

III. Turkey's search for stability and legitimacy in 2016

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Has Turkey, long seen as a pillar of stability in a sensitive geographical and geopolitical location, now become a source of instability and unpredictability in the Middle East, for Europe and for the transatlantic community? During 2016 a combination of external geopolitical events and regime decisions accelerated trends in Turkish domestic and foreign policies, and a series of disruptive events led to several open questions regarding Turkey's ongoing transformation.

In many ways 2016 was for Turkey and its people—Turks, Kurds and others—a true *annus horribilis*, with a string of dramatic events and existential threats shaking the country: large-scale terror attacks against civilian and military targets; a lethal coup d'état attempt followed by a massive purge of the alleged plotters as well as of a huge number of other suspected anti-regime circles in state and society; large-scale warfare between the Turkish security forces and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK); and military involvement in northern Syria. These events and others had a highly problematic impact on the Turkish economy and on Turkey's traditional ties with both the European Union (EU) and the United States, which in turn affected Turkey's crisis-ridden policies and resulted in policy changes relating to Syria and Iraq.

At the close of 2016, therefore, events during the year (and before) had resulted in a great deal of uncertainty going forward. Further to this, the politically polarizing issue of introducing a presidential system, in breach of Turkey's republican parliamentary tradition and within a post-coup state of emergency climate and continuing comprehensive purges, raised further questions regarding what would be the new normal in the 'New Turkey' conceived by President Erdoğan and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). In the area of foreign policy, pending clarification of what difference the unknown 'Trump factor' might make, 2016 ended on a note of tentative, risky Turkish reorientation: the country distancing itself from the EU and the USA and moving towards emerging cooperation with its historical enemy, Russia, and the antagonist across the Sunni–Shia fault line, Iran, with unfinished wars in neighbouring Syria and Iraq as yardsticks.¹ The Kurdish dimension provided the main connection between these major domestic and foreign policy developments.

In another arena, a potential silver lining to the complex mix of domestic and foreign affairs was a note of hope at the end of the year that United

¹ See e.g. Adelman, J., 'The long history of conflict between Russia and Turkey', *Time/History News Network*, 4 Dec. 2015.

Table 4.2. The main political actors in Turkey, 2016

Acronym	Name in English	Description
AKP	Justice and Development Party	Founded in 2001, the AKP has ruled Turkey since winning the elections in 2002. Former foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, became party leader and prime minister after Erdoğan was elected president in 2014.
CHP	Republican People's Party	Established by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of the Turkish Republic, in 1923, the CHP represents the main opposition. The party leader is Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu.
..	Gülen movement	An Islamic transnational religious and social movement led by Turkish preacher Fethullah Gülen, who has lived in the USA since 1999.
HDP	Peoples' Democratic Party	A democratic-socialist party that stood for the first time in 2015. It is led by Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ.
MHP	Nationalist Movement Party	A far-right party informally known as the Grey Wolves and led by Devlet Bahçeli.
PKK	Turkistan Workers' Party	The PKK has waged an armed struggle for equal rights and self-determination for the Kurds in Turkey since 1984.
TSK	Turkish Armed Forces	The military forces of the Republic of Turkey.

.. = not applicable; AKP = Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi; CHP = Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi; HDP = Halkların Demokratik Partisi; MHP = Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi; PKK = Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê; TSK = Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri.

Nations-led negotiations would finally lead to a settlement in the protracted Cyprus crisis.²

The 15 July coup attempt

On the night of 15 July 2016 a serious and lethal attempted coup d'état shook the country. Although this was clearly a serious military attempt to overthrow the government, after strong resistance both from people on the streets and from parliament and loyal factions of the armed forces, it soon became evident that the attempt had failed.³

While details of the coup attempt itself remain unclear and contested, it is clear that it had a history preceding it and serious consequences following it (see table 4.2 for a list of the main political actors in Turkey). It was both an outcome of a process of increasing conflict—notably between the ruling AKP and its leader and the rival Sunni movement in emerging Turkish Islamism led by Fethullah Gülen—and a game changer and accelerator of ensuing

² See e.g. Smith, H., 'Talks to secure Cyprus reunification enter "final stages"', *The Guardian*, 9 Jan. 2017.

