



VIEWING TURKEY THROUGH AN AUTHORITARIAN MIST?

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As David Benjamin has stated, “Turkey has long aspired to serve as a bridge between civilisations: between East and West, between Europe and Asia, between Islam and Christianity”¹. On the other hand, present circumstances intrude on this ambition. Amidst complicating factors, fault lines are surfacing in Turkey’s often-vexed relationship with Israel, the United States, Russia, Iran, Syria, Hamas and NATO. Additional complications arise due to Turkey’s current autocratic turn that threatens to pull it further from its Western alliances and return it to its pre-modern past, a history that has often placed the nation at the centre of the troubled Middle East².

Among the most alarming events is fresh evidence that Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to outflank the United States. For example, Russia has taken a progressively more active role in Syria, a move that has been aided and abetted by Russia’s improving relations with Iran. This move has been financed, at least in part, by billions of dollars flowing to Iran—the leading state sponsor of terror—because of the recently concluded nuclear deal and the corresponding relaxation of sanctions. Tangible corroboration of improved relations between Iran and Russia materialized in August of 2016, when Russia startled the West by launching bombers from a new base located in Iran, thus enabling Putin to strike more quickly with heavier bombardments

¹ David Benjamin, *Turkey’s Support for Hamas: A Bridge Too Far?*

² Yaroslav Trofimov, *Turkey’s Autocratic Turn*, THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, December 10, 2016 available at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/turkeys-autocratic-turn-1481288401>.

against U.S.-backed rebels in Syria³.

In reality, the seeds of Russia's involvement in Syria and a reduction in Western influence in the Middle East were triggered when a young man set himself on fire to protest the oppressive regime in Tunisia in December 2010⁴. That moment sparked the first Arab Spring uprising and then spread like wildfire throughout the Middle East, culminating in a crackdown by Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, which led to a bloody civil war⁵. As a consequence of the ebb and flow of war, the Assad regime has increasingly relied on external support to retain power, primarily from Russia and Iran. Although both countries have long competed to expand their influence in the region, more recently, they have cooperated with one another. These developments coincide with the march of radical Islamic jihadists, who target the West and western political influence⁶.

Apparently, these players are unified by a common purpose to constrain American influence around the globe⁷. This objective may be advanced by the emergence of what *Wall Street Journal* columnist Bret

³ Rowan Scarborough, *THE WASHINGTON TIMES*, August 18, 2016 available at <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/aug/18/vladimir-putin-ups-ante-in-challenge-of-us-dominant/>

⁴ JAY SEKULOW, *UNHOLY ALLIANCE: THE AGENDA IRAN, RUSSIA, AND JIHADISTS SHARE FOR CONQUERING THE WORLD* 161 (2016).

⁵ *Id.* at 162. Since the outbreak of war in 2011, more than three hundred thousand Syrians have been killed, and almost half the Syrian population has been forced to flee their homes in search of an escape from some of the worst humanitarian crises since World War II. *Id.*

⁶ See e.g., Harry G. Hutchison, *Russian Strategic Quadrangle vs. United States*, AMERICAN CENTER FOR LAW AND JUSTICE, August 25, 2016, Blogpost available at <http://aclj.org/middle-east/the-russian-strategic-quadrangle-russia-iran-turkey-and-radical-islam-team-up-to-thwart-the-united-states> [hereinafter, Hutchison, *Russian Strategic Quadrangle*]. The quadrangle consists of Russia, Syria, Iran, Turkey and possibly China, which may then serve to strengthen the West's mortal enemy, radical Islam. See *id.* Recent evidence includes Russia's proposal to conduct joint naval exercises with the Chinese navy, a move that would encroach on Japan's territorial waters. *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

Stephens calls the New Dictators Club⁸. This forecast may be particularly true if Syria operates as a catalyst, which levels out the often-turbulent historical relationship between Russia and Iran. The prospect of increasing cooperation between Russia and Iran can be understood by virtue of both nations' longing to increase their own power and influence in the Middle East⁹. This aspiration has become emboldened by the fact that Russia in particular, and perhaps Iran, believe that they are pushing against a largely open door¹⁰ due to the Obama Administration's weakness in ceding power and influence to those willing to fill the vacuum¹¹. American fecklessness issues forth from President Obama's demonstrable unwillingness to lead¹², coupled with his Administration's disorientation in the face of an ongoing reordering of the Middle East following the recent release of funds to Iran as a result of the Iran nuclear deal¹³. A newly bolstered Iran now has additional resources to finance and accelerate change within the Persian Gulf. Reacting to the changed circumstances on the ground, Turkey may find quite convenient the prospect of an alliance with nations that can be seen as past and future rivals¹⁴. This remains true despite its expressed distaste

⁸ Bret Stephens, *The New Dictators Club: An echo of the 1930s in the budding alliance of Russia, Iran, Turkey and China* THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, August 17, 2016, available at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-new-dictators-club-1471908089>. Ominously, this club echoes events that took place during the 1930s and 1940s when the governments of Japan, Italy and Germany pledged mutual support. *Id.* Within a span of five years, seventy million people would be killed as the result of an authoritarian effort to build a brave new world. *Id.*

⁹ SEKULOW, *supra* note ___ at 165.

