



# The Populism/Realism Gap: Managing Uncertainty in Turkey's Politics and Foreign Policy

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## OVERVIEW

Political audiences are increasingly confronted with populist displays by aspiring and entrenched leaders across the globe. We witness it in the muscular posturing of Russia's Vladimir Putin but also the anti-migrant stands of America's Donald Trump and Hungary's Victor Orban. Populists say that they champion the masses. In so doing, however, they seek to consolidate their own power vis-à-vis established political elites. Populists may speak in the language of the Left (e.g. Venezuelan leader Chavez who declared that "capitalism leads us straight to hell") or the Right (e.g. French ultra-nationalist Marine Le Pen's view of immigration as "endless cultural conflict").

Populist programs nonetheless share a surprising number of features.<sup>1</sup> Stylistically, for example, they pair dramatic imagery with everyday language to create the impression of speaking truth to power. Substantively, they articulate the grievances of those who feel disenfranchised but are often sexist and xenophobic in thrust (though women can be populists, and the targets of fear-mongering differ—typically poor immigrants in developed countries, and "Western imperialists" in the developing world.) Strategically too, today's populists are savvy campaigners on mainstream and social media, while also relying on media censure in the more authoritarian populist regimes.<sup>2</sup>

The result is a sort of political pantomime in which the populist "ought"—driven by domestic arithmetic,—outweighs the geopolitical "is"—driven by international realities. Foreign policy-making, to be sure, is always inflected by domestic and

partisan perspectives. The discrepancy between populism and realism becomes problematic, however, when leaders and their supporters' agendas impede level-headed assessment of national and geostrategic interests.

There is also danger in the reverse dynamic when unrealistic foreign policy positions are leveraged for domestic popularity. At best, this creates unnecessary tension, as with Trump's description of China as an "enemy." And all too often, such postures come at high domestic and international costs.

A case in point is the recent confrontation between Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan over the November 24 shooting down of a Russian jet. The move was driven by both leaders' aspirations to become regional kingmakers in general and define outcomes in Syria in particular. The result, however, has been an economic, diplomatic, and security fallout, especially for the smaller of the two players: Turkey. Russian sanctions may cost Turkey some .5 percent of GDP,<sup>3</sup> and the face-off has put its NATO allies in an awkward position, given the S-400 anti-aircraft missiles Russia has now put on the ground in Syria. The move, moreover, has complicated any plans Ankara may have had to balance strategic relationships in the West with more intensive Eurasian engagements (e.g. with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization of which Russia is a founding member). In short, the volatile relationship between populism and realism has become a driver of uncertainty in Turkey's politics and international relations, a dynamic this paper will assess.

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### TURKEY: BETWEEN A POPULIST ROCK AND REGIONAL HARD PLACE

If the dissonance between populism and realism poses challenges for Turkey and its partners, the gap is especially problematic when it comes to regional policies—the focus of this paper. This is because the ethnic and sectarian cleavages that populism exacerbates within Turkey also exist at the regional level. Thus, polarizing policies on, say, Turks and Kurds or Sunnis and Alevis, can complicate regional policy-making, just as partisan regional engagements can destabilize the home front.

Populism nevertheless has become a pervasive feature of the “new” Turkey of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* or AKP). The pervasiveness of populism was evident in the week after attacks by the Islamic State (or ISIS) on Paris and an ensuing G20 Summit hosted by Turkey. The events had spurred figures like U.S. President Barack Obama and German Chancellor Angela Merkel to laud Ankara's role as a key ally in the fight against radicalism. Their praise marked Erdoğan's triumphant return to the world stage after an electoral cycle during which domestic

performances steeped in populism trumped consideration for his or Turkey's international standing.

Victory notwithstanding, Erdoğan continues to take stands at home which challenge Turkey's foreign policy. A case in point was his invocation on December 31 of Hitler's Germany when asked a question about the nature of presidential systems (to which the leader seeks to convert Turkey's constitution). The comment sparked a global media frenzy. The president's office immediately clarified that it was meant to illustrate that presidential and parliamentary systems alike can lead to disastrous results if not governed justly.<sup>4</sup> Coming, however, at a time when Turkey seeks to repair diplomatic relations with erstwhile ally Israel, the analogy demonstrated remarkable tone-deafness for an incumbent head-of-state. Did it confirm, as critics argued,<sup>5</sup> that Turkey's leader nurses deep anti-Semitic, anti-Western, and illiberal convictions?<sup>6</sup> And if not—if the statement was the latest in a series of comments perceived as polarizing at home and “outrageous”<sup>7</sup> in the West—what did the steady uptake of such rhetoric bode for Turkey's trajectory and reliability as an ally?

To address these questions and better explore how the challenges generated by Ankara's populism-

realism gap can be managed better, this paper examines its sources, evolution, and impact over the past decade. It assesses when and why domestic populism and geopolitical realism go hand-in-hand, when they work at cross-purposes, and what the consequences are for Turkey's international commitments.

The paper shows that during the initial period of AKP rule, populism was aimed at domestic rivals who were portrayed as inauthentic and authoritarian. The EU accession process was likewise leveraged to this end, with the language of democratization deployed to block Kemalist attempts to shut down the AKP. Thus, for much of the 2000s, a populist pursuit of power at home dovetailed with a pro-Western orientation.

