

‘Erdogan the Good’ or ‘Erdogan the Bad’?

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.

An in-depth conversation on Washington's misguided tendency to view Turkey through binary lenses based entirely on Erdogan's policies, forgetting the country's strong political diversity.

Reilly Barry, editor-in-chief of the *Harvard Kennedy School's Journal of Middle Eastern Politics and Policy* (<https://jmepp.hkspublications.org/2019/10/25/erdogan-turkey-us-relations-syria/>), sat down with Soner Cagaptay to discuss what underlying factors are most influential for policymakers on US-Turkey relations right now, especially in light of Turkish troops' entry into northeast Syria and targeting of the former American partners, the YPG. Despite the seemingly recent wave of American bipartisan critique of Trump's withdrawal policy, which was hastily announced on October 6th, and denouncement of Turkey's actions, this has been a center point of bilateral tension for years. As mentioned by foreign minister Mevlut Cavusoglu in 2017, America's support for the YPG, who Turkey views as a Syrian branch of the internationally recognized terrorist group PKK, was at the time and has remained one of the top three major issues in the bilateral partnership.

Q: What do you see as the most fundamental misunderstanding from the outpouring of American public opinion following Turkey's incursion into northeast Syria after the US withdrawal of troops?

I think there has been an “obsession” in Washington and the US in general over Erdogan. The obsession is that in the last decade it was “Erdogan the Good,” he could do nothing bad, so when he was arresting dissidents, people were willing to ignore and look over these facts, and now it's the opposite; it's “Erdogan the Bad,” he or Turkey can do nothing good. So, it's a binary lens; whatever he's doing must be bad and whatever opposes him must be good, and therefore there's this view which casts the Kurdish YPG as the good guys, many people forgetting the fact that although the United States partnered with the YPG to combat ISIS, the YPG is, as a senior-level US State Department official put it recently, “the Syrian wing of the PKK,” which is a designated terror entity. Many in Washington are right to be angry at Erdogan because the Turkish incursion into Syria upset US plans to create a safe zone in northern Syria that would have allowed the US and Turkey together to push the YPG away from the Turkish border—without letting Russia and the Assad regime in. Having said this, I think “obsession” with Erdogan has often distorted Turkey

policy, reducing it to how we view Erdogan. Here is what I mean: although Erdogan is a strongman president who has run Turkey for 16 years while basically taking control of the media and many institutions, Turkey is still a democracy.

People now oftentimes compare Turkey to Iran or Russia, China—completely simplistic in my view. I would compare it to Hungary, in the sense that it's a democracy on top of which there's an autocrat. But what happened in Turkey in June, when Erdogan's party lost Istanbul's mayoral race, this could happen in the Middle East only in Israel and Tunisia. And it could not happen in Russia, China, or Iran. To be more specific, what happened in Istanbul happened in Hungary, where Orban has [lost \(https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50039847\)](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50039847) Budapest to his opposition. So I think that Turkey holds the comparison to other democracies in Eastern Europe that have powerful, strongman, autocratic presidents, but then I see some people tweeting, saying Turkey is like Iran/it's like Russia/it's like China. To me, this says that these people can be quite simplistic in their view of Erdogan and of Turkey, which they reduce to Erdogan alone. And so if he's "Erdogan the Bad" then there can be nothing good about Turkey policy. I have long argued that although Erdogan controls Turkey with an iron fist, he's both a feared and a respected figure, and is loved by his base and feared by his opponents. Turkey remains, however, still quite pluralistic and diverse as we saw in the recent local elections where Erdogan's party lost all but one of the largest six cities to opposition, but also taking into account the provinces that voted against him in local elections. When you add up their population and economic size, these provinces constitute a bloc nearly the size of Spain. So if people want to see Turkey as simplistically as Russia, that is fine, but without forgetting that it's "Russia that has Spain nested in it."

One of the reasons why I love studying Turkey is that if countries could be vegetables, I think Turkey would be an onion. You keep peeling away these layers and there's never a core. What is more, analysts and observers would be better served to not use a reductionist approach towards Turkey or explain it by painting broad generalizations. Accordingly, I believe that Turkey policy should not be reduced down to Erdogan, though this has always been a problem. In the last decade there was distortion through "Erdogan the Good," this time it's distortion through "Erdogan the Bad." But instead I suggest seeing this as a deeply nuanced country, presenting a huge amount of complexity and diversity. And I think that policy always ought to take into account that notwithstanding Erdogan's tight control of it, Turkey remains quite pluralistic and diverse.

