

# Two Paths for Turkey

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## If a case can be made for a country too big to fail in the Middle East, it would be Turkey.

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A few years ago, Turkey exuded self-satisfaction. An economic success story, Turkey was engaged in structural administrative reforms to satisfy a putative EU membership. As part of NATO since its inception, Turkey was confident of its status as a primary strategic ally of the United States in the region. Ruled by a conservative party with religious roots, Turkey engaged in an expansion of ambitious external trade policies and diplomacy, driven by the notion of “zero problems with neighbors” as well as a credible internal peace process, seeking a resolution of its long-standing Kurdish problem. When the Arab Spring shook the foundations of the Middle Eastern political order, there were multiple references to the “Turkish model” as an alternative to autocracy and socio-economic dysfunction.

Much has changed since. Today, perplexed by years of unfulfilled expectations and severely bruised by an attempted coup, Turkey has metastasized into an introverted, reactive autocracy engaged at home in disproportionate repressive measures against foes, real and imagined, while reformulating a regional policy aimed at disrupting detrimental developments, rather than initiating productive ones. Yet, if a case can be made for a country too big to fail in the Middle East, it would be Turkey.

Turkey will suffer immeasurable damage from the paranoid purge of cadres with suspected or alleged connections to the Gulenist movement — whose direct involvement in the coup is yet to be proven. In addition to the breach of due process and international norms, the repressive measures have excluded vast numbers of qualified professionals who had contributed to Turkey’s success — handing them instead to potential recruitment by existing or future opposition movements.. It is a course of self-destruction that any true friend of Turkey should seek to correct.

It may be counter-productive to see the fulfillment of villainy that Erdogan’s party had hidden — whether assumed to be Islamist, neo-Ottomanist, or simply Turkish irredentist. There is ample evidence to show that Turkey has served as a main supply route for international radical militants into Syria, and has leveraged the outcome to resist Kurdish

autonomy on its southern border. It is with outrage and disbelief, however, that Ankara has witnessed the Obama administration gradually engage what the AKP sees as the Syrian incarnation of the PKK, eventually elevating it to the status of a primary partner, while remaining detached from the approach that the Turkish leadership advocated for in Syria. It may have been a disagreement on the allocation of resources; Erdogan's vision of regime change in Damascus required a degree of engagement to which the intervention-averse Obama White House was unwilling to commit. On the other hand, with virtually no other realistic choice, Syrian Kurdish forces were viewed as an essential component within Washington's small footprint approach against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). With a change in the delicate balance of power between ethnic groups in northern Syria an expected result, Turkey could and should have underlined the shortcomings of the American approach, where the cost of tactical ease may be strategic complexity. But the lines of communication between Washington and Ankara seemed to have eroded — with a feedback loop of mistrust circulating between the two capitals. Rather than behaving as allies on Syria, Turkey and the United States run on parallel tracks, sometimes complementary, but often at cross purposes or even contradictory. Even worse, Washington's preference for a low intensity approach was favored by factions within the Turkish military. With loyalty to leadership the new standard for subsistence in post-coup Turkey, the US-Turkish alliance is hemorrhaging the career professionals who consolidated it.

Yet, the July coup has also pushed Turkey's regional policy closer to the United States — even though the trend remains unfulfilled. Turkey can no longer indulge in grand visions. Its approach is instead down-sized to its immediate interests: the containment of threats at its southern and southeastern borders. There may be no shift in Ankara's denunciation of the Damascus regime; its first priority, however, is now merely to avoid the emergence of a new Kurdish entity in northern Syria. Whether phrased in terms of aiding the internally displaced, insisting on the territorial integrity of sovereign states, the safeguard of the rights of the Turkmen minority, or avoiding destabilization resulting from antagonizing the Sunni Arab population, Turkey in Syria is highly focused on interdicting Kurdish autonomy. In words and in deeds, the PKK and its allies are exacerbating Ankara's obsession. PKK militancy and terrorism have resumed within Turkey, while verbal assaults continue in the media naming Turkey the new "sick man" of the region, with promises of further dismemberment.

The Turkish "force protection" approach extends also to Iraq. There, with productive relations still maintained with the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the priority is to steer the anticipated chaos in the aftermath of the liberation of Mosul away from causing further damage to Turkey. Left unattended, the Mosul situation can readily develop into another refugee, economic, and security crisis afflicting Turkey similar to the effects of the Syrian crisis. It is a worthwhile agenda that the Turkish leadership have been late in addressing; its actions are thus costly and ineffective. The Turkish-trained National Mobilization Units in Iraq are a diminutive calque of the Iranian-supported Popular Mobilization Units; but while Iran is confirmed in its role by its vassal Baghdad government, Turkey risks a diplomatic embarrassment in seeking to maintain its Iraqi connections.

The conditions in Syria and Iraq push Ankara to relegate its confrontation with ISIS to third priority status. Turkey is thus assuming considerable risk, and its supposed ability to absorb it may fail. The overreaction of the Turkish leadership to the July coup has in fact increased Turkey's vulnerability to destructive ISIS action. By excluding segments of Turkish society on affinity rather than accountability—Gülenists, secularists, Kurds, Alevis — one can entertain the impression of a solid loyal block of conservative Sunni AKP supporters. As a result, however, the potential for radicalization - minimal in the general Turkish population - grows both proportionally and through the polarization to which the Erdogan government is resorting. Political discourse in Turkey is hardening, with more intransigence and factionalism, and more proclivity for radical recruitment. It is on the basis of such potential that ISIS has recently called for open warfare in Turkey. With recent historical experience from Turkey's neighborhoods, both Balkan and Middle Eastern, it should be clear that authoritarianism may provide the leadership with an illusion of power and permanence, while in fact exposing society to attrition, factionalism, and radicalism. It remains to be

seen whether President Erdogan will extract himself from such temptation.

Washington may hold the key for a re-alignment of the Turkish approach towards a productive outcome in both Syria and Iraq. A proactive policy that seeks to restore the damaged trust between Turkey and the United States ought to be at the forefront of the concerns of next US administration. However, autocracy and the abuse of authority, even in the context of reacting to a coup, cannot be overlooked. A respectful, constructive, and principled engagement with President Erdogan should point to the two paths that Turkey can follow: a restoration of the rule of law and a salvaging of democracy, achieved jointly with the reconfirmation of Turkey's central place as a US ally whose vital interests are safeguarded; or taking Turkey for a game of Russian roulette with a false dose of security through exclusion and animosity followed by potentially irreversible damage.



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