From at least 2009 to 2012, however, the domestic narrative took a Euro-skeptic and anti-Western turn. This was underwritten by the view that Turkey stood at the vanguard of the rising "Rest." At one level, the assessment was visceral—a reaction to perceived rejection by the EU. At another level, it was a strategic—a response to the global economic crisis which emerging economic powers like Turkey, weathered better than the West.<sup>8</sup> As such, both domestic and international policy orientations were at best ambivalent, and arguably anti-Western, in thrust.

Between 2013 and 2015, populist rhetoric became ever more strident as Turkey went to the polls in four game-changing elections. Polarizing language invoking the West was accompanied by increasingly repressive policies. The main targets of divisive language, however, were the West's alleged proxies across the growing domestic opposition. The ensuing contests between pro- and anti-AKP elements opened old wounds in a country where citizens'

multiple, intersecting identities—as "secularists" and "Islamists," "Sunnis" and "Alevis," "Turks" and "Kurds"—have hardened. The result may be governance challenges for years to come. Yet, in this same period, the geopolitics of an increasingly troubled region, where Turkey's attempts at leadership had faltered, impelled Turkey towards improved transatlantic ties.

This dissonance between polarizing and anti-Western rhetoric at home, and the need for pro-Western realism drives uncertainty in Turkey's politics and foreign policy today. As the dust settles after an electoral cycle that culminated in President Erdoğan and the AKP's consolidation of power, we enter a new period. The outstanding question is whether populism can now be abandoned. Doing so could serve to reconcile divided camps domestically. And it would help reset foreign policy on a pro-Western course towards confronting major shared challenges in and beyond the Middle East. The paper nevertheless concludes that three factors are likely to keep the flame of Turkish populism alive: leadership style, ideological shift, and regional spillover.

### *The EU Era, 2002-2008*

Such concerns seemed remote, however, when the pro-religious AKP came to power in 2002. Its "post-Islamist" platform<sup>9</sup> appeared reconciled with economic and political liberalism and a Western orientation. Erdoğan proceeded to spearhead Turkey's campaign for EU accession. Combining populist and democratizing language, he challenged the elitism and illiberal tendencies of the country's then pro-secular establishment. This resulted in wide-reaching, if incomplete, reforms with the

support of the EU. Measures ranged from overhaul of the penal and civil codes in light of accession criteria, to engagement of ethnic and religious minorities in the framework of cultural rights. Many leading analysts accordingly began to refer to the Europeanization of Turkey.<sup>10</sup>

By the late 2000s, adroit management of the accession process helped Erdoğan to displace the Kemalist establishment. He was able to secure, for example, official EU condemnation of a Constitutional Court case seeking to shut down the AKP on grounds of anti-secularism. In effect, domestic populism in pursuit of power and a pro-Western foreign policy orientation went hand-in-hand. One consequence of this development was that the factions with whom Western foreign policy professionals were accustomed to interacting—like the military—became increasingly unavailable as interlocutors.

In retrospect, some have argued that this outcome—the dismantling of army tutelage—was a prime motive behind the pro-EU populism of the 2000s.<sup>11</sup> They cite also the Ergenekon court case launched in 2008 to uncover Turkey’s so-called “deep state.” For as the proceedings progressed, the case increasingly came to resemble a show trial targeting elements within the security apparatus which, for better or for worse, had upheld Turkey’s traditional pro-Western geopolitical orientation.<sup>12</sup>

Others place the onus on the EU for not meeting Turkey’s bid for membership halfway. They argue that, had figures like France’s president Nicolas Sarkozy not plied their own brand of Turkey-bashing populism, Ankara’s liberalization and pro-Western orientation might have been consolidated.<sup>13</sup> What is certain is that by the end of the decade Turkey’s EU process had floundered. Revealingly, in 2005,

Turkey and Croatia embarked upon the accession process together; by 2013, Croatia had become the Union’s 28<sup>th</sup> member while Turkey had only opened negotiations on 13 out of 35 accession chapters.

### *Neo-Ottomanism, 2009-2012*

The economy, however, was thriving—with over six percent average annual growth and a quick comeback from the global crisis. This translated into a determination to pursue other foreign policy paths.<sup>14</sup> Geostrategist Ahmet Davutoğlu and Erdoğan—then foreign minister and prime minister, respectively—accordingly embraced a sort of manifest destiny towards the former Ottoman geography.

First outlined in Davutoğlu’s book *Strategic Depth*, neo-Ottomanism was espoused from roughly 2009 to 2012. The label—much invoked by Turkey-watchers<sup>15</sup>—was never officially endorsed because of sensitivity to the mixed response it might pique in interlocutors across the former imperial space. The policy nonetheless entailed invocation of historical and religious connections with former Ottoman territories in the Balkans, Caucasus, and Middle East. Pursued in tandem with the principle of “zero problems with neighbors,”<sup>16</sup> the vision also nodded to the EU logic of functional spillover from trade, aid, and infrastructural integration. The overarching goal: to establish Turkey as an “order-setter”<sup>17</sup> in the region—the hub of a once and future empire built on soft power.

Neo-Ottomanism was framed as added-value, rather than zero-sum, to Turkey’s EU and NATO commitments. Ankara nonetheless conveyed that it would no longer play junior partner. As domestic audiences were regularly told, the Islamic world

and Turkey in particular were on the right side of history. This message was projected unambiguously at the AKP party congress of 2012—attended by Islamist leaders from around the region—at which Turkey’s historic mission to reunite the geography was cited as an explicit goal by 2071 (the 1000th year anniversary of Muslim Turks’ penetration of Anatolia).<sup>18</sup> This ethos also animated a foreign policy that included rapprochement with Damascus and Tehran (then on the West’s blacklist). If and when Turkey’s interests or ideology diverged, strategic thinkers declared, Ankara would pursue its own course.<sup>19</sup> This meant that both domestic rhetoric and foreign policy became increasingly ambivalent and—depending on where one sat—anti-Western in orientation.

