

TURKEY AFTER ELECTIONS: IRANIAN NUCLEAR DEAL, KURDISH PEACE PROCESS AND THE FIGHT AGAINST DAESH

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Our globalizing world has been shaped by speed and uncertainty. Nowhere is this more discernible than in post-election Turkey. Since June 7, 2015, events have been unfolding at such a rapid pace that unraveling the complexities has become extremely difficult if not impossible. Inside and outside are now strongly intertwined. Domestic developments have mixed with critical regional decisions and agreements.

While the pendulum in Turkish politics is swinging between coalition and early election, Turkey has found itself stuck between a rock and a hard place, as the tectonic stones have moved regionally. The possibility of a grand coalition between the AK Party (Justice and Development Party) and CHP (Republican People's Party) is still on the table. Yet, from DAESH (often referred to as ISIS or ISIL) attacks to PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) terror, the odds for early election are increasing. Turkish people's hopes for a better future just after the election have turned into anxiety and insecurity.

At the same time, Turkey is waging war on two fronts, analyzing the possible outcomes of Iran's Nuclear Deal, and exploring ways of making its active foreign policy more effective again regionally and globally. In these fast moving days giving rise to uncertainty, we offer our take on the current Turkish political landscape and a number of regional developments.

Domestic Political Landscape

The idea of a coalition has not been well received by the Turkish public mainly due to failed coalition attempts in the 1990s. However, the current talks differ from the past coalition attempts in three crucial ways: First, the tone of the talks was positive and constructive; second, all four parties in parliament agreed on the "necessity" of building an AK Party-CHP grand coalition; and finally the parties likely to remain outside of a grand coalition, HDP (People's Democracy Party) and MHP (Nationalist Action Party), are committed to supporting the coalition parties, making their mark in Turkey's political history with their constructive and positive tone. There is also the possibility of a AK Party-MHP alliance if the idea of grand coalition fails.

How and why did this new and refreshingly positive political climate form in Turkey, a democracy that has long suffered from polarization and an unyielding political ecosystem? Has a new playmaker emerged during this episode of coalition talks? If so, who is the game changer in the emerging Turkish political setting?

The election results have revealed the electorate's expectations of all major political players: "Conversation and Compromise." To incorporate this electoral message into politics is to work on a functional coalition government. In this sense, all major political players realize that calling for early elections instead of engaging in coalition talks would diminish their chances of electoral victory and so political leaders have engaged in sincere conversations about forming a coalition government. President Erdoğan also placed his support behind coalition building, urging political actors to prioritize coalition talks and, if such attempts fail, to swiftly consider early elections as

a last resort. Evidently, Turkey's electorate acted as a key player in the aftermath of the June general elections and encouraged Turkey's political actors to compromise and build coalitions.

At the same time, and more crucially, regional and global security, as well as economic risks, challenges and transformations, necessitate the fast rebuilding of stability and strength in Turkey through a coalition government –most likely through a powerful grand coalition. The political costs of pushing Turkey into an early election and, subsequently, delaying the formation of a new government until 2016 appear to outweigh the costs of building a coalition government. The fight against DAESH on Turkey's southeastern border, the problems associated with state failure in Syria and Iraq, the financial crackdown in neighboring Greece, economic instability across Europe, and a softening of relations between the US/West and Iran over the signing of a nuclear deal are, in our opinion, the key regional and global developments that triggered Turkey's political actors to opt for coalition building.

Although building and maintaining a coalition government is a challenge, it is the better choice when present-day internal and external policy dynamics are taken into consideration. An efficient and effective coalition is likely to set Turkey on a stable and powerful path. It could restructure domestic politics in a way that strengthens democracy and the institutional reform process, as well as, better prepares Turkey to respond to regional and global challenges. Moreover Turkey's proactive and constructive foreign policy could be reset through the promotion of soft power.

Recent developments in Syria and Iran are particularly central to our thinking about the potential impact of a coalition government in Turkey: on the one hand, it is involved in the efforts to combat DAESH, which is constantly expanding its influence due to state failures in Iraq and Syria and Islamophobia in Europe and the West; on the other hand, the nuclear deal struck between Iran and the United States – if actualized – will have significant implications for Turkey and for the region as a whole.

