudoscientific linguistic hypothesis developed during the early days of the Republic of Turkey’s establishment at the direction of Ataturk that claimed that all languages on earth descended from one original Turkic language. Scholars who are not arrested or barred from teaching might, if possible, leave anyway to teach in places with higher academic standards, greater prestige, and guaranteed academic freedom.

This risk of brain drain (i.e. the emigration of intelligent people from a country) is acute. Not only will this forced brain-drain mean the loss of innovation and education services, but the experts who have been forced out will be replaced by those without the know-how to make the change, and cannot pass that knowledge on.

As mentioned [previously in this series](#), even before the coup, the government was attempting to change the educational system, creating more religious schools and closing mainstream ones, and is now creating a new curriculum which removes evolution and much of the discussion of modern Turkey’s founding figures. According to the Ministry of Education, the new curriculum will be “from the perspective of a national and moral education.”

For Turkey, this means the next generation in will grow up being taught in schools how to act, rather than how to think.

Journalism:

Turkey jails more journalists than any other nation. In fact, as of 2016, they held a [third of the entire imprisoned journalist population](#). Arresting reporters is not a new tactic for Turkey, but Erdogan’s zeal for doing so is unsurpassed in Turkey’s history. There are a number of laws, new and old, that Erdogan and his enforcers use to arrest voices that are critical of him and his government, or present a challenge to the founding principles of Turkey just by existing, as with any Kurd speaking his or her own tongue in public. But for journalists, the punishment is more severe because the penalties for crimes like ‘propaganda’ increase if it is broadcasted or published online. The ability for the media to influence minds is, perhaps, treading on what the government sees as its own purview, which is why [189 media outlets have been shut down](#).

Laws like incitement to hate, terrorist propaganda and membership, espionage and revealing state secrets, and defamation of the Turkish President and public servants, are so broadly defined as to allow Erdogan and his ruling AK Party legal recourse to arrest anyone in opposition to them. Indeed, [Erdogan expanded the definition of terrorist](#) to include ‘supporters,’ equally loosely defined. The main targets for these arrests are, of course, Kurds, academics, liberals, journalists, and Gulenists.

In the crackdown following the coup, [pro-Kurdish TV channels](#) were fined for coverage that was critical or simply did not agree with the government, or they were removed from Turkey’s main satellite provider. The government then shut down 23 pro-Kurdish TV and radio stations under an emergency decree that allows closing media outlets that ‘entertain links to a terrorist organization’ or is a ‘threat to national security.’ This included a children’s TV channel, which broadcast children’s cartoons dubbed in Kurdish.

There were 2,000 cases of “insulting” Erdogan in the first two years of his presidency starting in 2014, and hundreds of those were against journalists. While defamation has long been part of Turkey’s criminal code, there has been a tenfold increase in defamation lawsuits since Erdogan. Examples of such lawsuits against journalists include a January 2016 article by Hasan Cemal on Erdogan violating the constitution, a September 2015 article by Murat Belge suggesting that Erdogan started up the conflict with the PKK for votes, and the case of Ayhan Karahan, who was arrested for speaking out against the jailing of several HDP politicians.

Other journalists have been charged with the more serious crime of espionage or revealing state secrets as a consequence of legitimate reporting on issues important to the public. Can Dundar, famous journalist and former editor of *Cumhuriyet* was arrested to reporting the [Turkish National Intelligence Agency sending arms to Syrian rebels](#).

The [list](#) of the hundreds of journalists detained or arrested for defamation or terrorism go on and on, and detaining them will get easier. On July 25, 2018, Turkey's parliament passed a [new law](#) that gives authorities even more power in the detaining of suspects and imposing public order, essentially incorporating measures of emergency rule (which officially ended July 19th, 2018) into law.

A great proportion of journalists, on top of legal action, also face threats, intimidation, and violence from the state, especially if they were reporting in the Kurdish region or on the Kurdish issue in general. Women journalists are particularly at risk, according to Human Rights Watch, and journalists have been attacked in the streets.