When it came to relations with Israel, for example, the Islamist undertones of neo-Ottomanism became overt. Deteriorating diplomatic ties reached rock bottom with the Mavi Marmara affair of May 2010 when nine Turkish citizens participating in a flotilla bent on breaking the Gaza blockade were killed by Israeli soldiers. Such crises coincided with elections at home in which Israel-baiting—and the broader tropes of Western “double standards” and Islamophobia—paid dividends. For example, Erdoğan’s approval ratings shot up 19 points from 55 to 74 percent immediately after he accused the Israeli premier Simon Peres of “knowing how to kill” on a panel at Davos.<sup>20</sup>

The nexus of anti-Western populism and foreign policy created headaches for Turkey’s transatlantic partners. These ranged from incidental (e.g. Ankara’s objection to a new NATO boss for his allegedly anti-Muslim views) to structural (e.g. the challenge for Washington of balancing relations with Turkey and Israel). The volatility in relations spurred some to ask: “Who lost Turkey?”<sup>21</sup> Soul-searching was especially salient among circles whose reading of Turkey

was rooted in the bygone Kemalist era. Others, who had forged a connection with the new leadership like the Obama administration or business interests invested in Turkey’s rise, sought to explain turbulence on a case-by-case basis. A sense nevertheless prevailed that even in a Middle East where “friends are also enemies, and enemies are suddenly allies...no one really knows what [Turkey] is anymore.”<sup>22</sup>

### *The Domestic/Regional Nexus: 2013-2015*

The Arab uprisings of 2011 nonetheless opened space for Turkish pursuit of regional leadership with American blessing. Secularist authoritarian regimes were tumbling, first in Tunis, then in Cairo, with more apparently on the brink. Revolutionaries demanded culturally empowering pathways to democracy and development. In this context, AKP-led Turkey’s experiment with pro-religious electoral democracy and market economics—which had enabled apparent democratization and lifted pious millions into the middle classes—was cited as “inspiration.”<sup>23</sup> As Erdoğan saw it, this amounted to: “a role that can upturn all the stones in the region and that can change the course of history.”<sup>24</sup>

Yet, the “Turkish model” narrative soon lost traction. At least two foreign policy moves from Ankara contributed to this outcome. Both were marked by populist patterns of governance: the personalization of policy-making and the projection of partisanship onto the geopolitical arena.

### *The Muslim Brotherhood Dimension*

The first such misstep was unequivocal support for Muslim Brotherhood (MB) inspired movements



across the region.<sup>25</sup> The approach anticipated that the AKP-cum-Brotherhood mode of populist, relatively moderate Islamism<sup>26</sup> would sweep the Middle East. The expectation that others shared a rosy-eyed view of Sunni Islamism overlooked complex national and sectarian, ethnic and tribal politics—not to mention realist calculations—across the region.

A turning point came after Egyptian President and Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohammed Morsi sought to seize extraordinary powers for the executive vis-a-vis other branches of power. This engendered months of massive anti-Morsi protests which General Fatah Abdel Fatah El-Sisi used to seize power in July 2013, accusing the Brotherhood of fomenting “instability.”

The MB thus found itself on the run in and from its bastion. The notable exception was Tunisia where the MB-inspired Ennahda attained, shared, and relinquished power in line with democratic processes. MB affiliates elsewhere, however, failed to make headway against established political forces of both pro-secular (e.g. Syria) or pro-religious (e.g. Saudi Arabia) orientation.

Rather than taking the setback in stride, Erdoğan—in part to delegitimize domestic protests against the accumulation of power in his person—took a stand on the international stage. He objected in turns to the Sisi regime, its Western supporters, and the Nobel committee (which in 2005 had awarded Mohammed ElBaradei—a participant in the anti-MB coalition in Egypt—the peace prize for his work as Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)). Such language struck chords with supporters at home and on the (Sunni) Arab street. The geopolitics of the Middle East, however, is no popularity contest. Ankara instead alienated counterparts in power across the

region. Soon enough, Turkey found itself short of interlocutors with the exceptions of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, major players hardly likely to take cues from Ankara, not least on subjects like the fate of the Brotherhood. Disappointment in Morsi’s performance and Erdoğan’s aggressive defense thereof also soured views in Washington towards the AKP’s own increasingly majoritarian approach to democracy. In short, the feedback loop between domestic—and international—populism and geopolitical traction came back in Turkey’s disfavor.

### *The Syrian Dimension*

The further miscalculation was a Syria policy built on the belief that Assad would soon exit the scene. As with the MB’s suppression, the approach was linked to populist phenomena: the personalization of power and the projection of partisan preferences. On the first count, Syria policy appeared to be at least partly driven by anger at Assad’s rebuttal of Ankara’s attempts to mediate a graceful departure for the Syrian leader. Rapprochement with Damascus, after all, had been a cornerstone of AKP’s increasingly criticized regional leadership aspirations. Demonizing Assad as much as he would an internal rival, Erdoğan was left with little room for maneuver when the former remained entrenched.

