Center for American Progress

TURKEY 2023

Turkey at the Heart of the Storm

By E. Fuat Keyman   May 3, 2016

More than two decades ago, Zbigniew Brzezinski alerted the world to a "global turmoil" steadily eroding the West's ability to respond to major global challenges.[1] Since then, the West has been gripped by multiple crises of globalization, manifested in myriad security, economic, humanitarian, and environmental challenges. The most recent additions to this litany include the dire refugee problem and the brutality of the Islamic State, or IS. Both the refugee crisis and IS have emerged from failed states, particularly Syria and Iraq, and are exacerbated by geopolitical power games, a lack of hegemonic leadership in the region, sectarianism, and the absence of inclusive and rules-based institutions of good governance. Yet while the crises interact and have similar root causes, they are driven by different actors with different intentions. While the European Union has focused on addressing the symptoms of the refugee crisis, the war against IS is driven by the United States, Russia, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states, which are less affected by the refugee crisis.

Only Turkey has a place at the heart of both crises. It is affected by the security and economic fallout of the current regional instability and will be a pivotal actor in any effective responses to the two crises. Western leaders—most crucially in Washington, D.C., and Ankara—should not think of Turkey as a buffer state used simply to manage the spillover from Syria and Iraq but rather as a proactive partner in any effort to address the root causes of these crises. But Turkey faces its own domestic and foreign challenges, which undermine its ability to respond to the turmoil. The Turkish government should take four steps to help improve its response:

1. The West's approach has relied on Turkey to contain the spillover effects of the crises in Syria and Iraq, but this approach is fraying. Turkey cannot just be a buffer state. Rather, it should find ways to proactively shape outcomes to the south that extend beyond support for Sunni rebels and that are not in tension with the goals of its Western allies. Ankara should reset its Syria policy by combining its unavoidable status as a buffer state with the proactive and constructive foreign policy it adopted from 2002 to 2010. This successful period of Turkey's policy was based on the principles of mediation, humanitarianism, and the promotion of economic and cultural interdependence. Today, Turkey must avoid being dragged into a sectarian standoff in Syria and the wider region.

2. Turkey should ensure that its cooperation with the European Union to address the refugee crisis is linked to the revitalization of the negotiations for Turkey's accession to the European Union by opening new chapters, especially Chapters 23 and 24. This process will ensure that over the long term, Turkey does not fall into a purely transactional relationship with Europe in which Ankara is viewed as a buffer against Middle Eastern spillover.

3. Despite the current Kurdish conflict, Turkey should move to restore calm and secure a peaceful resolution in Turkey, as well as work toward a grand bargain with the full array of Kurdish actors in Iraq and Syria. Turkey stands to gain if peace is restored, economic and energy ties are revitalized, and a security partnership is implemented. The Kurds are Turkey's best bet to act as a buffer to the turmoil of the Middle East.

4. In a globalizing world where domestic politics and foreign policy have merged, the debate around Turkey's new constitution should involve deliberation among all political parties and civil society, with the aim of strengthening the conditions for democratic and fair governance, the culture of living together, and equal citizenship, rather than focusing exclusively on the presidential system. While the presidential system can be part of the solution, it must not be forced on Turkish society.

Refugee crisis

Europe is seen as the target destination for many refugees. The flow of refugees has added to existing flows of migrants—more than one million migrants and refugees crossed into Europe in 2015—and has paralyzed the European Union and other European countries, which have struggled to formulate a political response.[2] EU members, especially Germany, are deeply concerned with the refugee crisis, which has direct political and social implications in their countries.

But these effects pale alongside refugees' impact on Turkey; approximately 4.8 million people have fled Syria so far, and around 2.7 million of them currently reside in Turkey.[3] Turkish government officials estimate that an additional 1 million to 2 million Syrians could arrive in Turkey in 2016.[4] Less than 15 percent of the refugees in Turkey—nearly 300,000 people—are registered in refugee camps, while the remaining refugee population is mobile within Turkey, searching for better economic conditions or safe passage to Europe.[5]

According to the European Union, around 150,000 Syrian refugees have claimed political asylum in Europe since the beginning of the current Syrian conflict in 2011, mostly in Germany and Sweden.[6] Although only 4 percent of Syrian refugees have been able claim asylum in Europe, the arrivals have prompted EU member states to shut their borders and have put the Schengen System of visa-free travel under severe strain.[7] The European Union has sought to address the symptoms of the crisis by mobilizing billions of euros in humanitarian aid to share the cost with Turkey and by asking member states to accept refugees, but this approach has been met with limited success.[8]