Even entire news organizations have been targeted. For example, Hurriyet was condemned for being critical of the government and for giving airtime to opposition voices, including the HDP. Erdogan and the AKP took to twitter encouraging loyalists to protest in front of the *Hurriyet* building. Protesters arrived soon after and attacked the building.

The vilification of journalists in a time of impunity in violence against them, and where courts are slow or unresponsive gags reporters from covering issues of utmost importance, causes journalistic 'black-outs' in regions that most need coverage. This allows the Turkish government to act, unchecked, and continues putting pressure on media in terms of their content and their staff. Many journalists who have not been purged by the government decree are fired by their bosses [because of government pressure](#), and others are almost certainly practicing self-censorship to avoid putting their livelihoods or even personal safety at risk

Erdogan, with his [personal statements](#), has also created a climate of mistrust and suspicion of people who think and write for a living. "There is no difference between a terrorist holding a gun or a bomb and those who use their work and pens to support terrorism. The fact that an individual could be a deputy, an academic, an author, a journalist, or the director of an NGO does not change the fact that that person is a terrorist."

Conclusion:

Turkey has no freedom of speech, except the freedom to agree with the president. When open dialogue in the media, in academia, in the judiciary, and in politics is suffocated, democratic institutions wither. When those voices are gone, NGOs may document when rights are being denied, but only if they themselves have not been arrested or shuttered as a consequence of terrorism charges. Once arrested, these thinkers, dissenters, justice-supporters, and minorities cannot expect any semblance of fair trial. While Kurds are accustomed to this treatment, the rest of Turkey's citizens are learning to contend with this new reality.

In his fear of rebellion, Erdogan has changed the very core of Turkey's institutions –the laws, school curricula and even the media and political landscape– to create a country where no one will challenge or question his governance. But in removing all civil avenues of opposition, he is himself laying the groundwork for the very thing he is fighting so hard to avoid.

The Kurds- Erdogan's Favored Target, and Turkish Democracy's Greatest Hope



The Kurds are the largest non-Turkish ethnic group in Turkey, and, as such, are vital component of the modern Republic of Turkey. The relations between the Kurdish and Turkish communities have not always been as frayed as they have been in recent decades. Many Kurds served in the military of the Ottoman Empire, as cavalry and irregular forces serving in the southeast and east of northern Kurdistan, the portion of the ancestral homeland of the Kurds that now lies within Turkey's borders. To administer this region, the Ottoman authorities formed alliances with tribal Kurdish leaders. While some Kurdish tribal leaders revolted against the rule of the Sultans, many others did not, retaining their own local power and acknowledging the overarching authority of the Ottoman rulers. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire following defeat in the First World War and the rise of ethnic nationalism throughout what was previously a religious empire – indeed, the Ottoman Empire was an Islamic caliphate – would fundamentally change the dynamic between the majority Turkish population and ethnic minorities, including the Kurds, most of whom, like the Turks, were Sunni Muslims.

The emergence of the Turkish Republic from the ashes of the withered Ottoman Empire created a state predicated Turkish ethno-nationalism, which was by nature hostile to attempts by minority groups to affirm their distinct identities, let alone exercise any measure of self determination. The mold created by Kemal Ataturk could not accommodate non-Turks in an explicitly Turkish republic. Starting around the beginning of the First World War and continuing into the first decade of the Turkish republic, the government engaged in the systematic extermination of non-Turks, in a series of several genocides that still scar the communities which suffered under them. The largest of these purges were the Armenian and Greek genocides, which killed 1.5 million and 750,000 natives of Anatolia, respectively. To this day, the Turkish government [still denies these crimes](#). The Kurds saw forced resettlement to infertile regions of the country, and uncompensated seizure of their properties as part of a new series of Turkish laws under the republic. In 1925, Sheikh Said Piran, a Kurdish Sunni spiritual and political leader led a rebellion of former Ottoman soldiers against the Turkish military. Sheikh Said's demands were a re-institution of the Islamic caliphate and system of governance, as well as proper recognition of the Kurds as a distinct people with a defined homeland and identity. The technological superiority of the Turkish military