On the second count of partisanship, the policy reflected ideological commitments among core supporters outraged at international inaction on Syria and the plight of the Sunni community in particular. This reading trumped even the significant number of both AKP and opposition voters—consistently up to 60 percent of the electorate—who did not favor intervention by regional and international actors.<sup>27</sup> Mount-

ing death tolls (330,000 to date)<sup>28</sup> and refugee flows (at least 4 million internationally with some 7.6 million internally displaced)<sup>29</sup> nevertheless corroborated, in Ankara eyes, the argument that the root cause of conflict—Assad—must be removed.

This logic translated into support for diverse elements of the Syrian opposition. Beneficiaries of Turkey’s policies, many observers alleged, included *jihadi* elements and smugglers who moved with ease across the porous border. When ISIS arose from this quagmire to claim with single-minded brutality the mantle of Sunni avenger, Turkey found itself accused of inadvertently or even willfully supporting the militants’ rise.<sup>30</sup> Yet, Turkey was among the first to grapple with the overflow of instability in Syria.

### *The Alevi Dimension*

Spillover came first in the form of humanitarian crisis. Today, with 2.3 million registered refugees, Turkey hosts the world largest refugee population. Associated with a liberal visa regime launched before but expanded during the neo-Ottomanist period, this laudable policy has cost Ankara an estimated 8 billion dollars.<sup>31</sup> Its fruits include, among other things, 25 refugee camps including one often described as the “world’s best.” Turkey’s hospitality nevertheless comes with complex costs.<sup>32</sup>

One of the consequences has been alarm in Turkey’s indigenous Alevi community at the influx of overwhelmingly Sunni refugees. Estimates of Alevis vary from 8 up to 20 million, at least 10 percent of the overall population.<sup>33</sup> They may be Turkish- or Kurdish-speaking and are spread across central, eastern, and southeastern Anatolia, as well as pockets of Western Turkey. In at least five provinces, the influx

of refugees has transformed demographic balances, stoking intercommunal tensions. This is especially the case in Hatay which is also home to an Arabic-speaking Alawite community that is not Alevi *per se* but is also heterodox in orientation.<sup>34</sup>

Alevis’ sense of vulnerability in a Sunni-majority state has been heightened by populism at the nexus of domestic and foreign policy. As a faith, Alevism has affinities with Shi’ism and the Arab Alawite tradition as well as Sufism. Alevis do not view certain core practices of Sunni Islam as obligatory and are considered heterodox by many Sunnis.<sup>35</sup> In light of persecution by Sunni rulers and neighbors since the Ottoman period (with pogroms as recently as the 1970s, ‘80s, and 90s), Alevism as a political movement continues to crystallize in response to mounting Sunni Islamism.<sup>36</sup>

Alevis accordingly cleave to secular parties like the Republican People’s Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* or CHP) and the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi* or HDP). One consequence is that Alevis tend to have been excluded from patronage networks under AKP rule.<sup>37</sup> Alevi activists, nonetheless, have resisted the temptation of political violence and co-option by regional third parties (e.g. Syria or Iran). Some analysts nonetheless argue that the Sunni-Alevi fault line, if activated, could “prove far more explosive” than even the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, “given that denominational allegiance amounts to an ethnic border running through much of Anatolia...dividing both Turks and Kurds.”<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, sectarian sensitivities have mounted in recent years. One source of concern has been a series of positions taken by Turkey’s leadership at the nexus of domestic and regional policy. For example, Erdoğan regularly sought to tar the opposition

leader, who is of Alevi origin, with a pro-Assad brush. More provocative still was his expression of condolences to “my 53 Sunni citizens,” after a bomb ripped through the border town of Reyhanlı in May 2013. Issuing a press gag to preempt nationwide political fallout from the attack, the government’s use of illiberal tools to suppress sectarian and other forms of criticism became increasingly salient in the months that followed. Many Alevis, in turn, responded to “sectarian brinkmanship”<sup>39</sup> by participating in nation-wide protests against the AKP leadership during the 2013 Gezi Park and ensuing protests.

### *The Electoral Dimension*

The Gezi protest flagged the frustration of the diverse “other half” of Turkey: the 48-65 percent of the electorate that, in nine successive elections, has categorically not voted for the AKP. Factions include Alevis and pro-secular Sunni Turks of liberal and leftist, Kemalist and ultra-nationalist conviction. Gezi also drew some Kurds—especially of secular, ethno-nationalist orientation—whereas religious Kurds until recently have tended to be pro-AKP.

Gezi marked a new turning point in the primacy of domestic over international imperatives, spurring Turkey’s leader to ever more populist language. This was exemplified by Erdoğan’s speech at a gathering of high-level European and U.S. officials originally intended to invigorate Turkey’s EU prospects. The leader instead put on a populist show, blaming the protests on a murky “interest rate” lobby<sup>40</sup>—a narrative subsequently spun into a conspiracy of Zionists, Westerners, and their alleged Turkish proxies.<sup>41</sup> The proliferation of such performances suggested that with municipal, presidential, and national elections around the corner, the

domestic electoral calculus would take precedence over foreign policy considerations.

