

Turkish Foreign Policy after the Elections: Where to from Here?

Senem Aydın-Düzgit*

STIFTUNG
MERCATOR

 **IAI**
Istituto Affari Internazionali

IPC | **ISTANBUL POLICY CENTER**
SABANCI UNIVERSITY
STIFTUNG MERCATOR INITIATIVE

The outcome of the 7 June general elections in Turkey led to an intense questioning of the future content and direction of some of the country's key policy orientations. Among the key election outcomes were the loss of the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) absolute majority in Parliament after thirteen years with a decline of 10 percent in its vote share, as well as the 13 percent of the vote that was garnered by the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) and led to their entry into the Turkish Parliament with eighty deputies. These outcomes suggest that key policy changes could be in store for Turkey, and foreign policy is among the top contenders in the debate on potential policy change.

One major reason for this is the fact that Turkish foreign policy has been widely criticised since the late 2000s by many domestic and international observers on various grounds, including, but not limited to: a shift of axis towards the Middle East and North Africa at the expense of relations with Europe and the West; the pursuit, primarily after the Arab uprisings, of a heavily ideological and sectarian foreign policy; the significant deterioration of bilateral relations with multiple key actors to the south such as Israel and Egypt (where it no longer has ambassadors); and the loss of its potential role as a democratic model for the South, and henceforth its soft power in the region, due to its worsening domestic track record in democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental freedoms. More recent criticisms focused on the AKP government's indifference towards the radical Islamists in Syria, many of whom entered Syria through the Turkish border, in its strong insistence to oust the Syrian regime

from power. These criticisms stand in stark contrast to the widely praised Turkish foreign policy of the AKP's former years in power, in which relations with the EU progressed in tandem with Turkey's increasing weight in the Middle East and North Africa, Turkey's improved democratic performance was perceived as a key aspect of its rising soft power regionally and globally, and economic relations and more liberal mobility regimes were successfully instrumentalised to foster closer relations with the countries of its wider neighbourhood. Thus a major question which immediately surfaced after the elections was whether Turkish foreign policy in its current form, with a rapidly diminishing regional power, is sustainable any longer and/or whether it has the potential to be changed or reversed under the post-election domestic power balances.

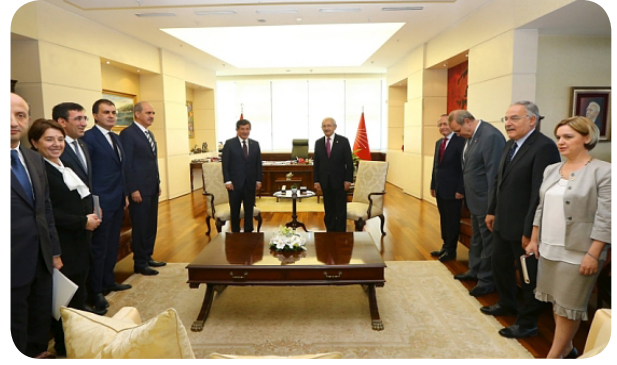
Another major reason for the heightened importance of foreign policy in the post-election scenarios relates to the role that foreign policy actually played in the election outcome. Research suggests that foreign policy issues generally have a negligible impact on the voting behaviour of the Turkish electorate compared to factors such as party identification and perceptions of economic performance.¹ Nonetheless, initial post-election findings suggest that foreign policy positions may have played a key role in these elections due to the close interrelationship between the Kurdish issue and

¹ See for instance Ersin Kalaycıoğlu, "Public Choice and Foreign Affairs: Democracy and International Relations in Turkey", in *New Perspectives on Turkey*, No. 40 (2009), p. 59-83, https://research.sabanciuniv.edu/11663/1/NPT_May_2009.pdf.

* Senem Aydın-Düzgit is Associate Professor and Jean Monnet Chair at Istanbul Bilgi University.

Turkish foreign policy in Syria.² When the Islamic state militants besieged the Kurdish town of Kobane in Syria, the Turkish government initially did not allow the Kurdish Peshmerga forces from Iraq or the Kurdish citizens of Turkey (who also had relatives in Kobane) to cross Turkish territory and the Turkish border to aid the Kurdish forces in Kobane fighting against the forces of the Islamic state. Furthermore, President Erdoğan made statements that gave the impression that the government perceived the Islamic State forces to be less threatening than the prospect of a larger Kurdish state that included parts of Iraq and Syria, given its own domestic problems with its Kurdish minority.³ The government only changed its course and allowed passage to Kobane upon strong pressure exerted by the United States. The domestic uprisings in Turkey in reaction to the government's initial indifference to the Kurdish militia's and to its own Kurdish citizens' calls for assistance to Kobane resulted in a death toll of thirty-five people in the country within the course of three days in October 2014. The large shift of the AKP's ethnic Kurdish vote to the HDP in the elections, which allegedly played a key role in the AKP's loss of its single-party rule, was in turn partly attributed to the Kobane incidents. The HDP in particular brought up the issue several times during its election campaign, and it has widely been argued that the government's initial position in Kobane created a significant disillusionment across the Kurdish constituency that had formerly chosen to vote for the AKP.