led to the defeat of the rebellion, marking the last major effort by Kurds to revive the Islamic caliphate. Despite the failure of the Sheikh Said revolt, it would by no means be the last attempt by Kurds in Turkey to liberate themselves from oppression. In 1937, following years of forced migration and violent repression, the Dersim Rebellion, in which primarily Zaza Kurds led by Alevi spiritual leader Seyid Riza revolted against the Turkish military, was sparked. For months Riza led his fighters across the southeast, attacking government positions and burning entryways into the mountains. The rebellion was crushed by the indiscriminate use of military air and ground forces, and Turkey's uncompromising and bloody approach to dealing with the concerns of non-Turkish groups was well established, but the message was also conveyed – Kurds would not suffer atrocities lying down. The Turkish government [only recently admitted to the crime](#), and puts the total dead at 13,000, fewer than most other estimates. Furthermore, despite the explicit targeting of Kurdish communities by the resettlement campaign, Turkish courts in 2011 refused to label it as a genocide, instead labelling it a resettlement plan.

The history of Kurdish resistance in Turkey changed drastically during the 1970's, when political polarization swept the country. Conflict between far-right and far-left became commonplace, and the intrinsically anti-Kurdish nature of the Turkish ultranationalists such as the Grey Wolves (a violent Turkish group affiliated the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), who are now part of Turkey's government), pushed many Kurds, especially of the younger generation, to the left-wing of the political spectrum. In 1978, Abdullah Ocalan, then a young Kurdish student with political aspirations, founded the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), initially a Marxist-Leninist group dedicated to the liberation of Kurdistan from Turkish occupation. The PKK rapidly grew in strength, and launched an armed struggle against the Turkish state's oppression of the Kurds in 1984, waging war from bases in Lebanon, Syria and in the mountains of Kurdistan, until his capture in 1999, in Nairobi, Kenya. Ocalan was found guilty of terrorism and crimes against the state, and was sentenced to death, although that sentence would later be converted to life imprisonment after the removal of the death penalty from Turkish legal code. It is worth noting, the European Court of Human Rights found in [their investigation and summary of the case](#) that there were multiple violations of Ocalan's legal and human rights during the trial conducted by the Turkish government. During his first few years in solitary imprisonment on Imrali Island, Ocalan studied the works of many philosophers and political theorists, and found himself drawn to the works of ecological socialist, Murray Bookchin. The ideas Ocalan absorbed led to adjust his ideology, and he instructed the PKK in this new thought and set out plans for implementation of a new system based on these theories. His new philosophy, which he labelled 'democratic confederalism' sought a federal system in Turkey, rather than an independent Kurdish state, with rights for minorities and women enshrined into law. This change greatly affected the militant Kurdish resistance to Turkish oppression, and was representative of the long-term shift in ideology pursued by Kurds in respect to their pursuit of freedom and self-rule.

When Recep Tayyip Erdogan ascended to the role of Prime Minister in 2003, some were hopeful that he could de-escalate the ongoing conflict with the Kurds, however, that optimism would soon sour. Despite [certain measures being taken to roll back the Turkish state's oppressive measures against Kurds \(e.g. allowing Kurdish prisoners to communicate with visitors in their native language\)](#), Erdogan's government, which had previously courted the votes of conservatives within the country's Kurdish community, has failed to address the Kurdish question and end the Turkish state's conflict with the Kurdish people, and the condition of the average Kurdish citizen has not improved greatly since the AKP took control. Indeed, that very same year, the Turkish government also [banned the only Kurdish political party](#) in the National Assembly. Erdogan's Turkey has embraced right-wing Islamist, ultra-nationalism in a way which intrinsically isolates the non-Turkish Kurds. Ankara has also pursued major infrastructure projects in the Kurdish region to ostensibly develop the region, under the aegis of the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP). The GAP has been criticized by some for its over budget costs often funded by outside investors, but by others by the threat some of its elements pose to Kurdish historical sites in the region. Despite protests and outcry from historians, archaeologists and artists, Erdogan [signed off on the construction of the controversial Ilisu Dam](#), which threatened to flood the ancient town of