In the months that followed, polarizing domestic rhetoric—met in colorful kind by the opposition—fused nationalist, Islamist, and anti-Western motifs. The language was used to rationalize increasingly repressive policies, from a sweeping anti-terrorism law to restrictions on media freedom, which had improved briefly during the early years of the EU accession process only to deteriorate ever since. Today, Turkey ranks 149 out of 160 countries, just above Congo, in the 2015 World Press Freedom Index of Reporters without Borders. EU and independent watchdog reports similarly highlighted a “roll-back” in Turkey’s democratic performance.<sup>42</sup>

Mounting international criticism notwithstanding, the primacy of domestic populism was only heightened when a rift between the AKP and former ally Fethullah Gülen of the faith-based Hizmet movement took on spectacular proportions. In December 2013, Hizmet-linked police officers launched a corruption probe implicating members of Erdoğan’s inner circle including his family. At this point, electoral victory became a matter of political survival trumping all other concerns—failure to convince the electorate of innocence would lead to loss of immunity from prosecution. Moreover, the fact that Gülenists commanded a strong media presence intensified pressure on critical mainstream and social media. This took forms like a sweeping new law on internet censorship and *ad hoc* bans—on the eve of 2014 municipal elections—on Twitter and YouTube.<sup>43</sup> In addition to garnering international criticism, the feud with Hizmet meant that Ankara effectively declared war on one of its most effective lobbyists in Washington, the U.S.-based Gülenist community, which now sought to discredit Turkey’s leadership.

## The Kurdish Dimension

In a country where half the population had come to disbelieve the truth claims of the other, one group—the Kurds—commanded crucial swing votes. An ethnic minority of approximately 15 million,<sup>44</sup> Kurds are poised to play a critical role in Turkey’s domestic/regional policy nexus. They are concentrated in the southeast areas of Turkey that border the Kurdish regions of Syria, Iraq, and Iran (where Kurds overall number 30 million).<sup>45</sup> Millions more have migrated to Western Turkey, with over 3.6 million people born in eastern provinces (many but not all of whom are Kurdish) now residing in Istanbul alone.<sup>46</sup> Assimilated in varying degrees, Kurds are divided by dialect.<sup>47</sup> In their politics, however, Turkey’s Kurds have two broad orientations. On the one hand, pro-religious Kurds have tended to look favorably on the AKP and Erdoğan, who, until recently, had been more receptive to Kurdish demands than any mainstream party or leader in Turkey’s history.

On the other hand, the Kurdish political movement led today by the People’s Democratic Party (HDP) is left-leaning and nationalist in orientation. Kurdish activism has evolved from the separatism of the 1980s and 1990s. That struggle was ideologically inspired by now-imprisoned Abdullah Öcalan—the founder of the militant PKK (*Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan*) whose long insurgency against the Turkish state in the 1980s and 1990s claimed some 40,000 lives. Today, the political wing of the movement calls for regional autonomy under a federal system.<sup>48</sup> Another goal is constitutional recognition of Kurdishness via a pluralistic conception of citizenship. However, initiatives aimed at “self-rule” or multi-national citizenship challenge deeply-ingrained conceptions of Turkish identity. They are anathema, in short, to the assimilation practices of

the unitary Turkish system that conflates Turkishness and the state.<sup>49</sup>

From early 2013 to the summer of 2015, Erdoğan and the AKP government embarked upon a “peace process” with Öcalan and the HDP. During this period, the PKK upheld a ceasefire and began withdrawing its fighters from Turkey to bases in northern Iraq. The substance of the dialogue was never made public. It was nevertheless speculated that a deal would entail a trade-off: something like Kurdish votes—and support for Erdoğan’s increasingly overt aspiration to convert Turkey into an executive presidency—in return for regional autonomy. The stakes of this dialogue help to explain why Kurds, typically the most restive group in Turkey, were by and large quiescent during the Gezi uprising.<sup>50</sup>

The peace process dragged on without substance or results, but the rapidly transforming regional situation altered the calculus for both Ankara and the Kurds. The retreat of Assad in Syria and the rise of ISIS had created an unprecedented window for pursuit of Kurdish regional ambitions. The Kurds’ sense of historic opportunity was captured by the title of a *Council of Foreign Relations* primer: “The Time of the Kurds.”

Assad’s entrenchment in Damascus had enabled Syrian Kurds’ *Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat* (PYD), an affiliate of the PKK, to establish non-contiguous autonomous zones. The nascent Syrian Kurdish territory of “Rojava” was then challenged by the expansion of ISIS. Kurds’ willingness, in turn, to serve as boots on the ground increased receptivity in the West to Kurdish causes. After all, reliable allies in the region were few and far between, with more than one attempt to arm the moderate Sunni Arab opposition in Syria culminating in fighters’

defection to jihadist groups. Kurds, by way of contrast, proved more effective and reliable. Willing to fight even to the death, they were also adept at pitching their aspirations in a secular, nationalist idiom intelligible to Western audiences.<sup>51</sup>

This alignment of interests and perceptions meant that when ISIS sieged the Kurdish-Syrian border city of Kobane in October 2014, both Kurds and many observers in the West were galvanized by the plight of the town's citizens. Obama authorized military strikes. And Kurds across the region, including Turkey, sought to join in the defense of Kobane.

