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Even Authoritarian, the Turkish Prime Minister Remains a Key Player in the Middle East

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This coming August, for the first time in its history, Turkey will elect her president in a direct election. This direct election will inevitably increase the power of the president. Moreover, since the probable winner will be Recep Erdogan, who is already a charismatic and a powerful leader, there is no doubt that the new electoral system will reinforce the already very authoritarian tendency towards power in Turkey. However, despite his incontestable authoritarianism, the Turkish leader remains the most legitimate leader in the region and a key player for U.S. policy in the Middle East.

Three candidates are in the competition for these elections: the current Prime Minister Erdogan who benefits from the support of his strong ruling AKP party; Ekmeleddin Ihsanoğlu, former general secretary of the Organization for the Islamic Cooperation who is mandated by the main opposition parties CHP and MHP; and, last but not least, Selahettin Demirtas, leader of the Kurdish party BDP which is expected to play an arbitrary role in these elections.

According to a majority of analysts and opinion polls, the question is not whether Erdoğan will win or not, but if he will be elected during the first or the second round. The immediate question that arises is how Turkey will emerge after these elections. The answer is actually evident; a more powerful and maybe more authoritarian Turkish president will dominate the country until 2019 and maybe beyond.

Recep Erdogan's political career is exceptional. A former determined Islamist politician, persecuted because of his adhesion to political Islam, he gradually abandoned his strong Islamism and became a moderate, conservative Islamic leader. During his first and second terms between 2002 and 2011, the country has been considerably modernized as Turkey's democracy has progressed, Ankara's candidacy to the EU has marked decisive steps, and its economy became stronger. In addition, Ankara has managed to build an assertive but balanced and peaceful foreign policy. This success story was part of the "Turkish model" that many in the West promoted as a model for the Muslim world.

Due to reasons which remain unclear, this success story started to change in 2011. Following his election for the third consecutive mandate, the Prime Minister became more authoritarian and more conservative concerning many social issues. Again, he adopted a more Islamist discourse, and what is even more alarming is the fact that his government started to intimidate journalists and muzzle the media.

Since June 2013, his power has become even more authoritarian. Indeed, his government ignored and even repressed the legitimate and peaceful Gezi demonstrator's claims. Since December 2013, Erdogan's authoritarianism has considerably worsened. Attacked by his former allies of the Gülen movement – a secretive Islamic clerics living in self-imposed exile in the US - Erdogan has harshly reacted, as its members and media have revealed many scandal's implicating the government, the Prime Minister, and his family. In order to defend himself against what he called the "parallel structure", he has purged the police and the judiciary and furthermore, increased the police's pressure on the judiciary. In fact, he de facto ignored the separation of powers with his regular interference.

Because Turkey is an important ally for the US, the White House, particularly President Obama, has been considerably concerned by the deterioration of Turkish democracy. Obama, who had a very special relationship with the Erdoğan, considered him to be among the most trusted leaders in the world, and the Obama administration has very good reasons to be disappointed by the Turkish Prime Minister.

Indeed, in addition to his authoritarianism, Erdoğan has adopted a couple of regional policies that Washington cannot approve of. Let's examine the most important points of disagreement between the two sides and try to see why the US is forced to deal with this embarrassing ally despite his disappointing behavior, in human right and regional policy issues

The US is perfectly right to denounce the authoritarianism in Turkey but in its denunciation Washington should be more specific and try to understand Erdoğan's delicate position. A better assessment of the situation and a better calibration of its reproaches to its ally should help the US save the future of Turkish-US relations which are vital for stability in the Middle East. Let's look at several examples.

The US is perfectly right to denounce the muzzling of the media in Turkey, as this point is particularly alarming even if we compare Turkey to semi-authoritarian countries. However, concerning the other side of Erdogan's authoritarianism, the concentration of power, or the absence of the separation of powers since last December, the US should adapt or recalibrate.

There is obvious interference of the Turkish executive in the judiciary. A lot of judges and policemen have been removed and overall, the judiciary and the police have been seriously reshuffled. This is a total disregard of the separation of powers and should not exist in a democratic country.

However, at the same time, an impartial observation of the situation in Turkey is an absolute necessity if we want to understand what is happening in this strategic country for the US. The concentration of powers in the hand of the executive started in December 2013 when followers of the Gülen movement started to use their positions in the administration to weaken the Prime Minister, or to hold a coup against Erdogan.

Moreover reassignments and removals (very few) were done according to the civil servant law in Turkey which is in fact very strong. Removals of prosecutors were done through HSYK, whose governing law was changed until the Constitutional Court overturned it. Accusations against these prosecutors, judges and policemen are very serious.

For sure, the Gülen movement has considerably rendered very positive services to Turkey, and even to humanity thanks to its educational services and to its initiatives promoting dialogue among religions and cultures around the world. This is absolutely true and admirable, as no other Islamic movement in the entire Islamic world has ever before worked for the rapprochement between Islamic and other civilizations as the Gülenists did.

