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Turkey Report: Autumn 2018

by David Barchard



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TURKEY REPORT

Autumn 2018

by David Barchard

Writer on Turkish history and society



Summary¹

During the last half year, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has not only remained firmly in control of Turkey but strengthened his political position, bringing forward both the general and presidential elections due in late 2019 and winning clear victories in both. The office of prime minister disappeared and the centres of most government activity shifted from the cabinet to the presidential palace. The new presidential constitution came into effect and the state of emergency, in force since the attempted coup of July 2016, was lifted though without any notable consequences for civil liberties or freedom of expression.

Turkey's opposition parties remained very weak, though a new one, the Good Party, won 43 seats in the new parliament, while another, the MHP (Nationalist Action Party), was closely aligned with the government and gave the AKP an overall majority in the National Assembly after the general elections.

The battle against terrorism and militancy continued on several fronts with daily raids across the country on persons suspected of links with terrorism. The most numerous arrests remained those of FETÖ associates (Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü – Fethullah Terrorist Organization), detected through mobile telephone records and similar links, but there were also regular raids and arrests of members of ISIS/DAEŞ, and also of persons believed to be linked with the Kurdish PKK, including the HDP, the Peoples' Democratic Party. With a noticeable drop in violence inside Turkey, the fight against the PKK and its affiliates shifted to northern Syria and Iraq where Turkey hopes to create a 'safe zone' along its southern border.

In Syria, Turkey remained a partner of Russia and Iran but a strong opponent both of President Bashar al-Assad, and of the Syrian Kurdish PYD/YPG and its American military allies based in Manbij. Because of Manbij, and also the continued detention of Andrew Brunson, an American Evangelical Protestant pastor, relations with the United States appeared close to breaking point, though Brunson was released on 12 October. To offset the breach with the USA, relations with Germany and the European Union became a little less adversarial than they had been in 2017 though

¹ This article was intended for the Autumn 2018 issue of TASR 32, but for technical reasons it was not possible to include it.

there was no real recovery and no progress towards EU membership. The disappearance and murder of a Saudi Arabian journalist, Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul on 2 October, while visiting his country's consular authorities, produced a worldwide sensation and ramped up an existing confrontation between President Erdoğan and the Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman.

Domestic Politics

Erdoğan goes for early elections

For many months President Erdoğan and the AKP had said firmly that there would be no early elections in 2018. This position was reversed without warning, and indeed without much consultation among his own followers, by the President after a meeting with his parliamentary ally, Devlet Bahçeli in March. It is unclear whether this was genuinely an independent initiative by the MHP leader or whether Bahçeli was deputed by Erdoğan with the task of raising the issue. The announcement – which was swiftly passed into law by the AKP majority in parliament – meant that Turkey faced a double election campaign, for the Assembly and the Presidency compressed into an eight week period from 30 April.

New inter-party alliances end 10% election barrier

This election was notable in Turkish political history for marking the effective end of the '10% national barrier' which all parties had to surmount previously to win seats in the Grand National Assembly. After the split in the MHP which led to the formation of the Good Party in October 2017, the MHP looked unlikely to pass the barrier, and the AKP introduced a law permitting the formation of electoral pacts between parties which (if at least one party got above 10% nationally) would allow their partners to win seats on a straightforward proportional basis. The AKP/MHP alliance (to which a smaller ultra-rightist party also belonged) was called the 'Republic Alliance'. Predictably the opposition followed suit with the CHP (Republican People's Party) forming an alliance with Meral Akşener's Good Party and the Democrat Party and the ultra-religious Felicity (Saadet) Party, called the 'Nation Alliance'.

However the CHP leadership did not extend the alliance to include the HDP, which it evidently regarded as tainted by its association in the minds of many people with the PKK and Kurdish nationalism. (Voices on the government side have been heard alleging that the CHP is in fact in alliance with the HDP and thus connected with terrorism and should be punished for this, though it needs to be stressed that the HDP leadership has repeatedly denounced violence and tried to distance itself from terrorism, denials which the government says are unconvincing.) This meant a much tougher struggle for the HDP (which had nine of its leading MPs and 68 of its mayors in jail) to get into the next parliament, though it nevertheless succeeded.

Observers had thought the AKP was flagging

Though President Erdoğan looked from the outside to be well ahead of other presidential candidates, the polls indicated that support for the AKP was flagging in the country and for a time some observers speculated gingerly that the party might even be defeated or at least come close to defeat. As usual the Turkish opinion polls failed to give a very clear picture of the way voter opinion was moving, though it should have been clear throughout that the AKP had more than 40%, while its nearest rival, the CHP, was at least 15 percentage points behind.

No level playing fields

The campaign took place under the now familiar one-sided constraints of national elections in Turkey with the President and the AKP enjoying disproportionate access to the media and radio and television. The AKP continued to be able to attract large numbers to its rallies with flawless efficiency and these meetings were covered on prime time TV. The Yenikapı Istanbul AKP election meeting on 18 June was reckoned to have had 1.3 million attenders.²

The AKP however did face one significant hazard – the way Turkey’s proportional representation system operates when more than two parties contest a general election. Its largest ever parliamentary majority came in 2002 when it polled the lowest percentage of the votes, because only one other party got into parliament.