Ankara, however, saw things differently. Declaring the PYD/PKK to be as much of a threat to Turkey as ISIS, Erdoğan affirmed the view of Assad as the main enemy. The move squandered political capital among Kurds, piquing nation-wide protests that killed 40.<sup>52</sup>

The HDP proceeded to capitalize on Kurdish anger as well as the favorable international climate for Kurdish claims. In January 2015, the pro-Kurdish party announced that it would contest upcoming parliamentary elections as a party rather than by fielding independents (the strategy Kurdish politicians long used to bypass Turkey's high electoral threshold). The HDP's all-or-nothing gamble relied upon its telegenic leader Selahattin Demirtaş. The previous summer Demirtaş demonstrated in his presidential campaign that he could muster crossover votes. In doing so, he became the first leader to capture the political energies unleashed by the Gezi protests.<sup>53</sup>

The campaign proved more successful than anyone, including pollsters, expected. The inclusive

call for a multicultural Turkey attracted votes from pro-religious Kurds in eastern Turkey (normally AKP supporters) and pro-secular Turks in western Turkey (typically CHP supporters). Soaring over the parliamentary threshold with 13 percent of the electorate, the HDP's success was a major upset for the AKP. This is because the high electoral threshold translates into a disproportionate share of seats for parties that receive a plurality when other parties fall short of the threshold (hence the AKP's parliamentary predominance—until June 2015—without ever surpassing 50 percent of the vote). The result prevented the AKP, accustomed to ruling alone for over a decade, from forming a single-party government. It also served as a veto against AKP intentions to effect a presidential system that would augment Erdoğan's powers.<sup>54</sup> Would the outcome, many wondered, lead to a change in the tone of Turkey's leadership and shift in its domestic and regional policies?

### *Presidential Ambitions*

Erdoğan's response was as cynical as it was effective. In the weeks after the June elections, he selectively deployed presidential powers towards delaying the formation of a new government. Meanwhile, in July, an ISIS sleeper cell in Turkey undertook a suicide attack against pro-Kurdish activists heading to Kobane on a humanitarian mission. Accusing the government of complicity, the PKK "retaliated" against government forces. Erdoğan proceeded to scuttle the Kurdish peace process. By Ankara's reckoning, the ensuing tit-for-tat violence has led to 200 government fatalities and the "annihilation" of 3,100 rebels.<sup>55</sup> At least 135 civilians also perished in three 2015 bombings attributed to ISIS, which targeted pro-Kurdish

activists.<sup>56</sup> Meanwhile, criticism of Demirtaş mounted for “failing to speak” against the PKK with the same “strong voice he used against Erdoğan.”<sup>57</sup> Snap elections were set for November 1.

The results reflected the re-securitization of the Kurdish question. If the spring elections were about the nature of the political system, the autumn polls were about stability.<sup>58</sup> The atmosphere of fear and chaos pushed both Turkish nationalists and conservative Kurds, who had migrated to other parties, back into the AKP fold. Furthermore, several million more voters, who had sat out the June polls likewise, weighed in for the AKP’s promise of law and order. The result: a comfortable 49.5 percent victory for the AKP. Erdoğan appears committed to leveraging the outcome towards his much coveted presidential system. Turkey, however, remains troubled by years of polarizing campaigns and neglect of foreign policy at a time of rapid regional transformation.

### *Closing Pandora’s Box*

The challenge now is to repair the damage—which ranges from economic and institutional to social—while meeting mounting geopolitical challenges. To begin with, populism has cast a shadow on Turkey’s once glowing economic profile. To be sure, trends like the Turkish national currency’s 40 percent loss in value in the past three years are due to global and regional as well as national factors. But electoral moves like saber rattling at the Central Bank for sticking to its position on interest rates have put international investors on edge. Post-election decisions to exclude well-regarded figures from the new government, such as former Minister of the Economy Ali Babacan,

while assigning the energy ministry to Erdoğan’s son-in-law, do not bode well for depoliticized economic policy. Such moves also compromise Turkey’s attractiveness for much needed short-term capital and undermine longer-term investments in research and education that the country needs to escape “the middle income trap.”<sup>59</sup>

The contests of recent years also have hollowed out institutions of governance. At one level, there has been simply a changing of the guard in Turkey’s imperfect democracy. In an earlier era, the courts and security apparatus were partisan towards Kemalism; today they take cues from Erdoğan and the AKP.<sup>60</sup> This is reflected in Turkey’s consistent “partially free” ranking by Freedom House over the past decade.

At another level, however, something precious has been eroded. For there was one constant to Turkey’s flawed but resilient democracy over the years: a core belief among both the pious majority and most minorities in the legitimacy of the ballot box. This faith has been shaken by, among other things, the wily reversal of the June 7<sup>th</sup> polls. The lesson for pro-AKP elements is that a free but unfair electoral process—in which elections day procedures are transparent, but campaigns are heavily weighted in favor of incumbents—is as legitimate as free and fair elections.<sup>61</sup> The lesson for the opposition, meanwhile, may be that normal politics are futile, incentivizing anti-systemic radicalism, not least among some Kurds.

To allay tensions at the nexus of domestic and regional policies, at least three wounds need suturing. The first is the old divide between “secularists” and “Islamists” which has been enervated by perceived attempts at conservative social engineering and repression of dissent. Such moves squandered the

window of the mid-2000s when a post-Kemalist and post-Islamist generation might have forged a new balance between public and private religiosity.

Towards re-opening that window, non-AKP constituents must be assured by government actions as well as words that their lifestyle choices and political rights will be respected. Depolarization, in turn, could have a “demonstrative effect” vis-à-vis comparable tensions across the region, reinforcing the fragile success story presented by Tunisia in reconciling rival lifestyles within the same political system.

Similarly, Sunni-Alevi tensions have been exacerbated by domestic populism and regional developments. There are mounting reports, for instance, that X markings have appeared on Alevi homes as if to single residents out for punishment.<sup>62</sup> The symbolism is all the more powerful because it gestures to earlier—and unpunished—pogroms which remain vivid in Alevi collective memory.

