

Arcanum in the news



ERDOGAN'S DEADLY AMBITIONS

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By John Hannah

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We break from our regularly scheduled programming to bring you this disturbing news: Turkey, a vital NATO ally, is teetering on the brink of civil war. Dormant for more than two years thanks to a 2013 ceasefire, the state's four-decade-old conflict with the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK) is again raging. The peace process that once generated such high hopes lies in tatters. Since late July, close to 1,500 people have been killed.

Here's another news flash: The person most responsible for the resurgent violence is Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. This is a political war if ever there was one, ginned up by Erdogan to salvage his political fortunes and advance his despotic agenda.

In parliamentary elections last June, Erdogan's Islamist-leaning Justice and Development Party, the AKP, lost its governing majority for the first time since 2002. For Erdogan, the result was intolerable and could not be allowed to stand. In his eyes, maintaining the AKP's uncontested control over Turkish politics is essential for at least two reasons.

First, without it, Erdogan stands almost no chance of achieving his monomaniacal goal of changing Turkey's constitution from a parliamentary system to a presidential one. Erdogan's ambition is nothing less than to be a modern-day Sultan, a near-absolute executive whose power and authority cannot be challenged or checked. Think an Anatolian version of Russian President Vladimir Putin and you'll begin to get the idea.

The problem is that the Turkish people by large majorities appear to want no part of Erdogan's power grab. If the elections carried any message, that was it. Nor do any of the three major opposition parties that won seats in parliament. After the elections, all of them conditioned their participation in any AKP-led coalition on Erdogan's abandonment of his imperial ambitions – something he simply refuses to do.

Erdogan's second reason for requiring an AKP majority is more defensive in nature. In December 2013 – at a point

when Erdogan had been Turkey's prime minister for more than a decade – a massive corruption scandal rocked his government. Senior AKP ministers were targeted, as were members of Erdogan's immediate family and close business associates. In a series of taped telephone conversations, Erdogan himself could allegedly be heard ordering his son to dispose of large sums of cash that he and other relatives were apparently hiding in their homes.

Confronting this potentially existential threat to his rule, Erdogan went on the warpath. Relying on the AKP's control of parliament and his own near-total disregard for the rule of law, separation of powers, and due process, he spent most of 2014 in a systematic campaign to quash the corruption investigations. Hundreds of senior prosecutors, police chiefs, and other law enforcement officials responsible for the inquiries were accused of running a parallel state, coup plotting, and serving as accomplices in a foreign-backed conspiracy to destroy Turkey. All were summarily purged.

Without AKP single-party rule, Erdogan is well aware of the risks that a future parliament or coalition government might insist on re-opening the corruption allegations and taking a fresh look at his breathtaking spree of lawlessness. All of the major opposition parties have made accountability in these cases an important part of their platforms. If ever allowed to proceed to their logical conclusions, these investigations could end in impeachment or even prison. Needless to say, for the man who would be Sultan, a jail cell is most definitely not part of the plan.

So the bottom line is quite clear: Erdogan's priorities – building an imperial presidency and keeping the corruption scandals buried for good – are in his view simply incompatible with a coalition government. It's hardly surprising, therefore, that the post-election negotiations to forge a coalition went nowhere fast. With the AKP still holding a plurality of seats in parliament, Erdogan designated his successor as prime minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, to lead efforts to form a government within the constitutionally-mandated 45 day period – and then promptly made sure that they failed. By nearly all accounts, the talks were a farce, manipulated by Erdogan for one purpose only: to run out the clock so that new elections could be called for Nov. 1, giving him a second chance to secure an AKP majority.

But winning another bite at the electoral apple was only the start of Erdogan's challenge. An even bigger obstacle was figuring out how to win back sufficient votes to ensure an AKP victory. Alarming, the strategy that Erdogan appears to have settled on is some version of the old Leninist adage, "the worse, the better." By allowing instability and conflict to spread in the elections aftermath, Erdogan seems to be betting that he can force Turkish voters to realize the error of their ways and reconsider their decision to turn their backs on AKP hegemony. His message is clear: See what happens when you foolishly abandon the relative stability and prosperity of 13 years of AKP rule? Within a matter of weeks, all hell breaks loose. No government can be formed. International markets lose confidence. The value of Turkey's currency plummets to historic lows and the threat of economic collapse rises.

But worst of all, blood will again flow. The terrorist threat from the PKK will re-emerge, putting at risk civil order, national security, and even Turkey's territorial integrity. Indeed, Erdogan has more or less explicitly said that all of these dangers would have been avoided if only the Turkish public had chosen more wisely in the elections. "If a political party had managed to secure 400 deputies or a number that could change the Constitution," he recently admonished, "the situation today would have been very different." In other words: If you want to have any hope of ending the surging political, economic, and security chaos, you need to go back to the polls on Nov. 1, restore the AKP majority, and support an empowered presidency with Erdogan at the helm.

The cynicism behind Erdogan's calculation to launch a full-scale war against the PKK is stunning. The biggest reason that the AKP lost its parliamentary majority was the fact that a pro-Kurdish party with ties to the PKK, the People's Democratic Party, or HDP, succeeded in crossing Turkey's 10 percent electoral threshold for the first time, leaving it with 80 seats. And the key to the HDP's success was its ability to win over large numbers of conservative and religious Kurds who had previously supported the AKP – whether out of attraction to the AKP's Islamist agenda or, more likely, because they saw the AKP as the party most committed to addressing Turkey's longstanding “Kurdish problem.”