While change seems both necessary and inevitable given the rapidly shifting dynamics in Turkey's wider neighbourhood, the heavy domestic and international criticisms levelled at its recent foreign policy, and the close internal-external linkage reflected in the election outcome, much depends on post-election constellations. As of now, it remains to be seen whether Turkey will have a coalition government or, in the case that no government is successfully formed, early elections. If an agreement can be reached, a coalition government is most likely to be formed between the AKP and the Republican People's Party (CHP) or between the AKP and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). Although hard to speculate about, an AKP-CHP coalition may run the possibility of steering the country's foreign policy towards a more rationalist line by which ideological orientations of the former era are dropped in favour of more pragmatic steps in the wider region. This could possibly imply improved



Ankara, 13 July 2015: Turkey's prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu meets main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu as part of the first round of coalition talks. Photo: Reuters.

and thus more balanced relations with the West, a tougher stance against the Islamic state, better relations with other key regional players including Israel, and the sustenance of the internal peace process with its Kurdish citizens, which could in turn bolster Turkey's confident activism in its region. This positive outcome, however, would largely hinge on the success of the coalition and the extent to which the AKP would be inclusive of its coalition partner in foreign policy-making.

A possible AKP-MHP coalition, on the other hand, may provide a different, and less positive outcome. Given MHP's strong euroscepticism and the AKP's increasing aversion to the European project since the second half of the 2000s, Turkey could be further distanced from the EU under an AKP-MHP coalition government. The rise of the nationalist tone in government would also work against a possible reconciliation with Armenia or the resolution of the Cyprus conflict. Relations with the South could fare even worse. This is largely due to the MHP's strong opposition to the internal peace process and to the prospects of an independent/autonomous Kurdish state/entity outside the country's immediate borders. Foreign policy pundits have already begun to speculate that, if realised, this could be a "war coalition" wherein Turkey would invade Syria to fend off the possibility of an independent Kurdish state or an autonomous Kurdish region along Turkey's southern border. It has been argued that this would not only help to serve the MHP's nationalist purpose, but also bolster support for Erdoğan and the AKP in the case that early elections are held even after the forming of the coalition.⁴ In other words, it could help strengthen Erdoğan's claim that the country needs a strong one-man rule – thus presidentialism à la Erdoğan – if it is to overcome these rising sources of insecurity in the neighbourhood. Some have even argued that Erdoğan may also go down that road in the case that no

² Hazal Özvarış, "Bekir Ağırdir: Erken seçimi zorlarsa AKP çok daha fena çakılır, HDP kesinlikle kazançlı çıkar" (Bekir Ağırdir: If the AKP pushes for early elections it would suffer even worse, HDP would definitely gain), in *T24*, 9 June 2015, <http://t24.com.tr/haber/bekir-agirdir-erken-secimi-zorlarsa-akp-cok-daha-fena-cakilir-hdp-kesinlikle-kazancli-cikar,299134>.

³ "Erdoğan: Kobani düştü düşüyor" (Erdoğan: Kobane is about to fall), in *BBC Türkçe*, 7 October 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZBEk9AyFDBw>. See also <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RONHrB9h39A>.

⁴ Jeremy Shapiro and Ömer Taşpınar, "Why would Turkey invade Syria?", in *Order from Chaos* | Brookings blog, 2 July 2015, <http://brook.gs/1HL0Uw>.

coalition is formed and early elections become inevitable. Government officials have recently stated that any entry into Syria would be with the purpose of strengthening the fight against the Islamic state and that the PYD forces in Syria (Kurdish forces which are seen as an extension of the PKK by the Turkish state) are not perceived as the enemy.⁵ Yet it remains to be seen whether reason will finally prevail for the common good or whether Turkish foreign policy will further sink into the quagmire of its southern neighbourhood in the post-election era.

⁵ Soli Özel, "Diğer Devlet Aklı" (The Other State Reason), in *Habertürk*, 5 July 2015, <http://www.haberturk.com/yazarlar/soli-ozel/1099090-diger-devlet-akli>.