The regional stakes are also high at a time that a Saudi-led pro-Sunni coalition is locking horns with the Iranian-led pro-Shi'a camp. Left-leaning Alevs, as noted, have proven impervious to overtures from regional third parties, Iran's historical attempts at promoting a Tehran-friendly version of Alevism notwithstanding.<sup>63</sup> Given the mounting intensity of sectarianism across the region, however, Turkey's leaders must do all they can to assuage Alevi fears of persecution and assimilation. In this regard, an Alevi reform package, said to be in the works for early 2016, can help pave the way to healing wounds.<sup>64</sup> As with the secular-Islamist divide, progress would raise Turkey's moral authority in a neighborhood where all are faced with the stark challenge of living together in diversity.

A third and by far the most urgent conflict is between Ankara and Turkey's Kurdish movement. The peace process is dead. And the concomitant HDP platform for a multi-cultural Turkey has lost much traction. As of late December 2015, PKK-affiliated youth were mounting urban barricades in southeastern cities like Cizre, Sur, and Silopi. Security forces moved in, as non-essential personnel including 3000 teachers, assigned to the region were evacuated. Confronted with urban warfare, over 200,000 locals have fled to date.<sup>65</sup> Stark images circulate of civilians caught in the crossfire. The imagery, many note, evokes the bad old days of conflict with the PKK in the 1990s. But even more problematically for Turkey, it also recalls the 2014 battle for Kobane. For at that critical juncture, ISIS, but also Ankara, served as the “other” against which nascent transnational Kurdish solidarity was imagined.<sup>66</sup>

### *Pro-Western Regional Recalibration*

The growing reality of transnational Kurdish mobilization underscores for Ankara the urgency of addressing domestic wounds which hinder more effective regional policies. The PKK now commands more strategic depth than ever in its history. And terrorists, axiomatically, win when they don't lose, while states lose when they don't win. Today, there are *de facto* Kurdish entities in both Syria and Iraq. Regardless of their rivalries, both work closely with the United States to take on a common existential enemy: ISIS. This has created friction in U.S.-Turkish relations when, for example, Washington airdrops weaponry to the PYD that can be deployed against Turkey.<sup>67</sup> U.S. pundits, meanwhile, have become increasingly frustrated with Ankara's apparent assessment of ISIS as a secondary or even tertiary threat (after Assad

and the PYD). In short, as long as ISIS persists, Ankara and Washington will not see eye-to-eye on priorities in Syria.

Ankara may be coming to terms with this dilemma and the overall faltering of its regional ambitions. This has translated into affirmation of pro-Western realism in and beyond the region. For example, in July 2015, Erdoğan announced Turkey's support for the anti-ISIS coalition and authorized the use of İncirlik airbase even as he declared war on the PKK. Invoking Article 4 on consultation, Turkey has asserted its NATO commitments with uncharacteristic declarations of openness to enlargement. It also signaled that it would back down on a weapons systems deal with China that had infuriated the Alliance.<sup>68</sup>

In 2015, ties with the EU were likewise affirmed in the context of an unprecedented refugee crisis as half a million from Syria and more from other countries sought entry into the Union. Visits to Brussels by Erdoğan and Prime Minister Davutoğlu were marked by language little heard since the mid-2000s. The PM declared, for instance, that Turks are “part of European history. And we are a part of contemporary Europe...we have to have an inclusive European identity.”<sup>69</sup>

The *quid pro quo* on refugees signed in Brussels on November 30 traded “an initial” 3 billion Euros, visa liberalization for Turkey's citizens, and a revitalized EU accession process for Ankara's containment of refugee outflow. Regardless of the accord's merits and practicability, it offered yet more evidence that Ankara may be coming full circle in terms of a pro-Western orientation.

Russia's entry into the Syrian fray has reinforced Turkey's apparent pivot back to the West. Russia's

goals include providing air support to local allies (and Turkey's nemeses): Assad, Iranian-backed Shi'ite militias, and Syrian Kurds (who stand to benefit from both Washington and Moscow's support and agendas in Syria).<sup>70</sup> Russia also aims to shore up its naval base in Tartus—a challenge to Turkey and NATO's naval primacy in the eastern Mediterranean. It is also deeply committed to combatting ISIS, especially because up to 200 of the group's foreign fighters hail from Russia's North Caucasus.<sup>71</sup> This has translated into Russian attacks on a range of anti-regime Sunni groups in Syria, including factions close to Turkey.

Moscow's engagement of Turkey's rivals and punishment of its allies in Syria may have been the underlying motive for Turkey's move to shoot down a Russian fighter jet. The Turkey-Russia debacle epitomizes the dangers of mixing populism and *realpolitik*.<sup>72</sup> Both Erdoğan and Putin's domestic authority is bound up in reputations for unrelenting pursuit of opponents when crossed. By projecting this logic internationally, an “unnecessary crisis”<sup>73</sup> has escalated that hurts both countries' interests. Russians, already enduring the EU embargo, will suffer from the (partial) ban on Turkish imports. Export-driven and energy-dependent Turkey faces significant losses in tourism, agricultural exports, and the construction sector which has been driving growth in recent years.<sup>74</sup> Meanwhile, Ankara is scrambling for alternative sources of natural gas, prompting high-level state visits to Azerbaijan, Qatar and, notably, Israel. NATO also has paid a price in that Russia promptly equipped its Syrian operations with S-400 air defense systems missiles able to take down Turkish but also Allied aircraft.

