



DEBATE: What's Next for Turkey?

Moderated by George N. Tzogopoulos

BESA Center Online Debate No. 13, July 19, 2018

Q: Turkey's fate has been associated with that of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan ever since 2002. After having won multiple elections and referenda and surviving an attempted coup d'état in July 2016, he is consolidating power in an unprecedented manner. The elections of June 24, 2018 were his most recent test, and he passed it successfully. Despite divisions within Turkish society and criticism in the West, Erdoğan continues to steer Turkey by holding greater power than any other Turkish leader in decades. The full impact of this development on Turkey's domestic and foreign policy remains to be seen. BESA joins the debate by asking: Now that Erdoğan has passed his most recent electoral test, what is next for Turkey?

Respondents: Mark Meirowitz, Katerina Dalacoura, Mark Lowen, Dimitrios Triantaphyllou, Gallia Lindenstrauss, Efrat Aviv, Vassilis Nedos, Burak Bekdil



Mark Meirowitz, Associate Professor, SUNY Maritime College, New York;
BESA Non-Resident Research Associate

Turkey is clearly at a crossroads. With the enhanced presidency won and a majority in Parliament achieved (in coalition with the nationalist MHP party), President Erdoğan and the AKP party now have a tremendous opportunity to effectuate real

change in Turkey. Having dedicated so much energy to achieving these electoral milestones, Erdoğan and the AKP can now focus on addressing Turkey's challenges and issues. The Turkish society's having to lurch from election to election was not helpful for stability. There is now, I believe, light at the end of the tunnel following the elections. The prospect of the termination of the state of emergency is extremely positive.

Further, the so far very effective discussions with the US concerning Syria, including the roadmap for Manbij, will hopefully usher in a period of improved Turkish-US relations (bearing in mind that Turkey must focus its energies on improving its relationship with the US, and should be very wary of relying on Russia to resolve Turkey's defense needs). As for the relationship with Israel, Turkey and Israel need to dedicate their energies to reestablishing the progress they made after resolving their differences following the Mavi Marmara incident by returning ambassadors and restoring good relations.

I am optimistic about Turkey's future but am also concerned about the pressing problems with the Turkish economy, which President Erdoğan and the Turkish government must tackle forthwith. Finally, Erdoğan and the AKP must resist the pressure that the nationalist MHP may bring to bear on key matters (such as how to resolve the Syria/Kurdish issue). With the election victory having brought enhanced freedom of action to navigate the many complex challenges that Turkey faces, Erdoğan and the AKP can accomplish great things for Turkey. I sincerely hope that they will do so.



**Katerina Dalacoura, Associate Professor in International Relations,
London School of Economics**

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's outright victory in the first round of the presidential elections of June 24, 2018, and the success of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in scoring 42.56% of the vote in the parliamentary elections held the same day, have deepened concerns for the future of democracy in Turkey. There are some silver linings, however, one of which is the performance of the opposition parties arrayed against the AKP during the election campaign. Over the past 16 years there has been a deepening realization among opponents of the AKP that no "big brother" (neither

the now defanged military nor any other) will rescue them from the dominance of the AKP and the master political tactician who leads it.

In the lead-up to the most recent elections, the Republican People's Party (CHP), the newly-established "Good" (İYİ) party, the Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP), and the small but significant Islamist Felicity (Saadet) party attempted to bridge their ideological and ethnic divisions, strike political deals, and conduct a dynamic campaign. To defeat the AKP over the coming years, they will need to do more to overcome the fault line between Turks and Kurds; send strong feelers out to the Islamist camp; extend their activities at the local level throughout the country; and listen to the voters more attentively. But their successes in these elections are already significant: the AKP's percentage was reduced and it lost its majority; it will be forced henceforth to rely on the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) to get things done.

All the major opposition parties secured representation in parliament, where some of the decisive political battles of the next five years will be conducted. There is still a long way to go for the establishment of a full-blown democracy in Turkey, but one of the indispensable requirements for it seems to have been put in place.



Mark Lowen, BBC Turkey Correspondent

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has achieved absolute power: head of the executive, as well as head of state; and able to appoint ministers and most senior judges, dissolve parliament, and issue decrees. Everything from the intelligence agency to the state theater has been put under his control. After ninety-five years of a parliamentary system, pro-government media call him the "first president" of the new constitutional framework. Turkey is to all intents and purposes in its Second Republic.

The opposition calls it "one-man rule." The concentration of powers in his hands makes him by far the most powerful leader of Turkey since the republic's founding father, Atatürk. His choice of ministers, particularly placing the Finance and Treasury brief in the hands of his son-in-law, Berat Albayrak, reinforces that impression.

The benefit, as far as he's concerned, is streamlined decision-making and less chance of conflict among the branches of government. The risk is that Erdoğan no longer has anyone to blame but himself if things turn bad – particularly on the economic front.

