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Turkey's Referendum is Transformative for Eurasia, Middle East
Special Report: Moving the Global Geopolitical Center of Gravity

Turkey's Referendum is Transformative for Eurasia, Middle East

Analysis. By GIS/Defense & Foreign Affairs Staff. Turkey's April 16, 2017, manipulated referendum granting dictatorial powers to the President may be the most significant and transformative change in Eurasia, the Middle East, and parts of Africa since the collapse of the USSR in 1990-91, despite the fact that Turkey's economy is itself in decline and its population divided to the point of civil war.

The transformation of Turkey from a parliamentary system, with the Government functioning under a Prime Minister, to an executive presidency has ended the Westernized democracy envisaged by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, introduced by the Grand National Assembly on March 3, 1924.

[See: "Turkey's President Plans to Unleash New Flow of Illegals into Europe" in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy*, 3-2017, and *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis* of [March 30, 2017](#), for a details of the changes.]

Pres. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has now embarked on a revival of Ottomanism and a Turk-centric caliphate which is being cloaked, to a degree, by modern trappings. Assessments by the International Strategic Studies Association, publisher of GIS and *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, indicate that the process by which Pres. Erdoğan reached this point was carefully scripted, including the manipulated "false coup" of July 15-16, 2016, which gave the impetus for him to purge the system and society of many of his opponents. The growing politicization of all legal and security elements in Turkey enabled him then to strongly structure the way in which the April 16, 2017, referendum would take place.

What is significant is that, even with all of the fraud (much of which was documented as it occurred by international observers) which accompanied the referendum, Mr Erdoğan was only able to scrape through his "victory". That victory, however, has polarized Turkish society, and may presage a decade or more of internal conflict, or, indeed, some genuine attempts at a new military coup if sufficient cohesion remains in the Turkish Armed Forces.

Take-aways from the referendum include:

- **European Union:** Turkish membership in the EU is now effectively impossible, given that Turkey has further violated EU membership tenets. However, the EU may be reluctant to express this finality, given that it would end any leverage it may think it has with Ankara. Equally, there is no incentive for Ankara to formally abandon its membership application. Polarization could end the existing Association Agreement between them, including the Customs Union, which is highly beneficial to Turkey.
- **Cyprus:** Turkey now has no incentive to allow the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” to negotiate meaningfully for an end to the division of that state. The TRNC has no independent ability to resist Ankara, and is now a subject territory of Turkey, occupied by a Turkish Army Corps of some 40,000 troops (now under Lt.-Gen. Ömer Paç) since the Turkish invasion of 1974. Despite the fact that Cyprus Pres. Nicos Anastasiades said only on April 15, 2017, that reunification talks were at a critical and defining moment, the Turkish referendum the next day meant that Turkey would now refuse any meaningful discussion on reunification. The Cyprus talks are dead for now, absent the collapse of Turkey.
- **The Turkish Civil War:** A civil war has been underway in Turkey for several years. Now, many Turks who had been reluctant to side with the Kurdish separatists, led by the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), may join with, or tacitly support, the armed uprising against Ankara. Possibly the one major gesture which European states and the US might undertake is the removal of the terrorist label formally applied, at Turkey’s request, against the PKK. Almost certainly, the US would now be unlikely to be swayed by Ankara’s attempts to pressure the US into ceasing support for Kurdish groups in Syria and Iraq, although Ankara should be expected to respond with some vigor to any lessening of EU/US sanctions against the PKK. The Turkish (and Kurdish) diaspora in Western Europe in particular should be expected to become part of the Turkish civil war, as unrest leading up to the Netherlands’ elections of March 15, 2017, indicated.
- **Turkey is Now Also at War Externally:** Despite efforts to cloak the reality, Turkey is now effectively at war with the EU, the US, Russia, Iran, Syria, Israel, and Egypt, and is seeking dominance in parts of Africa and the Red Sea. This is despite the reality that Turkey does not have the military or economic resources to undertake direct conflict on a broad front, and neither are the Turkish Armed Forces ready to commit to significant formal warfare, given the political purges against them by Pres. Erdogan. As a result, and operating substantially through some special forces units and the now-completely politicized Turkish National Intelligence Organization (*Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı*: MİT), Turkey is using proxy warfare as well as direct diplomatic and MİT-led agitation propaganda — as well as logistical support to proxy forces and allies — to undertake expansion of its spheres of interest. Turkey, given its grave economic constraints, may now be forced into an implicit (or even explicit) alliance with Russia, even though there is no doubt in Ankara or Moscow that such an agreement, given historical realities, could be anything more than a temporary accommodation. But it may be Ankara’s only option, and Moscow may see it as an opportunity to carve out permanent access through the Bosphorus. There is little doubt that Ankara will now

step up its strategic initiatives in Syria and Iraq, with HAMAS in the Palestinian Authority, against Egypt and in support of the *Ikhwan* (Muslim Brotherhood) there and regionally, in Libya, Sudan, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Somalia, and in the Balkans. It will also re-invigorate its activities to throw off the containment in which Russia presently has it, and to this end will almost certainly reinvigorate its links with Chechen and other Caucasus regions, and with the *ihadists* in Ukraine. Essentially, Turkey is now operating without direct restraints, but will cloak any short-term moves which could invite (a) rejection from NATO or the EU negotiating process, or (b) response from Russia. It will attempt to build its relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC), but the PRC finds Turkey less significant geostrategically than Iran.