Hasankeyf, which has stood for over 10,000 years, and contains many historical treasures, including many of Kurdish origin. Similar projects have posed threats to the ecology and housing of primarily Kurdish regions in the southeast of Turkey. The Turkish state has seen the intensity of the conflict with the Kurds rise and fall over the years, however, recently the escalation of pressure on the Kurds and the resulting tensions have proven to be more persistent.

Since the failed coup in 2016, Kurds, especially those in the political sphere, have been widely swept up in the [post-coup crackdown](#). HDP has been a particular target of the Turkish government, despite the fact that the HDP was against Gulen and his movement (the purported mastermind of the 2016 failed coup), as the religious cleric had previously advocated for an aggressive stance on the Kurdish question – and indeed immediately and unequivocally condemned the coup, standing firm against all military coup scenarios.

Erdogan is making the relationship worse in his efforts to silence dissent. By arresting pro-Kurdish political party members and Kurdish journalists and lawyers, he fuels the outrage of the country's Kurdish population and prompts them to reconsider the ways in which they demand their rights and express their frustration – as legal avenues for addressing grievances are quickly disappearing. As the prospect of a political solution, or even a visible pathway to discuss a possible solution, dissolves in Erdogan's purge, Erdogan potentially pushes Kurds to revert to armed struggle.

After intensifying nationalist rhetoric over the years, bombing and even invading Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria, and forming a coalition with the ultranationalist MHP, Erdogan has made it clear that the Turkish state has no interest in letting the Kurdish people of any country live in peace, and certainly no plan to address the historical injustices that the Turkish state has perpetrated against the Kurdish of Turkey since the founding of the republic. Erdogan is known for [building his way out of any problem](#) but with the lira losing its value, debt in foreign currency increasing, and Erdogan's behavior scaring away investment, the Turkish government cannot afford to keep building. The loan recently promised from Qatar may finance further projects, but such spending at a time when the rest of the country falls deeper in debt is not going to be well-received by any but Erdogan's most fervent and die-hard supporters.

The Kurds in Turkey have long experienced discrimination and denial of human rights, which has both hindered their economic and social development relative to the rest of Turkey, and hardened them to a bleak political reality that others in Turkey are only just beginning to experience.

The Kurds of Turkey are habituated to working in an environment of oppression, and may be the strongest and most skilled and organized opposition to Erdogan. Knowing this, Erdogan, like Turkish leaders before him, conflates the HDP, an active legal political party with a large national following, and the PKK, and associates any and all expression of Kurdish identity with illegal activity. Recently, former HDP co-leader [Selahattin Demirtas was arrested for terrorist propaganda](#) charges, accused of working on behalf of the PKK. Erdogan knows that, as he cracks down on all criticism, takes over institutions and purges the military, the only group that can confront his power will groups that operate outside the law, such as the PKK.

The transformation of Turkey under Erdogan is visibly displayed by the increasingly imperialistic tendencies of the republic, which has engaged in military adventures across Syria and Iraq. The desire to re-assert Turkish control, both directly and indirectly, in formerly Ottoman territories has been a major pillar of Erdogan's foreign policy approach. In January 2018, Erdogan [launched a military invasion into Northern Syria](#), against Kurdish YPG forces, backing jihadist terror groups in their push to seize the city of Afrin and the surrounding area. After 2 months of siege, the rebels and their backers declared victory, and the Turkish military set out to make an example of the once-peaceful enclave in northwestern Syria. The Turkish forces [restored the military headquarters of Kemal Ataturk](#) in Afrin, which he had used as a general in the Ottoman military