However, there is now enough evidence to suggest that the Gülen movement followers in the Turkish bureaucracy obey their leader more than the Turkish administration. In other words, the policemen and prosecutors who continue to be purged seem to be more loyal to their guru than to their administrative and bureaucratic hierarchy. For a better understanding of this situation in Turkey, imagine some Mormons or Jehovah witnesses infiltrated and empowered by the US administration using their influence to challenge the power of a democratically elected government. In fact, from a democratic perspective, one should not criticize the purges that resemble a concentration of powers but invite the executive to manage this infiltration phenomenon in light of the law.

Another point of concern in the US Turkish relations is the recurrent anti-Israel and even anti-Semite insinuations of the Turkish Prime Minister. The sad situation in Turkey is such that its Prime Minister gives the impression he does not differentiate between denouncing Israeli policy towards the Palestinians and anti-Semitism. This is a very disturbing issue but unfortunately this attitude is very widespread in all the Muslim countries where Israeli- Palestinian conflict fuels a strong anti-Zionism; it becomes anti-Semitism in certain cases. The more disturbing issue is that the Turkish Prime Minister's "anti-Semitic", (which are more anti Zionists in fact) formulas are in fact reflective of the popular opinion in Turkey regarding Israel. In this regrettable situation, the uncompromising Israeli policy has a certain responsibility that the US administration should take into consideration if it wants to combat anti-Semitism not only in Turkey, but also in other Muslim countries. Until recently it was considered prestigious among Turkish intellectuals to display a pro-Israeli attitude, but unfortunately this sympathy toward Israel began to change even before Erdogan came to power. This blend of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism goes beyond Erdogan and the AKP circles. With the current aggravation of the conflict between Israel and Palestinians- especially concerning the ongoing bombing in Gaza- it is unrealistic to expect a diminution of anti-Israeli rhetoric in Turkey where Gaza and the Palestinian issue is an electoral argument.

Last but not least, the US is disappointed by Erdoğan policy in Syria. To be more specific, the Obama administration has occasionally voiced its concerns about the alleged Erdoğan's flirtation with some jihadist groups acting in Syria. It is absolutely legitimate and understandable for the US to be disappointed by its ally's cooperation with some groups that Washington considers as terrorists but, here again, before criticizing the Turkish Prime minister, it is important to establish a better assessment of the situation. When the crisis erupted in Syria in 2011, Erdoğan was the leader who exerted the most energy to convince the Syrian regimes to introduce some reforms, even cosmetic ones, but the Syrian regime categorically refused. Then, when the Turkish government adopted a harsher attitude toward the stubborn Syrian regime, this was in full cooperation with its US and European allies. Turkey and its allies thought that with a very firm ground, they had a better chance to accelerate the end of the Bashar regime. However, this firm standpoint was abandoned by the US administration, especially when the US refrained from any attacks against the Bashar regime after it utilized chemical weapons. To a certain extent, Ankara had legitimate reasons to feel abandoned and disappointed by its US ally because of the attitude they had adopted together since the beginning of the crisis against Bashar al Assad. Because of this sentiment and because of the multiple threats posed by the Syrian crisis to Turkish security and stability, Turkey had no other option but to support some groups considered as jihadists by the US administration. The reality is that there are several groups in the conflict that could be labelled as extremists, but all don't have the same degrees of radicalism. The most extreme is ISIS, and the fact that dozens of Turkish citizens were kidnapped by this organization, thereby humiliating the Turkish diplomacy and weakening the AKP government, is the proof that these extremist are not those supported by Turkey. The alleged help that Turkey would have provided to jihadists in fact illustrates the Turkish despair in this war that continues to harm Turkey in many ways, such as harming its economy and threatening security and even domestic stability. The jihadist phenomenon in Syria would have been reinforced even without any Turkish support because of the situation in Iraq and the porosity of the Syrian Iraqi border. In brief, the sentiment of disappointment is mutual and reciprocal between Ankara and Washington.

Authoritarian and paranoid, Recep Tayyip Erdogan is no longer the "good, Muslim democrat" he was a couple of years ago for Washington, and the US has all the more reason to be concerned by this evolution. But at the same time, we should not forget that Turks have also good reasons to be disappointed by the attitude of their US ally, as on many regional issues, the Syrian crisis, the military coup in Egypt, the US admin's lack of initiative and reluctance to confront any of the issues in a serious manner frustrates Turkish leadership. Moreover, the US should judge their partner with the gauge of the global evolution of the Middle East. For decades Turkey had serious hopes to believe in its European dream but it is now obvious that the EU is not ready to accept Turkey. This implies that we cannot anymore assess Turkish democracy with European and Western criterion but with regard to the Middle East, where Turkey is more and more engulfed, overwhelmingly so because it was not accepted in Europe. For that reason, the US should evaluate or assess Erdoğan and Turkish democracy in the context of the situation and the political realities of the Middle East. Even while being authoritarian and corrupt, Erdoğan is still the most legitimate leader in the Middle East, at least because he is the rare leader in the region to have been elected by free and transparent elections. With the exception of Israel (which is a more apartheid state than an authentic democracy), no leader in the wide Middle East can display more democratic credentials than Erdoğan. He is certainly far from satisfying the idealistic US perception of democracy but he remains more acceptable than the other leaders of the region, like Al Sissi, Bashar, Maliki, and Ruhani.

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