The war against the Islamic State

Unlike the refugee crisis, the war against IS has brought in leading regional and global actors—the United States, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, and Israel—that are vying for geopolitical influence or working to restore stability in the region. Meanwhile, IS today is more than a terrorist organization but less than a state. Its brutal and inhumane attacks definitely make it a terrorist organization. Yet, perhaps more importantly, it constitutes a social and political movement with a claim and the military and administrative means to be an Islamic state, though an abhorrent one. IS was able to expand its influence in the region mainly because of state failure in Syria and Iraq. But the durability of IS is due to the fact that powers like Russia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia are more intent on waging a proxy war over Syria's future to augment their respective geo-political power in the region than on rooting out IS.[9] These competing agendas and the lack of hegemonic leadership in global and regional affairs has created ambiguity around the intentions of the strongest actors and a resource gap between what is really needed to militarily defeat IS and what the great powers are prepared to commit to that effort.

Another reason for the limited response to IS is that the leading actors pursuing the campaign are largely insulated—primarily by Turkey—from the security and humanitarian impacts of IS's rise. While the United States, Europe, and the Gulf Arab states have been targeted by IS operations, these countries can largely contain these threats through intelligence and counterterrorism efforts; Turkey, given its long, shared border with Syria, has less of an ability to seal out IS. Likewise, none of these great or regional powers—except Turkey—bear the socioeconomic and security burden of the refugee crisis.[10]

In sum, the refugee problem and the war against IS are intertwined crises in which humanitarianism is held hostage by geopolitical interests and morality by power and in which Turkey is the primary frontline state.

A return to proactive foreign policy

Turkey is both an affected and effective country in relation to these twin crises. Turkey is affected because it has accommodated more than 2.7 million Syrian refugees and is shouldering the resulting economic and security externalities.[11] Turkey is also an effective actor because it has the necessary hard and soft power to affect the anti-IS campaign and any prospective post-conflict reconstruction phase in Syria and Iraq. Turkey has demonstrated these abilities in its response to the refugee crisis and, in the past, in its engagement in the economic revitalization of northern Iraq.[12] Certainly in its treatment of Syrian refugees, Turkey has contributed a few lessons to the European Union on tolerance and hospitality. However, several internal and external obstacles have to be removed before Turkey can act with full effectiveness on these issues.

The largest obstacle is the deteriorating security situation externally and within Turkey due to high-casualty terrorist attacks by IS and the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, in major Turkish cities and border towns. The increased violence emanating from IS and the PKK strongholds across the Syrian and Iraqi borders has stifled the Kurdish peace process. Coupled with these security threats, Europe's and the United States' growing perception of Turkey as a buffer state encourages security-oriented approaches to take priority over normalization and the peace process. Domestically, polarization between the political parties and within society as a result of the Justice and Development Party's, or AKP's, resolve to move unilaterally to draft a new constitution—and its unambiguous goal to move to a presidential system—creates serious democratization problems. Therefore, the current political climate does not allow for a return to democratic reform and the peace process. This state of affairs is not sustainable or acceptable, and the Turkish government and society at large must strike a balance between security concerns and democratic reforms, despite the hostile security and political environments. The following four steps would help to overcome these internal and external challenges.

First, the West should end its functionalist and instrumentalist approach to Turkey. Recent rhetoric from allies such as the United States and the European Union has increasingly stressed Turkey's attributes as a "NATO ally" and a "partner in countering Daesh [or the Islamic State] in the region."[13] By the same token, Europe's view of Turkey has skewed from that of a strategic partner to a strategic neighbor. This shift was illustrated by the German chancellor's visit to Turkey on October 18, 2015—a week after the devastating Ankara bombings that claimed more than 100 lives—and the ensuing measures for Ankara and Brusells to share the financial burden of supporting refugees, which resulted in a 3 billion-euro aid package for Turkey and the prospect of opening new chapters in EU accession negotiations.[14] This attitude is reminiscent of the Cold War when the West engaged in horse-trading with Turkey and would use Ankara to hold security threats at bay in exchange for limited economic incentives.[15] This approach does not grant Turkey a seat at the decision-making table but rather empowers it as an enforcer. While short-term security objectives are equally important, enduring peace and stability in the region must lean on the tools on which Turkish soft power was built between 2002 and 2010, such as humanitarianism, sustainable and inclusive economic growth, human development, and equal citizenship based on constitutional rights. These pillars helped contribute to positive change in the region and the Western understanding, at that time, of Turkey as a strategic partner rather than a buffer state.[16]

