



PERSPECTIVES

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Erdogan's Turkey Takes a Fork in the Road

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The failed military coup in Turkey was most likely the swan song of the country's secular endeavor. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan now has a firmer hold on power, despite external and internal conflicts. Israel should remain wary of taking sides.

Until last week, it seemed that despite its constant turmoil and geopolitical upheavals, the Middle East still had some anchors of stability, including Israel, the Persian Gulf emirates, and even Turkey. But even with the strongman tactics exercised by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to cement his rule, last Friday's military coup attempt was completely unexpected.

It was believed that the Turkish military had been removed from the country's political sphere and was sworn to protect the country's secular and Western character. The army, we thought, was not part of the political body of Turkey.

These assessments proved wrong. Last week, the world learned that some forces in the Turkish army had not despaired. But without the support of the military's chief of staff and generals, those forces proved too weak to remove Erdogan from power. They underestimated the public's support for the president, and their coup failed, fading into history without leaving much of a mark.

The trivial questions that lend themselves to this situation -- why were the experts blindsided, how can one explain the failure of Turkish intelligence, and where were Erdogan's sensibilities as a leader, as he must have been aware of the disapproval his policies evoked among many in the public and the military? -- will most likely never be answered.

This, of course, will only fuel the conspiracy theory suggesting that Erdogan orchestrated the coup as an excuse to purge the military of those who oppose him. But I learned long ago that faced with a choice between conspiracy, stupidity, and inaptitude, the latter two are far more likely the explanation, simply because they are more common. A conspiracy is always the least likely scenario, even in Turkey's case.

With the coup quashed, Erdogan has a much firmer hold on power in Turkey. From a historical perspective, this is important, because it seems Islam has been able to undercut the secular revolution in Turkey in less than a century, and perhaps even root it out completely. It seems that contrary to popular belief, the secular foundations laid by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk when he founded modern Turkey on the remnants of the Ottoman Empire did not run deep enough.

While it is far too soon to speculate about the implications and ramifications of the failed coup and what they may mean for Turkey, the uprising was most likely the swan song of Ataturk's secular endeavor, especially since large parts of the military seem willing to accept the path on which Erdogan has placed Turkey. It is becoming increasingly apparent that last week was the military's last chance to oppose it.

The Turkish president's legitimacy was bolstered by the failed coup, and he is wasting no time in eliminating what is left of the opposition in the political sphere, the judiciary, and the military -- the very last body that had any real power over him.

The 2015 general elections in Turkey failed to deliver Erdogan the landslide majority he needed to change the country's constitution uninterruptedly, and half the public opposes his Islamist policies. Nevertheless, even those who disagree with Erdogan's policies prefer him over a military dictatorship.

Will Erdogan simply ignore half the Turkish people, or will he learn a lesson from last week's events and temper his steps? History indicates he is most likely to promote an "elected dictatorship" with more stringent Islamic undertones, and Turkey will become less democratic and less tolerant.

These changes will have regional effects: Turkey is a key nation in the Sunni world, and realizing its Ottoman dreams via a religious dictatorship would undoubtedly further radicalize the Middle East.

Turkey is further proof that democratic elections do not guarantee democracy, and they certainly do not guarantee the existence of an open society and a free press able to express pluralistic views.

The question of how much of a democracy Turkey really is will now bother Western decision-makers even more. Acknowledging that Turkey is not a democracy will be difficult for many countries, which have come to view Erdogan's AKP party as a democratic alternative to radical political Islam. At the time, the White House set the tone of that message to the Muslim world, and it will now have to reassess the situation.

There is a good chance that the measures taken by Erdogan following the failed coup, including mass arrests and declaring that he intends to reinstate capital punishment, will delay -- if not prevent altogether -- Turkey's integration in the European Union. True, the chances of Turkey realizing its accession bid have always been slim, but should the bid be officially suspended, it would push many old-new issues toward the surface.

For example, it is unclear whether Erdogan will continue to assist the EU in controlling the flood of refugees seeking to enter Europe. It is equally unclear whether Turkey, with the second-largest military force in NATO after the U.S. Army, will remain a key member of the North Atlantic Treaty. It is also unclear how Washington's refusal to extradite exiled Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen, whom Erdogan blames for the attempted uprising, will affect the two nations' relations.

In this respect, Erdogan's reconciliation with Russian President Vladimir Putin could not have come at a better time, as nearing the U.S. presidential elections, the Turkish leader may soon ponder the question of how much he wants to be dependent on the U.S. as his main arms supplier.

The new U.S. administration will surely be wary of the "new" Turkey, and will therefore reassess whether it remains the ideal partner to receive the state-of-the-art F-35 stealth fighter jet. Essentially, it remains to be seen whether the fact that Turkey is becoming something of an Islamic dictatorship will take a toll on the U.S.

Beyond economic, trade, and tourism ties, Russia's importance to Turkey lies with the Kurdish involvement in the civil war raging in neighboring Syria. The cooler Ankara's relations with Washington become, the easier it would be for Erdogan to convince Putin not to commit to aiding the Kurdish bid for independence.

Russia is likely to leverage that into Turkish support for a Moscow-friendly solution in Syria, assuming Erdogan would be open to the possibility. The end result would see Russia reduce its aid to the rebels in Syria, thus boosting President Bashar Assad's chances of remaining in power.

Another key issue remains Turkey's commitment to the war on the Islamic State group. This question was underscored last Saturday when, as part of its efforts to crush the uprising, Ankara blocked access to the southern Incirlik Airbase, used by NATO and the U.S.-led coalition fighting the Islamic State. Access to the airbase has since been resumed, but the possibility of future restrictions, temporary or permanent, remains, and it is clouding the future of the West's war on the jihadi terrorist group.

One must remember that Erdogan is currently dealing not only with the aftermath of the failed coup, but also with a surge in terrorist attacks, stemming from the regime's deteriorating relationship with the Kurds -- Turkish citizens for the most part -- on the one hand, and its fraying understandings with Islamic State on the other hand. Last weekend's events have left the Turkish military reeling, and at this point it is difficult to predict their impact on its ability to counter these threats.

As far as Israel is concerned, the new situation in Turkey mandates vigilance. Israel cannot be seen as taking sides in an internal Turkish conflict, and it must pursue the completion of the reconciliation deal signed between the two nations in June. This must be done with due discretion, as the process involves a Turkish leader rendered progressively less popular worldwide over his policies.

While Turkey's internal situation should not impede the issues discussed between Ankara and Jerusalem, Israel cannot afford to be perceived as a nation willing to forfeit the principles it shares with the free world, where it belongs.

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