The fight against DAESH, a nuclear deal with Iran, and Turkey's own Peace Process: How will Turkey balance these three key issues? What specific vision and strategies will strengthen Turkey's hand in the regional and global policy conversation?

Iran Nuclear Deal

Undoubtedly, a nuclear deal with Iran is a true “game-changer” on a regional level, as the country emerges from an era of exclusion from the international community. Lifting international sanctions will provide economic relief to Iran and improve its bilateral relations with the U.S. The deal's psychological boost to Iran in the Gulf and beyond would trigger a host of new international development initiatives.

The pros of a successful nuclear deal with Iran are the demise of a threat of military action and the blossoming of Iran into an economic center of attraction. The cons are the potential deepening of a fear of Iran by the Gulf Arab States and the subsequent emergence of radical inclinations to empower DAESH or its variations. A crucial dynamic is to further the withdrawal of the United States from the Middle East.

With Iran's multilayered and hierarchical state structure and its fairly chaotic decision making processes, the country seems determined to pursue two key policies. The first is to seal the nuclear deal. Iran began nuclear talks with the European Union, reached an interim stage with the signing of the Tehran Accord, and finally continued the talks directly with the U.S. Most

recently, Iran acted as a decisive party in the nuclear talks, offering timely concessions to avoid deadlocks in the process. The second policy is to preserve active engagement with Palestine, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain and Lebanon.

The Iranian regime considers the nuclear deal with the U.S. a bargain, as it allows Iran to consolidate its power at home and also increase its influence in the region. The government is confident the deal will not challenge its hold on power domestically. It is also likely that at least a segment of the political leadership in Iran is very invested in reform and transformation and that the nuclear deal would be a catalyzing factor for evolutionary reform in the country. In this sense, Iranian regional policies are less likely to change in the short-to-medium term.

The region's politics will no longer revolve around fast changing "flexible alliances," the early modus operandi of the political landscape after the Arab Spring. The nuclear deal marks a new era, which will be characterized by strong rivalries between consolidated blocks. The leading actors of two main competing sides will inevitably be Iran and Saudi Arabia. America is in the process of working out a roadmap to guide its future relationship with these two regional players. However, the nuclear deal with Iran will ultimately tilt the scales in Tehran's favor for some time.

The wars in Yemen and Syria are likely to increase in scale, which would have implications across the region. Political leadership in both countries is extremely reactive, which triggers the escalation of conflict. As Arab Sunni states descend further into chaos, the Wahhabi-Salafi radicalism gains a better foothold in the region against the rise of Shia sentiments and political groupings. What makes matters worse is the risk of sectarian conflict at the communal level eliminating the options of conflict resolution and multiplying the harm to the communities to a considerable level.

Kurds, Peace Process and Beyond

Turkey's main asset is its ability to position itself above the sectarian divides and power blocs in the region, and it therefore has the potential to build constructive relationships with a host of regional actors. When the Arab Spring pushed the country to address its own democratic challenges, Turkey attempted to respond by concentrating on the Kurdish Peace Process, a more inclusive political process, and an end to decades-long armed struggle with the PKK. Turkey developed successful bilateral relations with the KRG (Kurdistan Regional Government) in Northern Iraq and, with this move, contributed to an overall policy of soft-power projection in the region.

The Arab Spring opened a new chapter for Turkey in terms of its dealings with regional Kurdish dynamics. A strong Kurdish group, PYD, is the dominant group in the northern part of the Kurdish-populated area of Syria. This group has also established a strong-armed force, thanks to the Syrian army's leftover military equipment and new weapons provided by the U.S.-led coalition against DAESH. The PYD's move to control Kurdish areas puts it at direct odds with a number of military groups in the Syrian opposition as it has extended its control in northern Syria, keeping both government and opposition forces out of the area. The current situation is fragile and crisis-prone. Despite talks between PYD leader Salih Muslim and the Turkish authorities, the PYD's relationship with Turkey has been problematic as Turkey is increasingly concerned about whether or not PYD's growing strength around the Syrian border might give rise to an independent state and demographic changes. The PYD's relations with the KRG have also been tenuous and difficult.