CHP’s unexpected charismatic candidate

As in 2014, Turkey’s largest opposition party, the CHP (Republican People’s Party) selected its presidential candidate without the usual democratic selection procedures for selecting candidates in democracies. (This is despite the fact that to qualify for nomination in the presidential election, it is necessary to garner 100,000 signatures of supporters.)

The choice was made by the CHP leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu who said that his selection was so secret that even his wife did not know it.³ His remarks aroused memories of the backstairs selection of an unsuitable candidate, Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu in 2015, chosen without consulting the membership as a deal with the (then firmly oppositional) MHP. Kılıçdaroğlu seems to have understood that he himself would not be a popular presidential candidate and turned to his main (though recently defeated) rival for the CHP leadership, Muharrem İnce, a former school teacher. İnce proved to be a stronger than expected candidate, stressing both his secular background and the fact that he was a pious practising Muslim.

It should also be noted that the CHP did not hold primary elections in each province to test the views of its membership on parliamentary candidates and the order in which they should appear on the ballot lists. Instead this was again done solely by the leadership and a place at the top of the list was given to the party’s former leader, Deniz Baykal, 80, who had been incapacitated in hospital for many months and seems not to have appeared in public since October 2017. At the time of writing the party is again debating whether or not to consult its voters and hold primary elections, this time for the municipal elections due in March next year. The situation seems to be that voters would like them but headquarters is not so enthusiastic.



There were two other notable presidential candidates, and some minor ones. Mrs Meral Akşener, leader of the Good Party (*İyi Parti*) contested both elections. Her party had been enabled to stand by a parliamentary ruse in the previous assembly by which the CHP temporarily loaned the new grouping the MPs necessary to form a parliamentary

² <https://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2018/06/17/ak-parti-yeni-kapi-mitingine-kac-kisi-katildi-iste-yenikapiya-gelen-kisi-sayisi>

³ 'Adayımızı eşim bile bilmiyor' <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/adayimizi-esim-bile-bilmiyor-40812303>

group, thus making it eligible to compete in the general election. But nevertheless the party operated its campaign on a shoestring as it did not qualify for the generous subsidies established parties receive from the budget.

Campaigning from a prison cell

Selahattin Demirtaş, the leader of the HDP (Peoples' Democracy Party), who had been in prison for over a year on terrorism charges arising from remarks he had allegedly made in political speeches, also ran for the presidency. He seems to have passed the 100,000 supporting signature mark quite easily, but the actual figure he obtained was for some reason not widely available in the media, even though this was publicized for minor candidates. The HDP received only one formal party political broadcast slot but it was possible to watch some of its meetings via the internet and also to listen to the broadcast which Demirtaş made from his prison cell in support of his candidacy. (Demirtaş was able to run for the presidency despite being in prison, but President Erdoğan indicated that this was an oversight which will probably not be repeated.) It was clear from internet shots of crowds at election meetings in south-eastern Anatolia that the imprisoned Demirtaş retains a strong charismatic appeal as a martyr (in the Western sense) among his followers despite a manifest lack of international interest in his situation.



Akşener: a tough campaign with no funds

Lacking subsidies, Meral Akşener and the İyi Parti were unable to campaign on the scale of the other main opposition parties, but there was less obstruction of her speeches and campaigning than there had been during the constitutional referendum campaign the previous year. Her achievement in garnering just under five million general election votes is interesting, not least since the number of votes going to her old party, the MHP, remained more or less the same as in 2015.

Two presidential candidates from very small parties, Temel Mollaoğlu of Saadet (Felicity Party) the Manchester-educated heir to the late Necmettin Erbakan, and Doğu Perinçek of the Vatan (Fatherland) Party failed to attract significant votes.

Prosperity or parliamentary politics?

The government fought the elections on a programme of continued security and increased prosperity within a presidential state, i.e. one in which decisions are taken without delay. It also strongly stressed the series of giant infrastructural and defence investment projects which the AKP is undertaking. The opposition generally campaigned for more political liberties and the restoration of parliamentary politics, but also promising populist, inflationary economic policies, making pledges that they probably realised they would never be called upon to honour.

Unlike the election campaign of June 2015, the June 2018 elections were relatively free from tension or violence. Police have improved their techniques for managing angry crowds of protesters while they have also been successful in curbing terrorism, particularly from ISIS which was a recurrent feature of life in 2015. However a visiting OSCE Monitoring team found a series of issues on which it

recommended that the election process should be revised to bring it into line with accepted best practice.⁴

Ince's unexpected campaign charisma



During the final weeks of the campaign, it became clear that Muharrem İnce, the CHP candidate, was the one with by far the strongest appeal to opposition voters, able to attract vast crowds in the western metropolises (his followers claimed that they ran to millions) on a scale which the CHP had not seen since the heyday of Bülent Ecevit in the 1970s – when Turkey had a far smaller population. In İzmir, for example, a province with a population of about 4.2 million and generally an opposition stronghold, the CHP claimed to have attracted three million – though the governor said that it was more like 175,000. Whatever the truth, it was undoubtedly a vast gathering stretching for kilometres.