Second, Turkey should return to its previous proactive foreign policy—which had Turkey setting the agenda in the region rather than reacting to events that unfolded outside of its sphere of influence—and take action to avoid being treated as a buffer state. One way to do this is to work to thaw Turkey's frozen accession negotiations for EU membership. Turkey's successful combination of democracy, modernity, and Islam

in the immediate post-9/11 world helped discredit the concept of a clash of civilizations between the East and the West or between Islam and the West. It was Turkey's soft power and its ability to bridge divides that brought it closer to the European Union, which was struggling with its own problems of xenophobia, Islamophobia, and migration. In return, Turkey used the EU accession requirements to consolidate its own democracy, institutions of good governance, and rights-based equal citizenship. The motto "stronger together," which was used then, is relevant again in the face of today's crises.[17] Ankara's reengagement with Brussels and the opening of Chapters 23 and 24 on the judiciary and fundamental rights, justice, freedom, and security will hopefully put Turkey back on track vis-à-vis full membership and prompt domestic reform.

Third, Turkey's own democratic and institutional reform process is crucial for its successful return to a proactive foreign policy. Currently, Turkey's ability to project power is limited by its highly polarized politics. The process of drafting a new constitution will be critical to addressing this polarization. But the ultimate objective of making a new constitution should not be to shift the Turkish political regime toward presidentialism. On the contrary, the new constitution should strengthen the norms and institutions underpinning Turkey's democracy and should reinforce the culture of coexistence by strengthening individual rights. Presidentialism can be an integral part of the new constitution, but the main aim should be to enhance and consolidate Turkish democracy. Perhaps most importantly, the process of drafting must itself be inclusive, drawing in genuine participation and support from opposition parties and civil society groups.

Fourth—and related to the process of democratic reform—Turkey must reengage with the Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, and Syria on more constructive and cooperative terms. Although this is difficult to imagine while the current conflict with the PKK rages on, the emerging role of Kurdish communities in the region could boost Turkey's soft power if Ankara rejuvenated the peace process. Peace between the Turkish state and its own Kurdish minority, as well as a partnership with the Kurds in Iraq and Syria, would be mutually beneficial and could help insulate the Turkish border from IS, strengthen the forces fighting extremists in Syria, resolve long-running conflicts, and boost cooperation on energy projects while offering markets for Turkish exports. In this regard, a grand bargain between Turkey and Kurdish communities is essential for reinvigorating the sort of economic and security cooperation that helped the majority-Kurdish areas of southeast Turkey, Iraq, and Syria prosper before the region descended into chaos. A lasting solution to Turkey's Kurdish problem could also help reinforce Turkey's domestic reform process: A solution would remove the largest disagreement between rival political parties in Turkey and would add momentum to the constitutional reforms necessary to resolve festering constitutional issues, build inclusive democratic institutions, and guarantee equal citizenship and fundamental rights.

Conclusion

In short, a solution to the twin crises requires Turkey's active participation. The West should not relegate Turkey's role and importance to that of a trustee state or security buffer, as it did during the Cold War.[18] In the post-9/11 world, Turkey has already demonstrated what it can accomplish through soft power and proactive foreign policy. Currently, this positive regional influence has been undermined by the war in Syria, the resulting refugee crisis, and domestic polarization, particularly with respect to Turkey's Kurds. But by taking on the difficult domestic and external reforms suggested above, Turkey can move beyond short-term security arrangements and contribute to enduring peace and stability in its region. To this end, Ankara will have to return to the positive identity-based perceptions that were the foundation of Turkey's soft power and proactive foreign policy. These were simply Turkey's attributes as: a model developing democracy, a pivotal regional power, a trading state, a full EU-accession country, a humanitarian state, and an energy hub. Reinforced by Turkey's domestic reforms and constructive engagement with Kurdish communities, the reaffirmation of Turkey's proactive foreign policy would restore Turkey as an effective actor in helping address the root causes of the twin crises.

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Endnotes

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