

Turkey After the Snap Elections: War Cabinet or Peace Cabinet?

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Brief Analysis

If this weekend's results compel the AKP to form a coalition, its choice of partners could have very different implications for Turkish policy on the PKK, the Syrian Kurds, the fight against ISIS, and other issues.

In the June 7 elections, Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) lost its thirteen-year legislative majority, winning only 258 seats in the 550-member parliament. The party is now hoping to restore that majority in a November 1 revote. Yet renewed conflict against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) could play a major role in shaping both the vote tallies and the resultant government.

On July 24, Turkish officials ended peace talks with the group after PKK members carried out execution-style murders of two off-duty police officers. Some polls suggest that the subsequent government crackdown has helped the AKP, boosting its Turkish nationalist credentials with voters. If the party regains its parliamentary majority this weekend, it will be in no small part due to the war against the PKK. Yet if the party fails to win a majority, it will have to form a coalition. In that case, one of two outcomes will likely emerge, with strikingly different consequences for the PKK fight and other issues: an AKP coalition with either the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) or the social-democratic Republican People's Party (CHP).

AKP-MHP COALITION: WAR CABINET

If the AKP joins forces with the MHP, it would bring nearly the entire spectrum of the political right together under one government for the first time in four decades. Such a coalition would be reminiscent of the 1970s-era National Front (Milli Cephe) governments formed by a coalition of center-right, Islamist, and nationalist parties, including the MHP and the National Salvation Party, the AKP's predecessor. Given its similarly strong (albeit completely right-wing) mandate, an AKP-MHP coalition would drive a socially conservative agenda on domestic issues and a nationalist agenda on foreign policy. And on the Kurdish issue, it would continue the war against the PKK while adopting a

tougher posture against the group's Syrian franchise, the Democratic Union Party (PYD).

Since coming to power in 2002, the AKP has followed a foreign policy doctrine shaped by Islamist solidarity and autarkical Turkish nationalism. Typically, junior partners in Turkish coalition governments take the foreign affairs portfolio. If the MHP follows suit, its strong conservative-nationalist tendencies would keep it from posing a major challenge to the AKP's foreign policy line on most issues. As a Turkish nationalist party, however, the MHP has a deep interest in Turkic communities overseas and deep antipathy toward the PKK's cause, so it would likely insist on shaping policy in several specific cases, occasionally creating problems for the AKP.

Iraqi Turkmens. Since the rise of ISIS, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has taken over the multiethnic Iraqi city of Kirkuk to stave off a jihadist takeover. Thus far, Ankara's strong economic ties with the KRG and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's warm relations with its leader, Masoud Barzani, have tempered Turkish nationalist reactions to de facto Kurdish domination of the city and its large Turkmen population. Once in a coalition, however, the MHP would take issue with the situation, potentially undermining Turkish-KRG ties.

Ukraine. Russian occupation has left Crimea's indigenous Tatar community -- linguistic and historical kin of Anatolian Turks -- in harm's way. The MHP may not be able to force the AKP to dilute its intimate relationship with Moscow, which involves deep energy and commercial ties as well as personal rapport between Erdogan and President Vladimir Putin. Yet the MHP's persistent focus on Tatar suffering under the Russians would likely create bilateral problems that Erdogan would be forced to manage.

Syria. Since the beginning of the civil war next door, Turkey has followed a singular objective: ousting President Bashar al-Assad. This stance has eclipsed other concerns there, including the fate of Syria's 250,000 Turkmens. An AKP-MHP government would dedicate much more significant resources to helping that population and building them up as a fighting force. In fact, the MHP would likely insist on prioritizing the Turkmen issue over other aspects of Syria policy, including the fight against Assad and U.S.-Turkish cooperation against ISIS -- especially in cases where the party believes such efforts would disadvantage the Turkmens.

Kurdish-related problems with Washington. The MHP has long opposed the AKP's peace talks with the PKK, and it would use its leverage in a coalition cabinet to ensure that the talks do not resume. It would also take strong issue with U.S. assistance to the PYD, which has been fighting ISIS in Syria. The MHP views the PKK and PYD as essentially the same group; Turkey and the United States have both designated the PKK as a terrorist entity, but only Ankara has so designated the PYD. Continued cooperation with the Syrian Kurdish group -- even against ISIS -- could be a deal breaker for the MHP, potentially even forcing Erdogan to roil relations with Washington in order to maintain his governing coalition at home.

Massive Kurdish-liberal unrest. As a sine qua non for entering the coalition, the MHP would demand further escalation of the war against the PKK. Coupled with a potential anti-PYD policy in Syria, this stance would draw the ire of Kurdish nationalists in Turkey, sparking massive unrest in the predominantly Kurdish southeast as well as the larger cities, where liberal and leftist anti-AKP Turks could join in on the rallies. In fact, such unrest would be the most likely cause of an AKP-MHP government falling before the next election cycle. Deterioration of the Kurdish situation at home could in turn damage Ankara's ties with the KRG, which has been a unique mainstay of Turkish foreign policy under the AKP.

AKP-CHP COALITION: PEACE CABINET

○ f the four parties likely to win entry into parliament on November 1, the CHP is the only faction that stands in the middle on the Kurdish issue, sharing neither the AKP/MHP's deep hostility toward Kurdish nationalism nor the close embrace of the Kurdish cause shown by the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). In a coalition with the AKP, the CHP would insist on ending hostilities with the PKK and turning back to the peace talks. It would also push for further Kurdish cultural rights within a broader agenda of more rights for all citizens, reflecting its efforts to become a social democratic liberal movement. Given the party's unique position between two nationalist extremes, a CHP coalition

could help bring the country's Turkish and Kurdish parts together politically. Such a coalition would also bring the country's two largest opposing political blocs under one government, helping defuse political tensions.

Less involvement in Syria. The CHP has long taken issue with the AKP's active support of Syrian rebels. If it were to gain the Foreign Ministry portfolio in a coalition government, it would no doubt downgrade this support and scale down Turkey's overall involvement in Syria, thereby bringing Ankara's policy closer to Washington's. Scrutinizing and potentially ending Turkish support to rebels in northwestern Syria would also bring Ankara somewhat closer to Russia, whose ongoing military intervention has centered on rebels in that part of the country. In addition, a CHP-led Foreign Ministry might open communication channels with the Assad regime, in line with the current international initiative to find a negotiated solution to the war.

Pivoting toward NATO. Under a CHP foreign minister, Turkey would gradually turn back to its traditional foreign policy partners, including NATO. Kemal Kirisci of the Brookings Institution has likened this potential shift to a giant tanker slowly changing course. Given Turkey's preoccupation with the Middle East under the AKP, any reorientation toward NATO would be gradual and would require support from Turkey's allies in Washington.

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute, and author of [The Rise of Turkey: The Twenty-First Century's First Muslim Power](#)

(<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-centurys-first-muslim-power>) (Potomac), named by the Foreign Policy Association as one of the ten most important books of 2014. ❖

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