The size of İnce's metropolitan meetings and the enthusiasm of the crowds sparked expectations of a close race between the two sides and İnce himself appears to have supposed that he might even win the presidency, or at least take President Erdoğan to a second round in which the opposition parties might have united behind a single candidate.

Opposition hopes dashed

Such hopes were swiftly dashed on election night when it became clear that President Erdoğan had been re-elected on the first round with 52.6% of the votes and that the AKP had polled 42% in the parliamentary elections. In Izmir for example, the CHP had again won, with 1.5 million or 54% in the presidential elections but it received only 1.2 million votes or 41.3% in the general elections, coming a surprising second to the AKP. It had polled exactly the same number of votes and a slightly smaller percentage than in both the 2015 general elections.

Presidential Election Results 2018 and 2014

2018	Votes Mn	Percent	2014	Votes Mn	Percent
Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	26.3	52.6	Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	21.0	51.8
Muharrem İnce	15.3	30.6	Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu	15.5	38.4
Selahattin Demirtaş	4.2	8.4	Selahattin Demirtaş	3.0	9.7
Meral Akşener	3.6	7.3			
Others	–	0.9			

Source: secim.haberler.com

⁴ OSCE, 24 June 2018 ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/turkey/397046?download=true> pp. 27-29.

Elections to the Grand National Assembly 2018 and November 2015

	24 June 2018			1 November 2015		
Party	Votes Mn	% of total	Seats won	Votes Mn	% of total	Seats won
AKP	21.3	42.6	295	23.6	49.4	317
CHP	11.3	22.6	146	12.1	23.1	134
HDP	5.8	11.7	67	5.1	10.7	59
MHP	5.5	11.0	49	5.6	11.9	40
Good	4.9	9.9	43	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.

Source: secim.haberler.com

What had gone wrong for the CHP? As yet there seems to be no convincing psychological study to explain the result, although most observers, including scrutineers that the present writer has spoken to, tend to rule out the possibility of significant ballot box fraud. In Turkish general elections, around 188,080 ballot boxes are counted and signed off individually and these details are then posted on the Internet a few days later. So it is possible to observe local results closely, especially as most ballot boxes contain fewer than 300 votes.

Whatever the explanation, a stark failure of political leadership contributed to the general rout of the opposition. The disarray among the opposition parties (whose computerised scrutineering system quickly broke down, apparently because it had not even been tested by them before the election) was painfully apparent from the lack of prepared statements, detailed analysis and explanation of the results by opposition leaders. İnce inadvertently and inexpertly conceded defeat in what he says was a private email message to a journalist. After that the rest of the party folded its tents and conceded its even worse defeat in the general elections. During the hours around midnight İnce went off the air in a fashion that was not convincingly explained and triggered speculation of sinister pressures, though he strongly denied this and no evidence of any has ever been produced.⁵ The next morning a haggard and miserable İnce appeared on TV, apologizing abjectly to his followers for a defeat which he ought surely to have anticipated.

The other opposition parties had to contend with disappointment too. Perhaps the least dissatisfied was the HDP which cleared the barrier by winning 11.7% of the votes. It thus became Turkey's third largest party with 67 members in the parliament. Meral Akşener's Good Party was also in the new parliament, though her candidacy for the presidency had been overshadowed by İnce and as a result she polled only 7% of the votes, while the party scraped in with just 9.9 % of the votes but won seats thanks to the election pact system. The GP's parliamentarians face continuous wooing by the government side to change their allegiance to the MHP and their former colleagues, and by August the first such defection had occurred. In October, the party, which had 43 seats in the general election was down to 40, but Akşener seemed to have re-established command after a rare gesture from a Turkish party politician when she offered to resign.

⁵ Cumhuriyet: *Ve İnce 24 Haziran'ı anlattı: O gece çıkmadım, çünkü*
http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/siyaset/1025024/ve_ince_24_haziran_i_anlatti_o_gece_cikmadim_cunku....html