¹⁰ Charles Krauthammer, *The Price of Powerlessness*, THE WASHINGTON POST, August 18, 2016 available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-price-of-powerlessness/2016/08/18/f61d2c34-6575-11e6-96c0-37533479f3f5_story.html?utm_term=.952169af129f.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.* Krauthammer's analysis tracks with the analysis offered by ACLJ Chief Counsel Jay Sekulow. See e.g., SEKULOW, *supra* note ___ at 10 (arguing that America's withdrawal from the Middle East has allowed Iran, Russia, and ISIS the opportunity to grown in strength).

¹³ Hutchison, *Russian Strategic Quadrangle*, *supra* note ___.

¹⁴ Tiffany Barrans, *Turkey-Iran Relations: Pragmatic Economics & the Ideological Ceiling to Strategic Relations* 1 J. CTR. FOR STUDY OF L. & PUB. POL'Y AT OX-

for Russia and Iran's ally, Syrian president al-Assad. An alliance with former rivals may be a price Turkey is willing to pay to maintain its influence within the region, despite evidence that the unholy alliance of Russia and Iran is prepared to accommodate radical Islamic jihad whenever necessary to complicate the geopolitical picture for the West in the future. At the same time, history shows that while the bodies of children wash up on Greece's shores and despite evidence indicating that ISIS fighters have used the Turkish border as a transit point to the war-torn Middle East, the Turkish government—in an apparent effort to hedge its bets between Europe and NATO, on one hand, and its Middle Eastern friends, on the other—has been hesitant to fully invest the nation's political and ideological capital in the ongoing conflict with ISIS¹⁵.

Complicating this complex picture are implications issuing forth from Turkish President Recep Erdoğan's increasing affection for authoritarianism, a position that has been reinforced by the recent failed coup and Russia's purported role in ensuring the coup's failure¹⁶. Whether the news reports regarding the coup are true or false, it seems clear that Russia is prepared to take full advantage of this situation as President Erdoğan continues to consolidate power. Despite Erdoğan's landslide victory in Turkey's first direct presidential election in 2014, which extended his 12-year grip on power¹⁷, his ability to implement

FORD 27, 27 (2015); The Centre for the Study of Law & Public Policy at Oxford Research Paper No. 15-4. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2719980> (suggesting that the relationship between Turkey and the Islamic Republic of Iran has been mired with centuries of ideological and geopolitical friction and that even during waves of pragmatic cooperation, these unlikely friends will find themselves limited by ideological tension).

¹⁵ Andrew Ekonomou, Robert Ash & Harry G. Hutchison, *Introduction*, 1 J. CTR. FOR STUDY OF L. & PUB. POL'Y AT OXFORD, iii, iii (2015); The Centre for the Study of Law & Public Policy at Oxford Research Paper No. 15-2; George Mason Legal Studies Research Paper No. LS 16-02. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2719971>.

¹⁶ *Hours Before Military Coup Attempt, Turkey Warned by Russia—Reports*, available at <https://sputniknews.com/russia/20160721/104337382/russia-warned-turkey-coup-attempt.html>.

¹⁷ Joe Parkinson and Emre Peker, *Turkey Election: Erdogan Wins Landmark*

authoritarian rule has been thwarted by Turkey's democratic forces. During his victory speech, he called for societal reconciliation despite the hardening of divisions across the country; ominously, he warned his political enemies against undermining Turkish security¹⁸.

