

# Turkey: A Partner in Crisis

by [David Heidelberg \(/experts/david-heidelberg\)](#), [MacDara King \(/experts/macdara-king\)](#), [Lisel Hintz \(/experts/lisel-hintz\)](#), [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Heidelberg \(/experts/david-heidelberg\)](#)

David Heidelberg is an Emmy-nominated producer and supervising editor of "Great Decisions."



[MacDara King \(/experts/macdara-king\)](#)

MacDara King is executive producer of the "Great Decisions" series and chief information officer of the Foreign Policy Association.



[Lisel Hintz \(/experts/lisel-hintz\)](#)

Lisel Hintz is an assistant professor of international relations and European studies at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies.



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

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



Brief Analysis

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**As part of a special screening event, two experts joined the producers of a new PBS investigation to discuss Turkey's 2016 coup crisis and ongoing struggles with authoritarianism.**

*On February 7, The Washington Institute hosted a preview screening of "Turkey: A Partner in Crisis," an episode from the latest season of the Great Decisions television series. Two of the show's producers, David Heidelberg and MacDara King, addressed the audience after the screening, along with Lisel Hintz, an assistant professor at Johns*

*Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, and Soner Cagaptay, the Institute's Beyer Family Fellow. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

## **DAVID HEIDELBERGER AND MACDARA KING**

**T**he *Great Decisions* episode used concise factual evidence to explain why the modern Turkish republic has evolved into its current form. From the coup-marked legacy of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the program traces the Justice and Development Party's rise to political power in 2002, the AKP-Gülenist relationship, and the growing authoritarianism that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has exhibited since 2007

The in-depth, foreign-policy-focused format of *Great Decisions* is perfect for covering Turkey because the country's recent developments are too complicated to be adequately explained in a brief news segment. It was particularly eye opening to witness how Turks reacted to the failed 2016 coup, juxtaposed with the American media's less-than-perfect job at covering just how bloody the attempted takeover actually was.

To bridge this coverage gap, the episode's crew traveled to Turkey and held intensive interviews with around 100 people; they also attended Ankara's commemoration event on the one-year anniversary of the coup. Unfortunately, they were unable to secure an interview with representatives of accused coup plotter Fethullah Gülen, though Turkish government officials were eager to air their perspective on the matter.

## **LISEL HINTZ**

**O**n the first anniversary of the coup attempt, Turkish citizens gathered in front of the parliament building at the intersection of İnönü and Atatürk Boulevards, named after two former leaders who would have not been pleased with the crowd of people shouting Islamist slogans. "Ottoman Islamism" as a national identity is on the rise in Turkey, predicated on citizens being pious Muslims and their country acting as a leader of the Muslim world. This is a very different identity from that fostered by Atatürk and İnönü.

Erdoğan has used the coup's aftermath to jail civil society elements who oppose him. From the Turkish perspective, the Syrian Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG) are a clear security threat linked to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), but now ordinary citizens—journalists, doctors, social media users, and so forth—are being detained simply for criticizing Erdoğan's campaign against the YPG in Syria.

The judiciary has been heavily purged since the coup as well, since it was one of the institutions that the Gülen movement was able to penetrate. Yet because Gülenists were the main intellectual force behind the AKP, underqualified party supporters now fill many important positions. As a result, the judiciary is hollowed out and no longer independent; Erdoğan is in full control. Many Turkish mayors have likewise been removed during the post-coup crackdown.

Meanwhile, Turkey's relations with Germany and the Netherlands have suffered drastically, with Ankara repeatedly demanding that they turn over suspected Gülenists. In the United States, the Gülen movement has done an impressive job of building networks by trumpeting its image as a successful ecumenical civil society movement. This makes it difficult for many Americans to accept that Gülenists were complicit in Turkey's Ergenekon trials, which sought to weaken the role of the military and other ardent secularist factions.