MHP performs well

Perhaps the most interesting feature of the June 2018 election was the relatively strong showing of the MHP (Nationalist Action Party). This was a surprise in view of the party's troubled internal life over the previous two and a half years. The MHP, the opposition party which in the summer of 2015 had blocked the formation of an opposition-led coalition to remove the AKP from power, entered the elections in the wake of an acrimonious process during which much of its membership had apparently seceded under the leadership of Meral Akşener to form the Good Party in October 2017. The MHP's refusal to participate in an opposition coalition in the summer of 2015 however seems to have triggered a decision by many MHP supporters to switch to the AKP, giving the latter its victory in the subsequent general elections of November 2015. The MHP's votes plunged from 7.5 million (16.3%) in the June 2015 general elections, to 5.6 million (11.9 %) in the November of that year.⁶ The defections meant that the MHP looked unlikely to surmount the 10% national barrier and it was to overcome this that the AKP agreed to change the law and introduce the inter-party alliance system so that a much-reduced MHP would be able to enter parliament. In the event, the MHP vote hung on well in 2018 with a performance very close to that of November 2015, 5.56 million votes, 11.1% nationally. Moreover the party increased its share of the vote significantly in 19 provinces in southeast Anatolia, where its leader, Devlet Bahçeli, did not even campaign.⁷ However it needs to be remembered that swings in that region require fewer votes than in Turkey's heavily populated metropolises.

And may be still going up?

Exactly why this happened and what it means on the ground remains unclear. One explanation is that in the inter-party competition in the hinterland of Anatolia, the MHP is the only rival to the AKP, but not a hostile rival. Voters who shift to it are not putting their conservative loyalties at stake. On the other hand such an explanation does not seem to apply in south-east Anatolia. Whatever the explanation, the electoral fortunes of the MHP definitely appear to be improving. An opinion poll in early October suggests that the party's share in the local elections may be significantly higher than in the June 2018 elections at nearly 16%.⁸ If this finding is accurate, then the political leverage of the MHP (which did not receive cabinet ministries or significant rewards from its alliance with the AKP) must be growing – implying that the Good Party may struggle to survive.

MHP leading the AKP

Though it has no ministries, the MHP has attempted to nudge the AKP on a number of policy issues, pressing the larger party to go down the MHP trajectory. These include uncompromising policies on Kurdish matters, a hard line on other issues (e.g. Bahçeli criticized the conciliatory outcome of the Brunson case⁹), and also on

⁶ <https://sonuc.ysk.gov.tr/module/sspsYeni.jsf>

⁷ Haberler.com, *MHP, Asıl Sürprizi Doğu'da Yaptı!* <https://www.haberler.com/mhp-dogu-ve-guneydogu-da-oylarini-arttirdi-10991875-haberi/>

⁸ Sputnik News: *ORC'den yerel seçim anketi: MHP yükselişe geçerken, CHP, HDP ve İyi Parti düşüşte* <https://tr.sputniknews.com/turkiye/201810151035674377-orc-anket-mhp-chp-hdp-akp/>

⁹ Sözcü, Bahçeli, *"Milli vicdanı rahatsız etmiştir"* <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2018/gundem/son-dakika-mhpden-brunson-aciklamasi-2677560/>

some vote-winners: the introduction of commutation of military service, and an amnesty to free most though not all categories of non-political criminals. In each case the AKP's response seems to be qualified acceptance of the proposal after an initial delay. In recent months the MHP leader has expressed dissatisfaction at the partnership and it seems that the alliance will continue but the MHP will not support the AKP in the March local elections.

The new governmental system

Enter the presidential republic

His double election victory enabled President Erdoğan to proceed with the implementation of a presidential republic without a prime minister and in which a smaller cabinet operates outside the Grand National Assembly and is not answerable to it. Since the summer Turkey is settling down – relatively painlessly and without obvious hitches, it must be said – to a completely different form of government from anything it had in both the early Republic and the late Ottoman Empire. Instead of a two-tier political system, which essentially perpetuated the division between the Ottoman Sultan and his Vizier, Turkish government is now unified in the Palace (or, as it is officially known, *Küllüye* or mosque complex) at Beştepe.

Centralised decision-taking by the president

The following account of the new system is only tentative, but its main feature seems to be that all decisions and authorizations of any importance are channelled through the presidency.

- The president is surrounded by about three dozen specialist advisers who play a crucial role in helping him take decisions. By no means are all of them drawn from an AKP background; some are even former leftists. They are also mostly young or youngish. He consults them individually rather than collectively.
- The cabinet has been slimmed down and reduced to 16 ministers from the previous 26 and a key section of each ministry has resided in the presidential palace over the last three or four years. The presidency has formally assumed most of the legal responsibilities attached to the cabinet in the previous system.
- Many bodies and key industrial corporations (e.g. ASELSAN, the military electronics corporation, HAVELSAN (aeronautic electronics), and ROKETSAN (missiles) as well as agencies like the National Intelligence Organization (MIT) are now directly under the president.
- The Grand National Assembly (TGNA) is larger with 600 members (from 550) but much less important and (unlike the US Congress) the executive is no longer answerable to it. The President signs bills presented by parliament, but he can do many things independently of the TGNA, including (crucially) drafting and approving the annual budget.
- In the provinces, more power continues to shift to governors, away from local government and municipalities which in any case are being merged into larger units. The governor meets with and consults the small but crucial tier of local senior officials appointed directly by the President.