- **US/Western Forces in Turkey at Risk:** US and other NATO forces operating from Turkish bases, particularly Incirlik Air Base, will find themselves increasingly constrained. Germany has already begun searching for alternate basing to achieve its counter-Islamic State missions in Syria and Iraq. US nuclear stores based in Incirlik may now be a handicap rather than a strategic asset. The US may now negotiate with the UK for greater access to its Sovereign Bases in Cyprus, and to negotiate directly with Cyprus for access to other facilities on the island.
- **Attempts to Re-negotiate Treaties:** Pres. Erdoğan has indicated that he wishes to revise the 1923 Lausanne Treaty which set the borders between Greece and Turkey and which defined control of the Aegean Sea in Greece's favor. He indicated in December 2015 that there were no plans to address revision of the 1936 Montreux Convention on control of maritime access through the Bosphorus to and from the Black Sea, but it should be expected that Ankara will now start to use this treaty as leverage against NATO/EU maritime traffic into the Black Sea. How both these issues are addressed could engage serious Russian interest, and Russia should now be seen as the major factor in being able to constrain Turkey by controlling Turkish trade access to Russia and the Caspian states.
- **US and UK:** The UK's withdrawal from the EU will almost certainly revive British historical dreams of links with Turkey at the rear of Europe and to constrain Russia. This was, until 1945, largely geared at protecting British colonial interests in Asia (India and Persia in particular), and transformed into the UK-US "containment" of the USSR in the Cold War. Can the US and UK today re-think their view of the world given the reality that Turkey, although it may not be able to build its "new Ottoman Empire" at this time, has effectively broken the old map.
- **Turkey and Strategic Weapons:** Turkey's long-standing research into strategic weapons — including nuclear, chemical, and biological systems — will now resume with less constraint, and so will investigations into ballistic missile delivery systems. See: "Turkey Now Escalating its Moves Toward the Acquisition of Nuclear Weapons", in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, [July 23, 2010](#).

This Service noted, in that July 23, 2010, report: "Overall, Turkish strategic initiatives have been designed, *à priori*, to give the Islamist AKP absolute control at home, reducing the military to a pre-republic (ie: Ottoman) status in Turkey, but also to challenge the

other “great powers”, including Russia, the US, the UK, and France, as well as to the regional authority of the Iranians, Egyptians, and Israelis. There is some belief in Ankara that this “window of opportunity” provided by US powerlessness and EU confusion will not be open long, and that Ankara must act on all its strategic initiatives even before the Russians can assert dominance over the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean. As a result, Ankara is moving rapidly, perhaps to the point of recklessness. Absent a coherent response from the EU, the US, and particularly from a distracted Greece, Turkey may well attempt to further entrench itself in Cyprus, quite apart from making strenuous claims elsewhere in the region.”

That report also noted: “It now seems clear that the AKP Government feels that the Turkish population would be ready to support a move toward nuclear weapons even at the expense of finally ending the Turkish entry process into the EU. However, it is by no means certain that the EU entry process would be formally stopped — even though it has become totally academic at this point, in any event — even if Turkey went ahead with an open nuclear program. What seems more likely, however, is that the Turkish Government will continue to deny its nuclear weapons program for as long as possible; indeed, until testing or deployment, even if the reality becomes obvious. After all, it fully understands how Israel operates in this regard: the Israeli Government will still not confirm the presence of a nuclear weapons capability in the Israel Defense Force (IDF), almost a half-century after Israel acquired military nuclear capabilities.”

Special Report

Moving the Global Geopolitical Center of Gravity

Why is the global strategic architecture changing?

What led to it? How is it changing?

How can we plan for it?

Who will be at the center of gravity of the next era?

And where?

By Gregory R. Copley, Editor, GIS/Defense & Foreign Affairs. Several major determinants of the global architecture are now being revived or re-evaluated. Issues of governance, economics, technology, national identity, and where and how global power is moving geographically — issues which have for decades been regarded as “settled issues” — are suddenly, fluid and vital again.

Sovereignty and the nation-state (and therefore “nationalism”), and governance and politics (and therefore the question of the centrality of whether, for example, “democracy” can be reinvigorated and what it means) are now under review. Above all, geopolitics and history are being dusted off for discussion.

Even our macro-economic models are being seen as inadequate to the new era. The role of such measurement standards as gross national product (GNP) and gross domestic product (GDP), and even the evolution to the measure of “purchasing power parity” (PPP), is changing. Because it has to; human society has changed its shape.