Ankara has also pressed Washington on a number of matters, such as ending the prosecution of Reza Zarrab and executives from Halkbank on charges of evading Iran sanctions; ceasing cooperation with the YPG in Syria; extraditing Gülen; and maintaining bilateral military cooperation. Erdoğan wants to make sure that he and his allies win Turkey's next municipal, parliamentary, and presidential elections, so he often uses the United States as a nationalist punching bag in order to boost his popularity. The dilemma for Washington is how to avoid steps that harm the Turkish population without fueling Erdoğan's nationalist rhetoric.

As for Russia, Turkey is not going to develop a long-term alliance with Moscow. Ankara is at odds with the Kremlin over many issues.

## SONER CAGAPTAY

**T**he fact that fringe elements in the United States and Turkey are even talking about Ankara leaving NATO is frightening. Although Turkey's trajectory is moving away from America, their friendship of the past sixty years should help the relationship survive.

The *Great Decisions* episode did a good job of showing that Turkey was becoming more authoritarian well before the attempted coup. In this sense, Erdogan seems much like a doner kebab chef—over the years he has taken very thin slices from Turkey's democracy, so gradually and surgically that most people could not see that he was undermining its very existence. But he has set aside all pretense of gradualism since the coup; knowing that the Gulenists and other sworn enemies are after him, he has become an absolutist in his efforts to chop away democracy, no longer caring what the outside world thinks.

The documentary also did a good job of explaining Erdogan's rise to power from the political fringes. The nativist Islamist movement was once considered a marginal force in Turkish politics, but thanks to him it has won elections and taken over the center of political discourse. The center-right parties that dominated Turkey from 1950 to 2002 collapsed just when Erdogan's AKP was emerging. The political Islamists inherited a decade of economic mismanagement and corruption in the 1990s, culminating in the 2001 economic crisis, the worst in modern Turkish history.

In addition to addressing dire economic problems, the AKP succeeded because it moderated. From the 1970s to the 1990s, Erdogan took part in successive Islamist factions that were shut down by the courts for violating the country's secular constitution. To avoid another ban, the AKP formally renounced political Islam, becoming pro-Western and capitalist. This helped the Islamists take over the center-right as a self-professed mainstream political force.

Europe played a role in the AKP's rise too, albeit indirectly. The EU was right to demand that the Turkish military exit politics, but shortsighted in believing that the AKP—a movement with deep illiberal antecedents in political Islam—would consolidate liberal democracy. The EU should have kept its accession offer on the table instead of backtracking once Erdogan pushed the military out of politics; doing so might have allowed the Europeans to become the new grand arbiters of democracy in Turkey.

The 2013 Gezi Park demonstrations in Istanbul should have been a wakeup call for Europe and Washington regarding Turkey's illiberal trajectory, because Erdogan was brutalizing peaceful protestors who wanted to reopen the EU path. The coup three years later was a real, though flawed, attempt to reverse that trajectory. Many of the citizens who love Erdogan unconditionally came out during the bloodshed to help him regain control, giving away their lives in the process. As a result, he has been able to make Turkey even less democratic—though the country would be much worse off if the coup had succeeded.

Regarding foreign policy, Erdogan is not folding under Russia, despite widespread domestic fear of Moscow's intentions. The story of the Russian Empire's rise is also the story of the Ottoman Empire's collapse—Russia is a historic enemy that has started many wars with the Turks and defeated them each time. To stave off such threats, Erdogan will likely continue relying on U.S. hard power. Previously, he sought to make Turkey a major player in the Middle East through soft and hard power methods. Although he faltered each time, he will likely continue seeking "great power" status for Turkey.

*This summary was prepared by Egecan Alan Fay. ❖*

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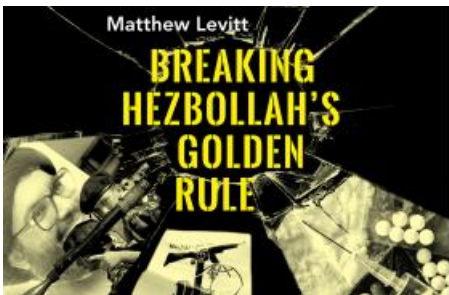
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