One possible and desirable way of enhancing Turkey-PYD relations is to situate these relations in the context of the peace process Turkey has been pursuing with its own Kurds since the beginning of 2013. The peace process has both domestic and regional goals. Domestically, it aims to end the conflict and place politics and deliberation at the center of solving the Kurdish problem. Regionally, it aims to promote interdependence between Turkey and Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, and Syria, creating spaces for convergence and cooperation. A sound framework for cooperation between not only contributes immensely to regional stability and peace. It also strengthens the fight against DAESH, which has become an urgent task for Turkey after the attack in Suruc, killing 32 civilians, and at a military border post killing a non-commissioned officer. However, today, the peace process is facing a serious crisis, as the PKK/KCK has begun to attack Turkish security forces. Turkey's response to the DAESH targets in Syria coincided with its operations against the PKK inside and air strikes to the bases in Northern Iraq.

The Fight against DAESH

The emergence, expansion and victories of DAESH have been no less surprising to Turkey than for other countries involved in the Syrian crisis. Turkey's support of the Syrian opposition, the long border and passage of "Syrian guests" into Turkey and the aid given to the Syrian opposition has led to speculation on Turkey's position vis-à-vis DAESH. However, in July 2015, after DAESH's attack in Suruç, the Turkish military issued an immediate response to the attacks, as Turkish jets were twice sent to bomb DAESH bases in the hours that followed.

Turkey is now in a full-scale war against DAESH and aims to remove the group's presence from its borders. Turkey has opened its Incirlik air base for use by the U.S. coalition forces and regional countries against DAESH entities inside Syria and Iraq. Turkey will also take on an active role in this war against terrorist structures. Despite various perspectives, DAESH's hold on power in vast territories of Iraq and Syria seems similar to a state structure. It attracts foreign fighters and constitutes a model for others in a volatile, post-Arab Spring, political environment. It has the potential to be replicated in Libya and Tunisia – a process which may have already started. The DAESH expansion into Northern Syria has resulted in strong criticism that the Turkish state did not take the necessary measures to prevent infiltration of foreign fighters into Syria and to stop DAESH's oil smuggling, which is a major source of revenue for it. Turkish authorities declared DAESH a terrorist organization at a fairly early date. However, its full-scale engagement against DAESH was realized only after it became a direct threat to Turkey. Ankara's security apparatus detained more than 500 people for their connection to DAESH and arrested 100 of them in 2015. They deported 1600 foreigners and prevented entry of 15,000 foreigners for the same reason. A new wave of anti-DAESH operations inside Turkey has resulted from the attacks inside Turkey.

Although the current situation was almost inevitable considering the nature of the DAESH expansion and threat, Turkey avoided direct engagement while a U.S.-led coalition was waging an air war. Turkey's full backing of the coalition without active involvement was a critical decision of Turkish policy makers and, to some extent, was due to geographical proximity and a wish to avoid the involvement of land forces. There was no sign of boots on the ground against DAESH -- the whole idea was to support local actors to take on this duty. DAESH's attack on Kurdish populated areas in Northern Iraq and PYD's resistance brought the Syrian Kurds to the fore in the fight against DAESH. Although Turkey hosted more than 200,000 Kurds from Kobane, a Kurdish enclave in Northern Syria, provided logistical support to the PYD and facilitated KRG's Peshmerga forces to fight against DAESH, the lack of its direct involvement

put it in an odd position in the eyes of the Kurds and international community. PYD's ties with the PKK, and Kurdish public sentiments in Turkey are putting the peace process at risk, placing the ruling party and the Kurds on opposite sides in the eyes of its support base. The new interconnected nature of regional geopolitics requires careful balancing to avoid multiple wars. The PKK is still a terrorist organization and started to pursue attacks against Turkish security forces after the Suruç attack. The lack of trust on both sides has led to the perceptions of PKK exploitation of the situation in Syria against Turkish provocation of DAESH against the Kurds in the same geography. Turkey's war against DAESH is a game changer but its impact on the Kurds will not likely be visible in the short-term due to this lack of trust.