That is now the main concern: soaring inflation, a plummeting currency, and foreign investment drying up. It was the reason why the president called early elections in the first place – to secure victory before a crash. But the changes he’s enacted since his victory have done nothing to calm markets.

The big unknown now is foreign policy: whether Erdoğan will soften his antagonistic rhetoric towards the west and try to repair Turkey’s traditional alliances, or continue to pivot Turkey away from Europe and towards Russia and the Gulf. If a financial crisis hits hard, he may face renewed pressure to improve relations with the big investors of the Netherlands and Germany.

On the domestic security front, there’s every chance that military operations against Kurdish groups in northern Syria will continue, as well as the crackdown on perceived opponents within the country. The continuation in post of the Foreign and Interior Ministers suggests no major change.

The “new Turkey” is full of unknowns. As ever, half the country relishes it while the other is terrified of it.



**Dimitrios Triantaphyllou, Associate Professor in International Relations,
Kadir Has University, Istanbul**

The victory of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the first round of the presidential elections in Turkey on June 24 as well as the domination of the AKP-MHP People’s Alliance in Parliament signals the birth of Turkey’s Second Republic, marked by Erdoğan’s inauguration on July 9. After 95 years of variants of a parliamentary system in place with relatively clear separations between executive, legislative, and judicial power, the new presidential system implies a concentration of power in the hands of the president. Irrespective of Erdoğan’s ideological proclivities, which entail a mix of conservatism, nationalism, and Sunni Islamism, the governance of a country like Turkey has always been a polarizing affair supported by a national security veneer that has historically perceived the country as facing the challenges of the modern world on its own.

In today’s increasingly fluid world, in which the edifice of the rules-based international order is being dismantled piecemeal by the very powers that created it in the first place on the heels of WWII, Turkey’s traditional instincts of fear of

insecurity, encirclement, and meddling by great powers in its domestic affairs have been reinforced. As a result, on the domestic front, Erdoğan's fight with the secular and west-leaning establishment that has been the political, administrative, and economic bedrock of the country will continue in order to ensure the consolidation and legitimacy of the new presidential system as well as Erdoğan's hold on power.

In terms of relations with the rest of the world, the new Turkey's foreign policy will become even more transactional than it already is, as the country will continue to seek a greater role for itself in regional and global affairs commensurate with the image and discourse of a conservative, Islamist leader in defense of the national interest. As a result, its relations with traditional allies and partners will become increasingly frayed and difficult to manage.



[Gallia Lindenstrauss](#), Research Fellow, Institute for National Security Studies and a visiting fellow at the Bipartisan Policy Center, Tel Aviv

The results of the elections in Turkey, which solidified the alliance between the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), will mean the continuation of a harsh stance on the Kurdish issue inside Turkey and towards the Syrian branch of the Kurdish underground, the PYD.

In terms of other areas of foreign policy, while we are witnessing some attempts to reset relations with the US, there are good reasons to believe that many of the existing sources of tensions in bilateral relations will remain in place – the S-400 deal between Turkey and Russia and the growing calls in Congress to halt the supply of the F-35 to Turkey, the ramifications of the US withdrawal from the Iran deal, the question of Fethullah Gülen's extradition from the US, and the fate of US citizens in prison in Turkey.

In terms of Turkey's relations with the EU, it is not expected that there will be any advancement in the accession process, and the current Austrian presidency of the EU may be quite challenging for Turkey. With regard to Turkish-Israeli relations, the tensions surrounding the May 2018 crisis are still in place, and the return of ambassadors to Ankara and Tel Aviv in the near term seems uncertain.



**Efrat Aviv, Lecturer in the Department of Middle Eastern Studies,
Bar-Ilan University; BESA Fellow**

The most important outcome of the Turkish elections is that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan will become Turkey's first executive president with significantly increased powers. The branches of the Turkish government are now set to begin implementing a series of constitutional amendments approved in a referendum last year. Under the new system, the re-elected Erdoğan will be able to appoint vice presidents, ministers, high-level officials, and senior judges, as well as dissolve parliament, issue executive decrees, impose a state of emergency, and issue new laws – something he was previously able to do only under a state of emergency, but will now have the right to do as executive president. AKP supporters believe the new system will allow Turkey to be governed in a more efficient and stable manner in the long run, but ignore the increasing authoritarianism of the president and his party. Now that Erdoğan's domestic and foreign policies were “proven right” by the election results, that authoritarianism will grow stronger – a danger it would be a bitter mistake to ignore.