Against this background, Russia's desire to reset the Turkish-Russian relationship has been previously blocked by the fallout from the Turkish military decision to shoot down a Russian military jet in November 2015¹⁹. Initial reporting after the downing of the Russian jet indicated that this event could make it more difficult for world leaders to convince Russia to join the U.S.-led, anti-Islamic State coalition, which includes Turkey²⁰. Russian assistance in thwarting this summer's coup attempt appears to change everything by pulling Turkey even further into Russia's orbit²¹ as Erdoğan now has a ready-made crisis that provides the justification to pursue his enemies on grounds of national security. Hence, despite Turkey's misgivings about working with one of Syria's allies, and even though both Turkey and Iran have had deep-seated differences, the evidence on the ground suggests the possible formation of a strategic partnership comprised of formerly rivalrous

Victory, THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, August 11, 2014 available at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/turks-cast-votes-in-presidential-election-witherdogan-primed-for-win-1407658125>.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ Natasha Bertrand, *Russia may be preparing a 'long-term, game-changing move' with Turkey*, BUSINESS INSIDER, August 5, 2016 available at <http://www.businessinsider.com/russia-turkey-relations-coup-2016-8> (noting that “[e]fforts to reset the Turkish-Russian relationship after Turkey shot down a Russian warplane . . . have been underway since before July's attempted coup”).

²⁰ Dion Nissenbaum, Empe Peker and James Marson, *Turkey Shoots Down Russian Military Jet*, THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, November 24, 2016 available at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/turkey-shoots-down-jet-near-syria-border-1448356509> (explaining that Turkish F-16s shot down a Russian military jet along the Syrian border sparking fury in Moscow that has threatened to undercut efforts to create a new international coalition to confront expanding Islamic State Terrorism).

²¹ See e.g., Neil MacFarquahar, *Warming Relations in Person, Putin and Erdogan Revive Pipeline Deal*, THE NEW YORK TIMES, October 11, 2016, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/11/world/europe/turkey-russia-vladimir-putin-recep-tayyip-erdogan.html?_r=1.

nations on the prowl for tactical opportunities to advance short- and long-term goals that advance their mutual interest. Turkey, for instance, may see short-term benefits from this alliance because it may facilitate the Turkish military's capacity to block the transmission of cross-border support from Syrian and Iraqi Kurds to Turkey's often oppositional Turkish Kurdish population and thus improve its security. Turkey may have incentives to move down this path despite evidence that Syrian Kurds have attracted Western military and financial support because they are the most effective and reliable fighting force against ISIS. These events do not arise out of a vacuum.

Ever since 1910, during a war against rebels in remote Yemen, when a young officer of the Ottoman Empire, İsmet İnönü, played French and Italian operas to his soldiers, Turkey was primed to occupy a pivotal place in the world built on its own internal conflicts: an internal pull by elites drawn to the West in response to the decaying Ottoman Empire and a residual, deep-seated, and often hidden desire to return to its past as a shimmering Ottoman authoritarian state to which all or most of the world's Muslims look for leadership²². As is now well known, "Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the secularist army officer who founded modern Turkey in 1923 sought to sever his land's ancient bonds to the Middle East"²³. In the process, Turkey became a "rare example of a major Muslim country that is also a prosperous stable democracy"²⁴. Or so we thought.

"Today that tradition is under attack as never before. Nearly a century after the Ottoman Empire gave way to today's Turkish republic, a tectonic shift is under way"²⁵. Under the surly and increasingly iron-fisted rule of President Erdoğan, Turkey "is drifting away from its historic Western allies"²⁶ and looking "like just another troubled

²² Trofimov, *supra* note ____.

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.*

corner of the Middle East”²⁷. Turkey is looking more and more like its Arab neighbors and “becoming infected with the same sicknesses—intolerance, autocracy and repression”²⁸. Despite its position as a non-Arab state, Turkey has become plagued by one of the Arab world’s most debilitating features: the advent of a culture of grievance that is defined more by what people oppose, than by what they aspire to, thus enabling the region’s autocrats to adroitly channel public frustration toward external “enemies” and away from their own misrule²⁹. Seduced by the possibilities of ruling without dissent, the failed coup, coupled with continued terrorist attacks³⁰, provides Erdoğan with an excuse to unleash an unprecedented crackdown³¹. But that is not enough for a man of Erdoğan’s appetite. Instead, in a move that recalls the unlimited goals of the communist project that had an external and internal dimension as it sought to transform the world and demanded a radical transformation of society, culture and human beings³², he now demands “constitutional changes³³ that would give him near-absolute authority and let him remain at the helm of this country of 80 million people until 2029”³⁴. This maneuver, if successful, would permit him to extend his influence over the wider world. In reality, as Kemal

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ Scott Anderson, *Fractured Lands*, 1, 14, THE NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE, August 14, 2016.

³⁰ See e.g., Margaret Coker, *At Least 38 Dead, 150 Wounded in Istanbul*, THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, December 1, 2016 available at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/at-least-38-dead-150-wounded-in-istanbul-1481470024>.