Q: To follow up on that, would you say that the "Erdogan the Good" paradigm came following his election in 2002, or later when Obama took office and pivoted toward harnessing a positive relationship with Erdogan and his vision for leadership in the Middle East?

I think it was earlier, just after Erdogan became prime minister in 2003, because at that time he was boxed in by Turkey's secularist constitution, the secularist military that acted as an unelected guardian of democracy in Turkey, and also pro-Western political and foreign policy traditions. I explain in *Erdogan's Empire* (<https://www.erdogansempire.com/>) that his foreign policy was not just one straight line; there were phases and fluctuations. At this time, for instance, he was more internationalist, and a better version of late Kemalist in the 2000s, embracing EU accession, trying to unify Cyprus, normalize relations with Armenia. This first phase of Erdogan rule in domestic and foreign policy lasted for almost a decade after his rise to power, when he was busy building his popular base, delivering phenomenal economic growth, and that's really a success story that I think is important to highlight. Erdogan lifted many people out of poverty; the base loves him not only because he is a populist, nativist leader and because they identify with his message, but because he has lifted many in the base out of poverty. His party came to power with only 34% support, and he increased this to nearly 49% by 2011 in just under a decade. In that period while he was busy building support, he was also boxed in by the military, the constitution, and the courts, and this is when he had assistance from the Gulen movement, which through its networks in the police, media, and judiciary, helped Erdogan build a court case ([Ergenekon case](#)

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2013/08/20138512358195978.html>, 2008-2011) alleging that there was a coup plotted against him.

That's also when the lens of "Erdogan the Good" distorted Turkey policy, especially during the Ergenekon case, when many people could simply not believe that Erdogan could be locking up dissidents for no good reason. This is, ironically, also the period when opposing Erdogan through ideas became a crime—with significant help from the Gulen movement, whose leader lives in the US. And again, that's another reductionist take for today—if it is "Erdogan the Bad," then Gulen must be good. Gulen is completely complicit in Erdogan's takeover of checks and balances and core democratic institutions. Gulen helped create a republic of fear in which opposing Erdogan through ideas became a crime. Gulenists would run op-eds and headlines in their papers targeting journalists who were arrested, saying "you're not arrested because you're journalists, you're coup plotters," and ironically that's what's happening to them now.

In the last decade the image of "Erdogan the Good" distorted Turkey policy at a time when Erdogan was busy undermining Turkey's democracy, with help from Gulen. So when he was arresting dissidents, Gulenists were labeling them coup-plotters, but also many people in the US and Europe were giving Erdogan a hall pass. This significant distortion allowed Erdogan to create a republic of fear, intimidate opponents, and simultaneously consolidate his base. The end of the Ergenekon case in my view was 2011—although the charges against people jailed were dismissed later on—more specifically summer of 2011, because that's when the top brass of the secularist Turkish military resigned in mass, recognizing that Erdogan had won. To me, this was the beginning of another Erdogan era, both in foreign policy and in domestic politics, and the Gezi Park rallies of 2013 were a reaction to that. Once he solidified power both by building a popular base and by locking up dissidents and creating a republic of fear—and changing the constitution in 2010 with support from the Gulen movement, which gave him the right to appoint a majority of judges to high courts without a confirmation process—a new Erdogan rose after 2011. And that was the Erdogan who became increasingly dismissive of dissent, cracked down on liberties, and tried to impose his conservative version of Islam on the rest of society, which is what sparked Gezi. 2011 also served as the beginning of a new foreign policy era under Erdogan that included many rifts with the US.

Erdogan is a pragmatic leader, he can make turns, but I think a number of events in foreign policy—including sharp differences with US over Syria—as well as crackdowns on dissent internally have shaped this other, and again, distorted image of him as "Erdogan the Bad." Erdogan remains an astute politician, he is the most consequential Turkish leader since Ataturk. Ataturk tried to shape Turkey in his own image. Erdogan, too, wants to shape the country in his own image, which is why I call him the "new Ataturk." Of course, Erdogan doesn't share Ataturk's values. The latter wanted to shape Turkey in his own image as a secular European country facing the West; Erdogan wants to shape Turkey in his own image as a socially conservative, politically Islamist—not "Muslim"—country facing the Middle East. So the leaders have opposite values, but their methods are the same—top down, Jacobin social engineering. But, I think the time for Jacobin social engineering has passed (in Turkey and elsewhere for that matter). And this is why Erdogan's model does not seem to be working. Ataturk shaped Turkey without having to worry about a democratic mandate and taking stock with his image as "Turkey's Lincoln and Washington" simultaneously. Erdogan, meanwhile, is democratically elected, so he cannot continue with his "revolution" to shape Turkey in his own image because nearly half of the country will not fold under him. And that's why I think he's increasingly more authoritarian, because it's the only way he can impose his "revolution" on the broader society. But that, in return, has created a backlash, as well as producing deep societal polarization, from which increasingly there seems to be no exit.