The experience may have clinched, however, Turkey's pivot back to a pro-Western foreign policy af-



ter almost a decade of exploring alternatives in and beyond the Middle East. Perhaps the strongest sign that Turkey's leadership is becoming reconciled to pro-Western realism is rapprochement with Israel. In a pending deal, the two countries may restore diplomatic relations and make mutual concessions disguised as "victories" for their respective publics. These might include Israeli reparations for Mavi Marmara in return for Ankara's ouster of Hamas leaders living in Turkey, potentially leading to enhanced strategic cooperation in, say, the U.S.-coordinated fight against ISIS.

## CONCLUSION

In the international arena, realism dictates, bullying and idealism are options of the biggest kids on the block. For middle powers like Turkey, the more effective strategy is to forge alliances that enable bandwagoning and balancing. In recent years, however, polarizing domestic populism and its international projection has trumped realism, creating tension at home and headaches abroad for Turkey and its partners.

Today, as the country emerges from a polarizing electoral cycle, there may be scope to reset both the tone and substance of Turkey's politics and foreign policy. At the end of the day, Turkey is a troubled but vibrant country. Dynamism is driven by the same social and economic forces that gave vitality to the "Turkish model" story in the first place.<sup>75</sup> If cleavages are rife today, only a few years ago and under the same leadership, Turkey was closer than ever before to resolving its secularist-Islamist and Turkish-Kurdish conflicts on one hand, and building bridges across the region on the other.

What is needed is the political will to mend fences at home and abroad. In the days immediately after the November elections, recalibration appeared underway. The G20 summit in Antalya, for example, provided a stage for President Erdoğan to engage counterparts as a collegial problem-solver.

Three factors, however, are likely to keep the flame of populism and hence uncertainty alive: leadership style, ideological shift, and regional spillover. First, Erdoğan's pugnacious charisma is a function of personality, to be sure, but also of Turkey's political culture. He may always feel driven to fill political space, speak his mind, and micro-manage. Since at least Atatürk, uncompromising patriarchal leaders have been the rule in Turkey's politics, and they are rewarded as such (though a more humble, counter-hegemonic charisma also appeals to left-leaning voters.<sup>76</sup>) Once installed, such leaders allocate resources and appointments that sustain underlings and constituents. Turf is defended through negative campaigns, offending counterparts who vow revenge to save face. As such, even if a leader wants to make concessions, both he and his inner circles must fight to the bitter end, else rivals go for the jugular. Such dynamics help account for the remarkable dearth of political resignations in Turkey even after, say, a party leader botches elections or is engulfed by scandal. To be sure, in Turkey today, the lack of effective opposition is also a prominent factor in the tenacity of strong leadership.

This style of leadership impels towards populism and brinksmanship. But Turkish foreign policy traditionally has been the realm of an elite diplomatic corps. And the final call, of course, rested with the military. As captured in Malik Mufti's classic work on "caution and daring" in Turkish foreign policy,<sup>77</sup> for such cadres, caution was often the preferred logic.

Under AKP rule, such cohorts have been displaced or simply retired as Erdoğan increasingly takes on foreign policy-making roles. A consummate domestic politician, he has struggled to adapt to the impersonal terrain of international affairs where relationships are forged on the basis of carrots *and* sticks, principled positions *and* compromise. He has thus been prone to create controversy, making unnecessary enemies (e.g. Putin), and backing himself—and Turkey—into corners. The unfolding deal with Israel will be an interesting test case to see if, in response to geopolitical imperative, Turkey's leader can keep his cool.<sup>78</sup>

A second reason why populism may persist is the ideological shift of recent years. Today, the center in Turkey has moved to the ethno-religious right in tempo with the steady drumbeat of nationalist-Islamist rhetoric. The new ethos is captured by a recent promotional video of the AKP youth wing. The clip fuses militaristic Ottoman-Islamic symbolism with images from the nationalist battle for Gallipoli. These are further cross-referenced with a mixture of iconic and rebellious images from the Muslim and Western worlds, including Mecca and Istanbul's mosques, Malcolm X and Mohammed Ali, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu.<sup>79</sup> The video suggests that even if the battle is over for now, the battle hymn will remain nationalist, Islamist, and anti-Western. The same pitch was evident in Davutoğlu's November victory speech, in stark contrast to his culturally conciliatory tone in Brussels earlier in the year.

A provocative ideology, in turn, can become tinder to flames from the volatile region. The historical record is filled with leaders and parties who mistakenly believed they could mobilize—but control—ethnic and religious passions. Especially in times of geopolitical flux, such forces acquire a life of their own. Turkey is no exception as it confronts, in the escalation of conflict with the PKK, the fallout of elections won via ethno-nationalist populism. Similarly, it grapples today with an ISIS threat it has long underestimated. In less than six months, radicals—several of whom were home-grown—have launched three attacks since June 2015 which have left some 150 dead and fueled intensive polarization between Turks and Kurds, Sunnis, and Alevis.

What can the West do to mitigate against these pressures? In the short-run, it can pursue modest, concrete policy outcomes in cooperation with the country's top leadership. This may help to disincentivize further polarization and anti-Western stances. But in the medium-term, and towards building a more sustainable basis for relations, Washington and Brussels should expand dialogue and institutional ties with a wide range of policy-making and civil society actors across the country. For an entire generation is coming of age in a climate of deep ambivalence towards the West. And, ultimately, it is the leaders of tomorrow, not today, who will drive Turkey's trajectory.

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