The Way Forward

There is no doubt that the Iranian nuclear deal is a game changer. It will provide better economic incentives and growth for Iran. It could create rapprochement between Iran and the international system. It might produce spaces of convergence between Iran and the West when tackling regional problems. Yet, realistically speaking, we expect the Iranian role in the region is unlikely to change soon as sectarian divisions, Saudi-Iranian rivalry and Iran-Israeli tensions remain.

Turkey's deal with the U.S. is also a game changer. It has involved Turkey's effective position in the U.S.-led coalition as a full-fledged warring partner against DAESH; the opening of the Incirlik air base; and a 68 km safe zone reaching to Aleppo. The Obama administration recognized Turkey's legitimate right to respond to terrorist attacks of DAESH and the PKK on its own soil. Mesud Barzani, President of the KRG, supported the operations against the PKK, while calling for political dialogue to solve the Kurdish problem in Turkey. However, fine tuning and redesign is needed as these four actors (Turkey, the U.S., PYD, PKK/HDP) navigate the complex web of relations and the fight against their common enemy, DAESH.

The agreements on the Incirlik air base, a de facto safe haven in Syria, and the recent contact between Obama and Erdoğan promises an era of enhanced cooperation between Ankara and Washington, in particular, against DAESH. The follow-up of the renewed Turco-American commitment to ending the Syrian crisis necessitates better coordination with the local forces against DAESH. Turkey and the U.S., like other forces in the coalition, are in desperate need of ground forces. In this sense, PYD proved the most efficient fighting group, and in some cases the only one. Washington would contribute to bridging the gap between PYD and Turkey. Prime Minister Davutoğlu hinted that the government will treat PYD differently in the aftermath of Turkey's full scale involvement in the war against DAESH. A rapprochement between Turkey and PYD is urgently needed since it will provide an ethical and strategic upper-hand to both Washington and Ankara in these ongoing struggles.

The HDP had an electoral victory with its claim to be both the main actor of the Kurdish question and the party of a whole Turkey. The Turkish electorate welcomed this argument and now considers the promises levied by the HDP as a guarantee of peace. However, less than two months after the June victory, tensions between the ruling AK Party and the HDP have re-emerged. Consequently the PKK has claimed responsibility for the deaths of Turkish security forces, which resulted in the continuation of military operations against the PKK and air strikes in Kandil. This is not what the Turkish public envisioned when they granted the AK Party 41 percent of the vote to lead a possible government, while also allowing the HDP to pass the national threshold for representation in Parliament.

The critical turning point in the Kurdish peace process was the ceasefire between the two forces and both parties have done a fairly good job in preserving it. However, the PKK attacks against Turkish security officers and the subsequent harsh crackdown against the PKK has dampened the positive atmosphere, as there is danger of a return to the security measures of the 1990's. There is a great deal of responsibility on the AK Party to regenerate the peace process and on the HDP/PKK to stick with the ceasefire and prepare for urgent step towards the disarmament process of the PKK. The success of the peace process in Turkey would constitute a regional benchmark for Kurds in other countries in tackling the complexities of the post-Arab Spring era. A collaborative and mutually beneficial relationship between Turkey and the Kurds could be a game changer: they could play a balancing role vis-à-vis the attempts for regional hegemony of other actors. DAESH is the common enemy and fighting it requires a stable Turkey, meaning substantive progress in the Kurdish peace process, and constructive relations between Turkey and the PYD.

Conclusion

The region is becoming ever more politically challenging and the worst is yet to come. Turkey needs to deal with a number of fault lines in domestic politics and has to strike a delicate balance in a challenging regional atmosphere. A grand coalition between the AK Party and the CHP may constitute a suitable government for easing tension in Turkey's domestic landscape, while also guiding its adaptation to new regional dynamics. A new coalition government with priorities of political consensus, peace promotion and the economic development may regenerate Turkey's self-confidence as a constructive regional player.

Turkey stands to become a regional winner once again if it adopts a constructive foreign policy vision based on peace, economy, mutual dependence, energy and security. Realizing Turkey's potential is the mandate the electorate has clearly given Turkey's political actors. Standing at a critical juncture and facing serious regional challenges and opportunities, Turkey requires a leadership with a formidable political vision to manage the problems and opportunities on the horizon. We can only hope that Turkey's political actors will not let this opportune moment pass them by.

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