Q: For the first time, possibly ever, in a US presidential debate, the question "Should Turkey remain a US ally?" was recently posed to candidates for the Democratic nomination. Do you see this as having heightened

importance being brought up in an American presidential debate, about a country that we have historically had a strategic partnership with since the 1950s, or is this just another moment in a long string of flash points in the last six years where experts and policymakers say that the US is at a “breaking point” with Turkey?

Again, I think at least some people are reducing Turkey to Erdogan, viewing the whole country through the Erdogan lens, which is simplistic. To me this is equivalent to letting anger at Erdogan lead people to ask whether Turkey should be kicked out of NATO, forgetting the fact that regardless of one’s feelings towards Erdogan, the US is going to need Ankara (Turkey borders Iran, Iraq, Syria, formerly ISIS-held territories, and Russia across the Black Sea). Turkey can be a facilitator or spoiler for US policy. Realizing that those Turkish citizens who do not vote for Erdogan constitute a bloc nearly the size of Spain economically and demographically, the US ought to view its policy regarding Turkey beyond the tenure of a leader. Turkey is bigger than just its leader. It has been, is, and will always be bigger than Erdogan.

Q: Thinking back to early 2018 when Erdogan launched his Zeytin Dali Harekati (Operation Olive Branch) into Afrin, this was amidst a time when it was widely speculated that snap elections would imminently be called for Erdogan’s early presidential election. The military offensive into Afrin had also been linked to trying to draw domestic support amid economic troubles before the election. Do you see any parallels or manner in which the offensive into Syria now reflects a fear of greater opposition in the wake of Ekrem Imamoglu, an opposition candidate, winning Istanbul’s mayoral elections in June of this year?

Yes and no. I think that Erdogan’s switch to an executive style presidential system has actually been not so good for him. Although the system has increased his powers and made him Turkey’s most powerful president since it became a multi-party democracy in 1950, it has unwittingly unified his opposition. For a long time I used to argue that Erdogan was blessed with an ineffective opposition composed of disparate groups, leftists and rightists, Kurdish and Turkish nationalists, who could never vote for each other. But by switching to an executive style presidential system, he’s eliminated the parliamentary system in which a party could form a government with as little as 40% of the vote—in Erdogan’s case, the first time his party won in 2002 it garnered only 34% of the vote. The switch to a presidential system requires a run-off in a two way race. The opposition has realized if they’re not united they’ll never win. So they offered a joint candidate in 2018 (Muharrem Ince), and it didn’t work, but it worked in Istanbul in 2019. It worked in Istanbul primarily because the economy slowed down, but also because the opposition had a united candidate. Perhaps Erdogan is trying to divide his opposition again. The war against the PKK may allow him to pry the Kurdish nationalist HDP from the rest of the opposition.

But I said yes and also no. And the no part is that this war is not just about Erdogan. There’s a broader constituency: with the exception of HDP, all of the other parties represented in parliament support the war effort. Although it’s hard to tell what public opinion is about because media’s oppressed and people cannot speak up against the war and if they do, they’re arrested. But political parties broadly support this.

But let’s also note that while Erdogan is trying to divide the opposition, he will not get a long term boost from this wave because there’s no election scheduled until 2023, and no snap elections are likely unless the economy recovers. If the economy’s not doing well, snap elections may deliver him another Istanbul defeat.

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow at The Washington Institute and author of the book [Erdogan’s Empire: Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East \(https://www.erdoganempire.com/\)](https://www.erdoganempire.com/). ❖

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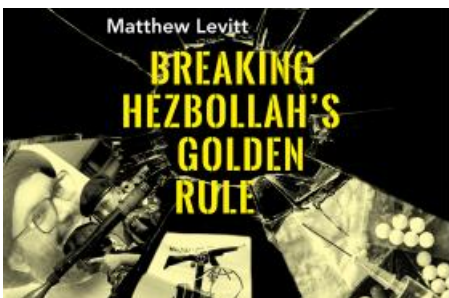
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