The fate of Turkey's volatile economy is critical, and much will depend on how Erdoğan handles it. The depreciating currency, which has lost about 20% of its value against the dollar since the start of the year, along with rising inflation and the current account deficit, the high exchange rate, and high interest rates, will remain the most urgent issue. I see no indications that Erdoğan will reverse course on his populist economic agenda despite his attempts to calm down the society and the business sector. To cite Emine Erdoğan's latest provocation, the president's approach is like carrying a Hermès handbag when all you can afford is a Waikiki one. On top of the economic issue is Erdoğan's tough relationship with the West and especially with “fascist and cruel” Europe. I expect no change in Erdoğan's foreign “policy,” so internal tensions will remain. Again, Erdoğan believes his harsh, non-stop criticism of the West was an efficient tool to help him gain popularity. The election results did nothing to encourage him to change that policy.

Growing polarization inside Turkish society is worrisome, as are social problems such as violence against women, child abuse, mass arrests, and unjust trials, as well as Erdoğan's promise to apply capital punishment after the elections. This will put the

government in a difficult spot internationally by attracting criticism, especially from the West, over human rights and democratic standards in the country. Human rights conditions in Turkey will almost certainly worsen. For instance, lawsuits like the one filed against the farmer protestors who participated in the recent “potatoes protest” in Adana – the suit filed on the grounds that they had insulted Erdoğan – will probably be more common from now on.

As Turkey’s current foreign policy consists of no doctrine nor unified ideology but is based on immediate interests and needs, the Turkish involvement in Syria will continue and Erdoğan’s fight against PKK will be increased, especially in view of AKP’s alliance with MHP. Erdoğan has to keep on implementing the policies he followed in the last few years in order to remain MHP’s ally. True, Muharrem Ince’s emergence signaled that there could be a credible alternative to Erdoğan, surpassing current CHP leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu. But Ince has no official position within CHP and the opposition as a whole does not seem strong enough to face Erdoğan, especially not as an executive president.



[Vassilis Nedos](#), Diplomatic and Defense correspondent, *Kathimerini*, Athens

Does Turkey have a 21st century Atatürk? A large share of Turks, especially the ones who feel increasingly alienated or even segregated, would find it very difficult to accept this. Others would feel this is probably quite accurate in concrete terms. But all would discover resemblances. At the elections of June 24th, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan managed to consolidate his power not only for five more years but for an unforeseeable period of time.

This makes Erdoğan the master of the game. He makes the rules, he bends the rules, he breaks the rules, and then he remolds the rules. In terms of internal power balance, it seems that he will remain unchallenged, as the old Kemalist order is toothless. So the answer to the question “what comes next” can only be answered with another set of questions. Can clear-cut, pro-Western parties and actors exert influence in Turkish society? Is there a (politically) able-bodied opposition to stop the authoritarian outbreak?

On a geopolitical scale, the question is whether Turkey can a) be effectively re-anchored and fully engaged to the West, b) deepen its new partnerships with Russia and Iran, or c) try to balance them all. In the meantime, it is projecting power in both

the eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea, producing tensions with all littoral states. The current “hunting expedition” for natural resources in the eastern Mediterranean will test the resolve of Ankara’s power projection in the region because it will bring Turkey into friction not only with the littoral states, but with Western powers that have presences and economic interests there.



Burak Bekdil, Ankara-based columnist, fellow at the Middle East Forum, and regular contributor to the Gatestone Institute and *Defense News*

On June 24th, more than 56 million Turks went to the ballot box to elect their president and members of parliament. The election results pleased (and saddened) all players. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan won the presidential race with 52.6% of the vote, slightly up from 51.8% he won in 2014. More than 25 million Turks endorsed their support for the Islamist strongman who has ruled Turkey since 2002.

Erdoğan’s ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) won 42.6% of the vote, down from 49.5% in last parliamentary elections in November 2015. But the AKP, in alliance with the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), won 344 seats in the new 600-seat house, a clear majority. The MHP, whose popularity was estimated at 7-8% in polls, won a surprising 11.1%, another winner and now Erdoğan’s indispensable coalition partner. It should be noted that without the MHP in alliance, Erdoğan’s AKP would fall short of a parliamentary majority with its 293 seats.

The Kurdish People’s Democratic Party (HDP) is another winner as it narrowly passed the national threshold of 10% for parliamentary representation (with 11.7% of the national vote). The Kurdish bloc is now the third-largest power in the Turkish parliament.

Finally, Erdoğan’s main presidential rival, Muharrem İnce of the main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP), a secular, social democratic grouping, was also a winner as he took a surprising 30.6% of the national vote (against Erdoğan’s 52.6%), significantly higher than his party’s 22.6%. İnce may not have challenged Erdoğan as he claimed he would, but he has proven to be his only serious future challenge.

The Turks chose to go on with Erdoğan, making, at the same time, a clear choice to blend his neo-Ottoman Islamism with MHP's ethnic Turkish nationalism. This Islamist/nationalist bloc now makes up 53.7% of Turkish voters. That same ideological blend will guide Turkey's foreign policy in the years ahead.

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