New cabinet – a dauphin and a strongman

The new cabinet named on 10 July is no longer a collection of politicians but of technocratic specialists and bureaucrats.¹⁰ Much attention has been focused on the promotion of Berat Albayrak, the president's son-in-law to the position of Minister of the Treasury and



Finance. Turkey's economic difficulties have exposed him to a blaze of international publicity at an early stage in his career. Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, the foreign minister, has been retained from the previous cabinet



and is a forceful presence in the diplomatic exchanges over Syria and Iraq, and popular with foreign diplomats. But a third survivor of the transition, Süleyman Soylu, the Minister of the Interior should also be noticed as a possible new strongman.

Soylu, who for much of his early career belonged to the small Democrat Party from which he was expelled in 2010, is a notable of removing HDP or pro-officials and replacing them



is also responsible for the effective – police methods of for such tough steps as the crackdown in August on the 'Saturday Mother Demonstrations' in Istanbul, which have seen a group of mothers sitting in Galata

each week since 1995 to protest the death or disappearance of their sons.¹¹

Emergency ends

The State of Emergency (known by its Turkish acronym of OHAL) ended on 20 July after almost exactly two years. The government retains more permanent emergency powers, including local ones, than previously, both to issue decrees and to appoint and dismiss officials at a stroke. Rights of appeal to the European Courts have been restored. One of the most important – but least noticed – effects of the emergency was that ailing companies were prevented by it from declaring 'postponed bankruptcy', thus obliging firms to choose between having their assets broken up by liquidators or continuing to trade while unable to pay their way. One of the results of the lifting of OHAL was a rush by some firms to proclaim '*konkordato*' (a protected status roughly equivalent to British 'administration' or the US Chapter 11).

Press

The government remains firmly in control of most newspapers and radio and television stations and news coverage tends to focus correspondingly on the speeches of the president. These often cut straight into other programmes while they are being transmitted.

End of the Doğan Media empire

¹⁰ Sözcü, *Yeni kabine açıklandı!* <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2018/gundem/yeni-kabine-aciklandi-yeni-bakanlar-belli-oldu-iste-yeni-kabinedeki-isimler-2512907/>

¹¹ New York Times; "Turkey Clamps Down on a Group Erdogan Once Championed: Grieving Mothers", <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/29/world/europe/turkey-erdogan-saturday-mothers.html>

An important change in the media world came in the first week of April when the Doğan Media Group, owners of *Hürriyet*, *CNN Türk*, *Kanal D*, the football magazine *Fanatik* and others, was sold to the Demirören Group for US\$1.1 billion, about \$900 million net of debt, dissolving the Doğan press empire which had dominated the Turkish media since 2002 when the AKP took power and had been its most formidable rival powerbase. It was notable that Demirören, a conglomerate, had received a loan of \$700 million (denominated in US dollars) to help it make the acquisition – though some observers claimed that the purchase undervalued DMG. However, by international standards the price was surely rather good, though it is hard to know exactly how much income media assets generate in Turkey or whether the attraction of owning them comes from the more indirect benefits they bring to conglomerates.¹²



Broadcasting watchdog to control Internet news channels?

On 25 September a more direct move to restrict freedom of expression was announced. RTÜK (the High Radio and Television Board, i.e. the broadcasting watchdog which has power to fine or even close radio and television stations which broadcast things it regards as unacceptable) is to require all Turkish internet broadcasting platforms to obtain a licence and come under its own remit.

Though most large scale TV news channels, and major political parties use the Internet and services such as Periscope for news, this new power seems aimed directly at small television stations, generally linked with the political left, which offer their own brand of news and comment to the public via the Internet. Though these are mostly not very hard-hitting by international standards, in the Turkish context they contrast dramatically with the rather monotonous flow of nearly identical news and views from the main broadcasters. The regulations – which do not seem to have come into effect yet – would also make it possible to see what programmes particular individuals have watched and to hold this information. (Internet legislation introduced during 2014 in the aftermath of the Gezi Park protests already means that all internet activity can be monitored.) However according to *Cumhuriyet* newspaper, RTÜK is to confine this monitoring power to the collection of statistics rather than personal data.¹³

Upset at Cumhuriyet

Cumhuriyet itself was also shaken by internal problems. On 7 September a court reinstated a board of directors of the foundation which owns it, finding that it had been ousted improperly in 2014. Alev Coşkun, a CHP politician and minister in the Ecevit period, returned as chairman and there was a sudden turn-over of staff and editors, with 28 persons (including some of those involved as defendants and prisoners in the well-known prosecution of the paper along with many big names such as Aslı Aydıntaşbaş and Özgür Mumcu) departing.