during World War I. Similar acts of engaging militarily in former Ottoman territories helps further Erdogan's narrative of restoring old Ottoman glory, and endears him to many of the more conservative and traditional members of Turkish society, at the expense of Kurdish lives. The Turkish occupation of Afrin has been brutal, essentially allowing fundamentalist Arab and Turkmen fighters to run amuck, torturing, looting, and murdering with impunity. While Ankara maintains a strong trade relationship with Iraqi Kurdistan, from the Turkish state nonetheless repeatedly violates Iraqi Kurdistan's territorial sovereignty by bombing the region indiscriminantly, using alleged PKK presence as a pretence for doing so, and actively supporting Turkmen militias, and training other Sunni militia forces to destabilize Iraq. Most recently, Erdogan has [initiated another campaign of airstrikes](#) in the Qandil Mountains of Iraq, ostensibly aiming to hit PKK fighters situated there, and showing no regard for the lives of villagers in the region. The clear violation of the borders and rights of two sovereign states by Turkey is in direct conflict with international law and agreements. By refusing to play by the rules set by the international community, Erdogan is flaunting his disrespect for diplomacy and cooperation in matters of significant transnational importance. The 'bully role' is one well-suited to strongmen such as Erdogan, and, while it may purchase him some short-term political capital among Turkish nationalists, the loss of credibility and respect by global actors and Kurdish citizens alike will have negative consequences for him as well.

It will be incredibly taxing on Turkey to sustain bad relations with both the Kurds of Turkey and the United States. Erdogan has shown he chooses self-aggrandizement over what is best for Turkey. The country as a whole can only benefit from a peace agreement with the PKK, and a stable Kurdish region would not only bring prosperity to Turkey, but also have positive consequences for Syria and the broader region as well. However, a stable and thriving Kurdish region is almost the last thing Erdogan wants. Erdogan's enmity to the Kurds is not based simply on ethnic chauvinism or 'national security'. Rather, Erdogan is afraid, not of actual Kurdish secession (which most Kurds do not claim to want), but the decentralization of power. Any lasting and meaningful peace with the Kurds must include giving them, to some extent, the right to have a say in their own affairs, rather than remain powerless subjects oppressed by the discriminatory federal legal and judicial framework of the Turkish state in its current form.

With Kurds making up over fifth of Turkey's population and occupying a distinct and sizable geographical territory, any concession to Kurdish identity, political rights, and economic empowerment would mean a change to Turkey's unitary system of government that keeps local administrative power at a minimum. If Ankara loosened its chokehold on the Kurdish region (the one that historically and most vocally advocates for self-rule) and Kurds were allowed to educate themselves, run their own cities, vote on their own issues and levy local taxes for their own regional projects without the need for approval of parliament, then other regions would perhaps want the same – and that is the true danger for Erdogan. If he loosens his grip on the Kurdish region, what next? Would Istanbul rebel against Ankara's inept meddling in the economical capital of the country? Regions that are more socially liberal and/or economically successful may also see the merits of decentralization. Erdogan's arguments for increased centralism and, indeed, authoritarianism, based in religious and nationalistic fervor, may ultimately become a relic of the past – as would his ability to maintain an influence that comes with a centralized system of patronage that he currently maintains. Cronyism would decline. Efficiency would increase. Indeed, a measure of decentralization would be beneficial to Turkey's social and administrative health. But it is not what benefits Turkey that matters, but what benefits Turkey's president.

Essentially, any long-term peace with the Kurds would mean increased self-administration, which will chip away at the current system of one man rule in which Erdogan rules almost completely by decree – a system which was the culmination of 15 years of political maneuvering by Erdogan. To Erdogan, the most dangerous thing about the Kurds is not violence, as he repeatedly states, but the prospect of decentralization (whether via democratic confederalism or another system), which would challenge his unquestioned authority and compel him to act within the law and take responsibility for his own illegal actions.