Erdogan and the AKP lost those votes for two key reasons: The first was mounting Kurdish frustration with the lack of real movement in the two-year old peace process. More and more Kurds had come to the realization that the effort was less about addressing core Kurdish demands for equal citizenship, including political decentralization in Kurdish-dominated areas of Turkey's southeast, than it was about Erdogan's desire to lock the Kurds in as a reliable voting bloc that would give him the majorities he needed to fulfill his increasingly despotic ambitions.

Second, Turkey's Kurds were shocked in the fall of 2014 by Erdogan's harsh reaction to the plight of Kobani, a Syrian Kurdish town near the Turkish border that had come under assault by the Islamic State. Knowing full well that the town's inhabitants faced possible extinction, Erdogan at first refused to allow international assistance to flow to the People's Protection Units (YPG), a Syrian Kurdish militia defending Kobani that has close links to the PKK. Despite his supposed peace process with the Kurds in Turkey, it quickly became apparent that Erdogan viewed the rising power of Kurds in Syria as a much bigger threat than the barbarian hordes of the Islamic State. While international pressure finally forced Erdogan to allow assistance to flow and Kobani was saved, the deep sense of betrayal felt by Turkey's Kurds was profound. Erdogan's fundamental animosity had been laid bare. His hopes of coopting them into his Machiavellian schemes were dashed, probably irreparably.

If appearing to make peace with the Kurds failed to serve his broader political goals, Erdogan is now banking on the hope that making war on the Kurds will do so. By whipping up anti-Kurdish hysteria, Erdogan is aiming to generate a rally around the flag effect whereby Turkish nationalists of all stripes are mobilized behind his leadership. At the same time, by attacking the HDP as a front for the terrorist PKK, he's clearly determined to do whatever he can to suppress its vote back below the 10 percent threshold in order to keep it out of parliament entirely. Aiding that effort are the army's intensified security measures across Turkey's southeast, which could well drive down Kurdish turnout come election day.

In the wake of Erdogan's incitement, hundreds of HDP offices have been attacked in recent weeks. The number of assaults against ordinary Kurds has also skyrocketed, some of them lethal in nature. Mobs led by AKP sympathizers – and in one case even an AKP parliamentary deputy – have attempted to intimidate major Turkish media outlets that have been critical of Erdogan in their coverage. Efforts by the state to prevent such politically-motivated lawlessness and thuggery, much less punish it, have been noticeably absent. The whiff of fascism, Erdogan-style, clearly permeates the air as new elections draw near.

Unfortunately, there's an American angle to Erdogan's war on the PKK. After a year of rebuffing pleas from the United States to use Turkish air bases for attacks against the Islamic State, Turkey finally relented in late July – at precisely the moment that it decided to ramp up the PKK conflict. It's difficult not to suspect that the timing had more to do with

Erdogan's desire to secure Washington's acquiescence in his anti-Kurdish power play than with any sudden epiphany on his part to at long last become a full-fledged member of the fight against Islamic State.

The Obama administration rightly puts a high premium on its access to the Turkish bases. Their proximity to the fight in both Iraq and Syria is no doubt a significant force multiplier for the coalition battling Islamic State. The question is at what cost? The fact is that both the YPG and the PKK have been among the most effective groups fighting the Islamic State on both sides of the Iraqi-Syrian border. Indeed, in Syria, it's almost certainly the case that no ground force has captured more territory from the Islamic State than the YPG, or served as a more reliable partner for the U.S. air force. Even if the Turkish military limits its attacks to the PKK, and leaves the YPG alone, the links between the groups are such that Turkey's campaign will almost inevitably serve as a major distraction that threatens to undermine and weaken the overall Kurdish contribution to the U.S.-led war effort.

Inside of Turkey, the impact of Erdogan's reckless drive for power could be even more ominous. By re-igniting the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, he has lit a fire that he well may not be able to extinguish. All the key indicators are moving in the wrong direction. Political polarization and societal tensions are at explosive levels. An economic crisis looms. Press freedoms are under constant assault. An aspiring despot seems more than ready to do whatever it takes in his desperate bid to maintain his grip on power – even if it means ripping the country apart and putting Turkey's future as a stable, unitary state at risk.

Whether the Turkish people will fall for Erdogan's machinations is far from clear. Many recent polls suggest that they might not. By large majorities, they remain opposed to his demand for an empowered presidency. They blame him for the failure of coalition talks. If anything, his anti-PKK campaign is consolidating Kurdish support behind the HDP. The chances that he will again be denied a parliamentary majority are not insignificant.

How far Erdogan will go, especially if he senses that the Nov. 1 elections will not deliver the result he demands, is anyone's guess. An even more systematic crackdown on opposition media? Outlawing the HDP entirely as a terrorist organization? Arresting its leadership, or allowing even worse to happen to them? Using his war against the PKK as an excuse to declare a state of emergency and cancel the elections entirely? Given what he's done already, nothing, no matter how outrageous, seems out of the question.

That's a scary thought, indeed. But that is the unfortunate place that Erdogan has now brought Turkey. For its part, the Obama administration should be on guard against all possible downside scenarios. It certainly should not allow itself to be seen as complicit in any of them. It needs to be sending clear messages now in an effort to deter Erdogan's worst excesses, and to bring pressure on him to de-escalate his war with the Kurds before it is too late. Should Erdogan proceed nevertheless in his assault on Turkey's wellbeing, Washington ultimately needs to be prepared to speak out forcefully and publicly against him – even at the risk of losing access to Turkish bases. That access is important, no doubt. But not at the price of standing by in silence as the democracy and stability of a vital NATO ally are systematically subverted and destroyed before our eyes.

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