¹² "The media ownership in Turkey and its advantages" Ceren Sözeri, https://www.academia.edu/5210149/The_media_ownership_in_Turkey_and_its_advantages

¹³ *Cumhuriyet*; *Fişlemede geri adım* http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/1096152/Fislemede_geri_adim.html

Cumhuriyet is no longer a very large newspaper. According to the latest figures it has a circulation of about 36,000 daily, far below that of the main opposition paper *Sözcü* whose 256,000 circulation is the third largest in the country. But *Cumhuriyet* remains an influential name with a distinguished readership and it is still ahead of the other surviving left-wing papers, *Evensel* and *Birgün* which tend to be read by the young and have minute circulations – 5,500 daily for *Evensel* and 7,500 for *Birgün*, though the latter are mainly addressing an internet as opposed to a print readership. The change of control at *Cumhuriyet* does not seem to imply a shift towards the AKP¹⁴ but it does probably indicate a move back to an older style of centre-left Turkish nationalism particularly on issues to do with the south-east.



Terrorism

Crackdown on PKK achieving calm

Meanwhile there continue to be frequent raids in Turkish cities on persons either suspected of links with the PKK or regarded as dissidents favourable to it. In the first week of October for instance, 90 people were arrested in co-ordinated raids in eight provinces from Diyarbakır to Mersin, many of them said to be either journalists or local politicians.¹⁵ Unlike 2016, when there were several major bombings by the PKK – or groups presumed to be offshoots of it, such as TAK ‘the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons’, there seem to have been no significant incidents of PKK terrorism in much of Anatolia this summer.



Control by stages in eastern Anatolia

A clear pattern is discernible in this, going back to the decision to end the ceasefire with the PKK and resume combat against it in July 2015. The emphasis and nature of operations by the security forces in south-eastern Anatolia also seems to have changed. In 2015-2016 there were major clearance operations in the large urban centres such as Sur Diyarbakır, Lice, and Şırnak. In some cases towns were literally flattened after which there were operations in the countryside to net groups of terrorists hiding in the open. A total of 218 indefinite curfews had been imposed in such towns between August 2015 and June 2017.¹⁶

Those phases now seem to be over, though some ‘search and sweep’ operations continue in eastern Turkey, involving curfews on settlements and open land. To block off the route between Iran and Turkey used by the PKK, a concrete wall, 144 kilometres long and two metres high, is being built along the border in five stages

¹⁴ T24 Newsport: *Akın Atalay: Cumhuriyet yazarları AKP yandaşı değildir ancak...*;

<https://t24.com.tr/haber/akin-atalay-cumhuriyet-yazarlari-akp-yandasi-degildir-ancak-alev-coskun-cumhurbaskanligi-ile-is-birligi-yapmistir,722407>

¹⁵ <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yerel-haberler/ankara/terror-orgutu-pkky-8-ilde-es-zamanli-operasyon-40980885>

¹⁶ Siyasi Haber newportal : *Doğu ve güneydoğuda son iki yılda 218 kez sokağa çıkma yasağı ilan edildi* !<http://siyahaber3.org/dogu-ve-guneydoguda-son-iki-yilda-218-kez-sokaga-cikma-yasagi-ilan-edildi>

with the cooperation of the Iranian authorities.¹⁷ These developments, carried out by TOKI, the state's social housing construction agency, have been extensively reported and indeed photographed in the Turkish press. There are also towers and fortifications along roads and strategic points in much of the south-east.

Rooting out terrorist infrastructure

An additional emphasis in combatting the PKK in the east is to destroy the infrastructure of terrorism, i.e. detecting abandoned PKK hideouts and weapons stores. The use of Turkish satellites and Turkish-made drones is said to be yielding much better results than when Turkish operations depended largely on signals intelligence and data supplied by the United States under an agreement which began in late 2007 and was still continuing earlier this year.¹⁸

Death flying low overhead

In particular, advances in face recognition technology along with drone observations and strikes make it possible to identify, track, and then eliminate leading PKK operatives. For instance, on 17 August Turkish drones and jets identified and pursued Zaki Shangal, a senior PKK commander in Sanjar, northern Iraq. Realising that he had been identified, Shangal fled by car but drones were on hand to follow and film him, including the moment in which he and his vehicle were destroyed. The film was subsequently placed on the internet with the approval of the Turkish authorities. It must be extremely depressing news for senior PKK militants who face a similar end.¹⁹



They also mean that the numbers of dead announced after each government operation, described as 'rendered inactive', actually do represent bodies of militants remotely identified either from drones or satellites and are not just hopeful conjectures.

Towards the eradication of the PKK?

It may be premature to foresee total victory just yet, but the statistics seem to suggest that, after a campaign beginning in 1984 which may have claimed 40,000 lives over the subsequent decades, the Turkish authorities may be moving towards a final defeat of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party), the militant revolutionary Kurdish nationalist movement.

