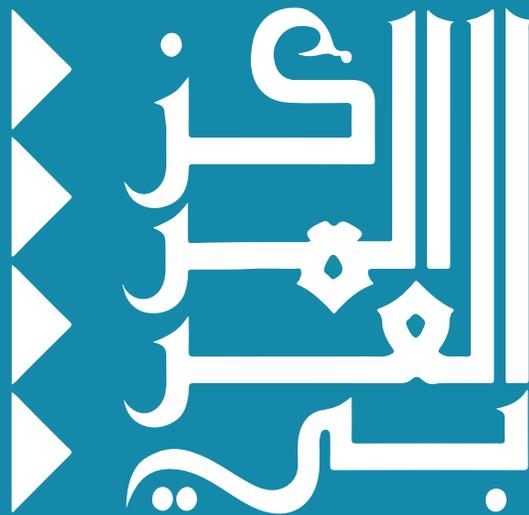


Will Erdogan's Victory Usher Dramatic Changes in Turkish Foreign Policy?

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Since becoming Turkey's president in July 2014, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has pursued a protracted campaign to win constitutional changes that would grant him more powers. After his failed attempts to gain a two-thirds majority in the parliament, Erdoğan turned to his electoral base to achieve his goal of an "executive presidency" through a popular referendum. His narrow win of 51 percent, however, was not the outcome he had wished for.

Turkey's new presidential system will not take effect before the parliamentary elections in 2019. Thus, Erdoğan's expectation from the referendum was to receive domestic legitimacy and thus international recognition for his heavy-handed rule—especially after the failed coup attempt in July 2016. Erdoğan surely did not want to galvanize the opposition, which is now coalescing around election fraud claims and organizing street protests in major cities. In effect, the referendum turned out to be Erdoğan's most controversial and most divisive victory. For the first time since coming to power in 2002, he is now witnessing the fact that the opposition parties do not accept the legitimacy of the election results—primarily due to the last minute decision by the High Electoral Board to allow about 1.5 million unstamped votes as well as the high number of irregularities in the Kurdish-populated eastern region of Turkey.

How will Erdoğan's razor-thin victory shape Turkish foreign policy? Given the fact that most European leaders did not congratulate Erdoğan, and that the report by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) was highly critical, Turkey's tensions with Europe may remain substantial. The refugee deal is also still fragile in the context of a tense election atmosphere in Germany. On the other hand, President Donald Trump's swift call to

congratulate Erdoğan indicates Washington's willingness to prioritize security cooperation with Turkey over domestic abuses of power.

The Refugee Deal on the Line?

The day after his referendum victory, Erdoğan challenged European Union leaders by renewing his demand for visa-free travel for Turkish citizens across Europe as well as threatening to restore the death penalty in his country. Last week, Ankara repeated its plan to withdraw from the refugee deal if visa-free travel is not granted.

Many European officials had perceived Erdoğan's provocative discourse before the referendum as a political strategy to win it. The first important test will be on the issue of the death penalty, which Erdoğan promised to reinstate "without hesitation" if the Turkish parliament agrees to support such a policy after the referendum. Now that the referendum is over and Erdoğan now holds even stronger sway over the parliament, European officials will watch Ankara's steps closely. Earlier, the European Commission president stated that a return of the death penalty would be a "red line" for Turkey's EU accession talks and will be viewed bitterly.

The most likely scenario, however, is that Erdoğan will not take such a provocative step, as he does not want to jeopardize Ankara-Brussels relations. Nonetheless, there are major impediments that stymie the current refugee deal, which was signed in March 2016. Further, European officials have become increasingly reluctant to grant visa-free travel for Turks; therefore, Erdoğan's demand is not likely to be met.

As for the architect of the refugee deal, Angela Merkel, visa-free travel may be a liability for her reelection in September—especially in light of European reports about the illegitimacy of the Turkish referendum results. Merkel has long been criticized for downplaying Erdoğan's mounting repression of journalists and academics at home. Both Merkel's electoral competitors, like Martin Schulz, as well as conservatives within her party question the nature of the refugee deal. As a reaction to alleged fraud in the Turkish referendum, for example, Julia Klöckner—a leading voice in Merkel's CDU party—called for the halting of billions of euros in contributions to Turkey. Given the current fragile nature of the Turkey-EU deal, Greek officials have declared that they have prepared emergency plans to cope with a new refugee crisis.

Trump-Erdoğan: A Pragmatic Future?

Unlike his European counterparts, President Trump was the first western leader to congratulate Erdoğan on the referendum vote. At the same time, the US Department of State warned Turkey “to protect all its citizens' rights and freedoms,” noting widespread voting irregularities. The disconnect between the White House and the State Department indicates Trump's willingness to prioritize pragmatism in his future relations with Ankara. Among primary drivers behind Trump's courtesy to Erdoğan is the Raqqa operation against the Islamic State.

Washington and Ankara have long diverged on the role of the People's Protection Units (YPG), an affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), in the Raqqa operation. Ankara proposed alternative military plans to Washington with the aim of halting the US alliance with the YPG. The Trump

Administration calculated that Erdoğan could not reach such an agreement as he was vying for nationalist votes in the referendum; thus, he postponed some of the action plans in Raqqa.

For the White House, Erdoğan's victory will now enable him to adjust his position. Some analysts argue that he may even seek to negotiate the renewal of a peace process with the PKK—a development that would offer major relief for US policy in Syria. While it is reasonable to expect Erdoğan's acquiescence on the US-YPG coalition for Raqqa—in an exchange of the Trump Administration disregard of domestic repression in Turkey—there are major obstacles for a renewal of the Kurdish peace process. Erdoğan's razor-thin victory has emboldened the opposition, especially the Turkish nationalist constituency. For the first time, Erdoğan lost in five major cities including his stronghold Istanbul, where he has never lost an election since becoming mayor of Istanbul in 1994. The referendum's “yes” camp coalition of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Turkish Nationalist Action Party (MHP) represented 61 percent of the voter constituency (according to the previous elections), but it delivered only 51 percent. The results—and the ensuing allegations of 2.5 million vote fraud—were most encouraging for those Turkish nationalist politicians who defied their party (the MHP) leadership and campaigned “no” to Erdoğan's executive presidency.

Thus, in the upcoming Turkish elections in 2019, if not earlier by Erdoğan's call, the Turkish nationalist challenge to Erdoğan's party (the AKP) is real. The president's potential strategic turn to the pro-Kurdish party (the Peoples' Democratic Party, or HDP) is also difficult as the party leadership remains imprisoned and

the Kurdish constituency may not be ready for quick reconciliation without major assurances.

Washington's transactional approach toward Ankara may be limited as Erdoğan's foreign policy will likely remain determined, to a great degree, by his domestic calculations at home. For decades, US-Turkey relations have been centered on security cooperation, thus Trump's approach to Erdoğan may not be seen as extraordinary indeed. Nonetheless, the Trump Administration is remarkably different from the previous White House team in interpreting

Turkey's role in the Middle East. After Trump's congratulations over the referendum, Erdoğan expressed that he found "encouraging the way President Trump is approaching matters," noting his earlier frustrations with Obama. Apparently, Trump and Erdoğan will pursue a transactional foreign policy that will define the Washington-Ankara partnership. Diverging interests in Syria as well as a turbulent Turkish domestic context, however, will continue to restrain US-Turkey strategic cooperation in the near future.

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