³¹ Trofimov, *supra* note ____.

³² ALAIN BESANÇON, A CENTURY OF HORRORS: COMMUNISM, NAZISM, AND THE UNIQUENESS OF THE SHOAH (trans. By Ralph C. Hancock & Nathaniel H. Hancock) 46 (2007).

³³ Emre Peker, *Turkey’s Recep Tayyip Erdogan Seeks to Consolidate Power with Overhaul of Constitution*, THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, December 10, 2016, available at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/turkeys-recep-tayyip-erdogan-seeks-to-consolidate-power-with-overhaul-of-constitution-1481384221> (the bill includes measures that call for Turkey’s president to run his own cabinet and acquire executive powers currently vested in the parliamentary government, enable government by decree and enable the current president to rule for two, five-year terms until 2029).

³⁴ Trofimov, *supra* note ____.

Kilicdaroglu, the head of Turkey's largest opposition party, points out, Erdoğan's real objective is to take Turkey out of the Western bloc and turn Turkey into a Middle Eastern country that is shorn of secularism and rich in division along ethnic identity and beliefs³⁵. If this prognosis is correct, Turkey has the potential to become just another Iraq, Syria or Libya³⁶, a Middle Eastern nation with global ambitions, staggering under the weight of plutocracy and nepotism that is braced by bloated bureaucracies³⁷.

These facts, taken together, signal that Turkey's relationship with the West and NATO is now in a state of flux that does not trend toward an optimistic outcome. Simultaneously, evidence on the ground suggests that Turkey's previously vibrant commitment to the rule of law has been fractured by the nation's response to the recent failed coup attempt³⁸. Although the long-term consequences of the failed coup remain cloudy, the darkening trend is clear. Thus, it is foreseeable that Turkey's reputation will remain haunted as this proud nation descends into gloom and instability³⁹ birthed out of Erdoğan's limitless ambition reinforced by hubris. This situation is further compounded because the evidence shows that President Erdoğan suffers from delusions of grandeur that are deepened by mounting paranoia⁴⁰ as he seeks to return Turkey to its "rightful" role as the leader of the Islamic world. Corresponding with the ever-ramifying implications of this forecast, Turkey's tourism sector and much of its economy are already in free-fall⁴¹. As we have seen, this situation is compounded due to Turkey's security situ-

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ Anderson, *supra* note ___ at 13.

³⁸ See Bertrand *supra* note ___ (noting that Erdoğan has drawn condemnation from the West for his decidedly undemocratic crackdown on those suspected of plotting or sympathizing with the coup).

³⁹ Harry G. Hutchison, *Turkish Coup: Democracy, Autocracy, Terror?*, AMERICAN CENTER FOR LAW AND JUSTICE July, 18, 2016, available at <http://aclj.org/middle-east/the-turkish-coup-democracy-autocracy-and-the-rising-specter-of-terror> [hereinafter, Hutchison, *Turkish Coup*].

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ *Id.*

ation – one destabilized by a wave of terrorism that reflects activity by Islamic state sympathizers and Kurdish nationalist opponents contributing to the decline in the value of Turkey's currency⁴².

Given these facts, the world and the West, in particular, will discover that Turkey is a less-reliable ally and a less-predictable nation going forward. This is so because Erdoğan persists in implicating the West in Turkey's domestic politics⁴³ as he continues down a pathway that is littered with increasing strands of oppression. Because of the current state of flux in Turkey, the world and the West will discover that relations with the current Turkish government are likely to remain prickly. This signifies that the price of friendship with Turkey comes with a correlative risk of instability and unpredictability. Hence, one consequent remains clear: Turkey and Turkish policies are once again at the centre of any attempt to understand the Middle East and the geopolitics of the Persian Gulf. This indicates that Turkey ought to command acute attention from all observers who are interested in the future stability of the Middle East and the ongoing rivalry between the United States and Russia. In all likelihood, the Trump Administration will be required to devote more and more human capital to understand Turkey. Equally clear, such a reassessment will mean that Turkey may need to be treated as a former, as opposed to current, ally of the United States.

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ Ceylan Yeginsu and Daniel Victor, *Erdoğan Calls on U. S. to Arrest or Extradite Fethullah Gulen*, The New York Times, July 16, 2016 available at <http://www.nytimes.com/live/turkey-coup-erdogan/erdogan-calls-on-u-s-to-arrest-or-extradite-fethullah-gulen/> (Erdoğan has accused Mr Gulen of being behind the coup attempt, a charge that Mr Gulen denies).