In contrast to the pattern a few years ago, when military and police outposts in the south-east came under regular attack from bands of PKK militants and monthly casualty figures were usually over 20 police and soldiers dead, the number of fatalities is now down to a handful each month and most of these are caused either

¹⁷ NTV Sınır 43 kilometrelik yeni duvar <https://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/sinira-43-kilometrelik-yeni-duvar,qfkmBUS39EOurc0VR16idA> ; *Milliyet newspaper*, *İşte Türkiye-İran sınırına damga vuran görüntü!* <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/toki-iran-sinirindaki-duvarin-gundem-2582324/> Karar newspaper: *İran sınırına 144 kilometrelik duvar.* <http://www.karar.com/guncel-haberler/iran-sinirina-144-kilometrelik-duvar-480073>

¹⁸ A good overview of the remarkable and diverse achievements of Turkish aerospace industries is available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkish_Aerospace_Industries#Unmanned_aerial_vehicles .

¹⁹ <http://www.english.iswnews.com/2868/turkey-have-published-a-video-that-shows-the-moment-that-one-of-pkk-commanders-car-being-bombed-in-sanjar-of-iraq-images/>

by IEDs (improvised explosive devices – home-made landmines) operating in remote mountain areas in provinces such as Hakkari and Şırnak, or – less commonly in recent months – by long range rifles. The PKK seems no longer to be able to field large groups for its attacks and instead is said to be infiltrating into local civilian society in small groups of two or three. The explosives planted under roads are not necessarily new and may be ‘sleepers’ lying in wait for long periods before being detonated.

Force not politics

If this trend to reduced fatalities inside Turkey continues, it may not be long before killings by the PKK inside Turkey cease to be statistically significant. On the other hand it will not necessarily indicate that a lasting political solution to the tensions of the area has been achieved.

Given the land area and mountainous terrain of Turkey’s south-eastern provinces and the size of the local population, the suppression of the PKK’s operations is a remarkable achievement outstripping, for example, the often-cited British success in Malaya in suppressing the Communist uprising in the 1950s.



One explanation might of course be that the PKK has staged a tactical withdrawal into Syria and particularly its headquarters in northern Iraq at Mount Qandil. Yet the picture seems very clear. There is a downward trend in the fatality figures. In July and August 2017, 52 Turkish soldiers and police were killed by PKK militants. This summer the figure in the same two months was down to 30 and about a quarter of those died outside the borders of the Republic of Turkey in Syria or Iraq.²⁰ These may still seem large figures by international standards but they are an enormous

improvement on the pattern seen only a few years ago when more than 30 troops might die in a single night during an ambush by the PKK in Çukurca.

New forces, new technology

Most of the combatants killed are no longer conscript soldiers, but special forces professionals, better paid, trained, and equipped with the rank of ‘uzman çavuş’ or ‘expert sergeant’ earning up to TL 5,000 monthly at the start of this year, i.e. about three times the then minimum wage. The numbers are quite considerable: 18,353 ‘uzman erbaş’ were recruited in 2017 and 13,000 so far this year while 25,000 ‘expert’ gendarmes were signed on in 2018.

In other words, Turkey, now an industrial country of 80 million, has devoted correspondingly large amounts of advanced technology, financial resources, and manpower into the quest to eliminate the PKK and the results seem to be visible. The routes into Iraq are being cut off and new roads are being built in the remote

²⁰ These are my rough calculations based on published reports of deaths in action; however some of them are the consequences of non-terrorist events including traffic accidents and heart attacks. The large number of casualties from the military coup attempt of July 2016 means that a comparison is not possible for this year when the security situation seems to have been much worse in line with previous experience. Figures for the earlier months of that year suggest much higher levels of PKK violence obtained then compared to 2017 and 2018.

border areas, Şırnak and Hakkari, to ensure that Turkey can send troops south when and if it wishes. Many of the soldiers and local guards killed in recent months have died on roadsides in those two provinces. But overall, it has been the Kurdish militants who have lost disastrously. This is a catastrophe that to some extent their leaders, such as Cemil Bayık, brought upon them by repeatedly urging an end to the 2013 ceasefire with Turkey and the resumption of a terrorist campaign.²¹ They failed to realise that this kind of 'asymmetric warfare' involved a new and huge imbalance with the resources and offensive capabilities of the Turkish state which meant that the outcome would be different from Ireland or Vietnam.

Facing Mount Qandil

The ultimate goal in Iraq is Mount Qandil, the 3,500-metre high mountain headquarters of the PKK's thirteen camps.²² President Erdoğan has many times indicated that Turkey intends to clear it though this is a massive undertaking which will presumably have to wait until next summer. If such an attack were to succeed it would perhaps spell the end of the organization as a coherent force inside Turkey and elsewhere in the Middle East though it might linger on among exile groups and immigrants in Western European cities. The conquest of Afrin in Northern Syria in March was a much easier target than Qandil – the terrain being much less high and remote – but the earlier operation points the way.

IS

Turkish police have continued to be vigilant against IS but the number of raids and detentions during the summer was far smaller than the numbers for FETÖ (Fethullah Terrorist Organization) or for the PKK. Those detained fell into two categories; non-Turkish nationals (very often Iraqis, many of them based in the İlkadım district of the Black Sea city of Samsun) and Turkish nationals.

FETÖ

By far the toughest crackdown – at least in terms of numbers – came on members of the Gülen movement, 77,081 of whom were said by Süleyman Soylu, Interior Minister, to be under arrest and facing charges on 18 April²³. Of these, 48,305 were arrested during 2017. The courts are now starting to process these cases but, to judge from the available statistics, they will take a very long time to complete their work.

Mass trials getting under way

On 1 October, *Daily Sabah* reported that there were 42 major trials of Gülenists under way across the country with a total of 2,805 defendants. There were fourteen trials in five cities with 1,659 defendants linked specifically to the coup attempt, plus

²¹ e.g. <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-turkey-kurds-pkk/kurdish-rebels-threaten-new-fight-in-turkey-as-syria-clashes-intensify-idUKBRE99L06920131022> Bayık kept pressing for the resumption of armed hostilities until Erdoğan took him at his word in July 2015 with results Bayık had clearly not foreseen.

²² Haber7kom newsportal: *Kandil nerede? Kandil Dağı'nın harita üzerindeki konumu!*

<http://www.haber7.com/guncel/haber/2229248-kandil-nerede-kandil-daginin-harita-uzerindeki-konumu>

²³ <https://www.aksam.com.tr/guncel/feto-ve-pkkda-mit-korkusu-sardi/haber-773437>

another 28 trials of 1,146 suspected FETÖ members. In addition to almost daily raids against suspected Gülen supporters, often detected through their mobile phones or, latterly, calls from phone boxes, the Turkey's intelligence services also launched operations to apprehend and 'render' leading Gülenists in other countries back to Turkey for trial. MIT, Turkey's secret service, was revealed to be tracking suspects from FETÖ and the PKK in at least eighteen countries. Its successes included the repatriation by 'packeting' (involuntary rendition) of FETÖ members from Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Sudan, Gabon, and Kosovo.²⁴ There were also proceedings against members of the group as far away as Vietnam and Mongolia, though an attempted 'packeting' in the last of these countries seems to have failed.

International relations

Discussion of Turkey's internal situation ends here, though it is clear that some aspects of the country's life, including the fight against militant opponents now interfaces with the whole range of Turkey's international relations, but particularly the nexus of states involved in the politics and conflicts of Syria and Iraq.

Turkey's involvement in both countries involves dialogue with other countries – notably Russia and Iran – and its strategic concern particularly in Syria has largely unstitched the seven-decades-old Turkish-American alliance. Suspicion about the latter is exacerbated by US complacency – or is it sympathy? – towards the Gülen movement and its crimes in Turkey, ranging from the framing of Turkish officers and others in the purported Ergenekon and Balyoz conspiracies to the attempted coup of 15 July 2016. The Gülenists were seen from the outset in Turkish rural society as a pro-American movement. Perhaps that is why their downfall has been so damaging to the US's standing in Turkey. The US, unlike almost all Turks, whether supporters or opponents of President Erdoğan, fails to accept that there is a significant case against the Gülenists for the military coup attempt.

But a second thread of serious suspicion concerns the US alliance, *faute d'autres*, with the Syrian Kurds (and PKK external militants) against the Islamic State. Virtually all Turkish public opinion fears the possible rise of an internationally-backed Kurdish irredentist movement and the Kurdish enclaves of northern Syria do not look like candidates for client state arrangements, such as Turkey has effectively achieved in northern Iraq with the Kurdish Regional Government.

Haggling with Russia

Hence Russia has become Turkey's 'enabler' in Syria and the last four months have seen a series of four meetings between Presidents Vladimir Putin and Erdoğan, culminating in the Sochi summit in September, at which Turkish diplomatic persistence enabled it to press for its goals in Syria. Those goals remain clear and have been frequently spelt out: further advances against the Kurdish enclaves, starting with Tel Rifaat and the town of Menbij, and then perhaps strikes east of the Euphrates, many of them in flat open land which will be much easier targets than the hill province of Afrin. Then the creation of a 'safe zone' which Turkey will leave, the President says, only when democratic elections are held.²⁵ But that cannot happen until US forces first leave Menbij and withdraw the protective shield that they are giving their allies. The course of events will perhaps also be determined to some

²⁴ <https://www.aksam.com.tr/guncel/feto-ve-pkkda-mit-korkusu-sardi/haber-773437>

²⁵ <ps://www.aksam.com.tr/guncel/feto-ve-pkkda-mit-korkusu-sardi/haber-773437>

extent by the state of the Turkish economy, though, as an overriding policy priority, the conflict will probably continue to receive resources.

2019 a fateful year for the region?

A focus of Turkish foreign policy in 2019 will be the PYD enclaves in Syria. Will there be a Turkish offensive against them, as repeatedly promised? What form might it take? Would it be accompanied by an even more ambitious onslaught on the PKK camps on the top of Mount Qandil, an operation which would probably involve Turkey in close cooperation with neighbouring Iran? Such events may well send tremors through the international system but they will essentially be emanations of conflicts that began inside Turkey itself.



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