³ For an account of events that night see e.g. 'Turkey's coup attempt: what you need to know', BBC News, 17 July 2016; and Al Jazeera, 'Turkey's failed coup attempt: all you need to know', 29 Dec. 2016.

events. The relationship between the two contenders, previously one of practical cooperation in a joint struggle against the former ruling secularist (or Kemalist) military and civilian establishment, had since 2013 turned into mutual demonization and hostility. This led the AKP regime to label the Gülenists as a terror organization (Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü, or FETÖ) and seek to purge its followers, who were seen as having infiltrated state institutions, especially the education system, the police and the judiciary. According to the official regime narrative, the coup attempt was planned as revenge for earlier crackdowns and as a means to pre-empt new punitive regime measures, and was in that sense a counter-coup (in the ongoing violent dialectics of 2016).⁴

Although at the time of writing many sensitive questions relating to the events themselves remain unanswered, the consequences of the coup and the ensuing stages of popular resistance and regime response can be said to have clearly laid the foundations for the pattern of repercussions that followed.⁵ These can be summarized as follows: (a) an atmosphere of revolutionary agitation in which the surviving and now drastically strengthened regime and its 'heroic' leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, could further consolidate power and set in motion its own counter-coup, with words such as 'traitor' and 'treason' in increasingly widespread use; (b) an initial, post-coup spirit of tentative national unity (the so-called Yenikapi spirit, based on the shock of a serious threat to Turkish democracy by an 'unthinkable' military coup d'état); (c) broad acceptance, initially, of an extraordinary situation requiring and legitimizing extraordinary measures such as the instant promulgation of a state of emergency and stern measures against suspected plotters; (d) a comprehensive wave of (Turkish) nationalism leading (together with a string of terror attacks by the PKK and its splinter group TAK, the Kurdish Freedom Falcons) to enhanced understanding and cooperation between the AKP and the nationalist opposition National Movement Party (MHP), notably on the constitutional amendments issue; (e) the coup trauma, which promoted suspicion, conspiracy theories and tension in Turkey's nationalist attitudes towards its Western allies and partners; and (f) a weakening and

⁴ The terms 'counter-coup' and 'dialectics' also feature in the discourse on the nature of the ensuing purge. See e.g. Erol, A., 'Legality and power: the 2016 Turkish coup attempt and the state of emergency', *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Socio-Legal Studies* (1 Nov. 2016), p. 10. On the history of AKP-Gülenist mixed relations, see Rodrik, D., 'Is Fethullah Gülen behind Turkey's coup', *Social Europe*, 23 July 2016; and Karaveli, H. M., 'Turkey's fractured state', *New York Times*, 1 Aug. 2016. The terms also refer to the regime's narrative on the corruption cases in 2013-14 as constituting an attempted coup d'état.

⁵ There are many accounts, often contradictory, of what is so far known about the events. See e.g. Filkins, D., 'Turkey's thirty-year coup', *New Yorker*, 17 Oct. 2016; Jenkins, G. H., 'Post-putsch narratives and Turkey's curious coup', *Turkey Analyst*, 22 July 2015; Candar, C., 'A new Turkey? Implications for the failed military coup and subsequent political coup', *Horizons*, Centre for International Relations and Sustainable Development, issue no. 8 (Autumn 2016); and Hurtas, S., 'Turkey closes coup commission as key questions linger', *Al Monitor*, 28 Dec. 2016.

demoralization of the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) in view of the ensuing swift government crackdown on suspected Gülenist (and other) perpetrators-cum-infiltrators, soldiers and generals alike.⁶

Thus, the attempted coup, while apparently taking most by surprise, took place against a backdrop of ongoing crisis.⁷ The enmity between the AKP and the Gülenist movement had been accelerating since 2013 and was now officially part of Turkey's so-called war on terror. Additionally, in 2015 the Turkish Government took two important policy steps after the June elections: it joined the US-led anti-Islamic State (IS) coalition, thereby allowing the USA and other states to use the military Incirlik airbase, and it resumed large-scale warfare (and political intimidation) with the PKK and the wider Kurdish movement.⁸ In addition to these two developments, there was a link to developments in northern Syria (see below), where PKK-affiliated Kurdish militias—the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), acting since 2014 under the umbrella of the Syrian Defence Forces (SDF)—were increasingly feared to be gaining ground and legitimacy as a 'boots on the ground' ally of the USA in the latter's actions against IS.⁹

The context of the attempted coup, in sum, was one in which Turkey was already involved in a war on terror on at least three separate fronts: against the PKK/TAK, IS and 'FETÖ'. The issue of whether these three actors were, in fact, separate phenomena or somehow working in tandem—masterminded by a foreign, anti-Turkish 'superior mind' (be it the USA or others), as increasingly hinted at in the AKP polemic and evolving pro-regime media conspiracy theories—largely defined the rising tension between the Obama Administration and the Erdoğan Government towards the end of 2016.¹⁰

⁶ The ideological composition of the plotters/purge victims remained one of many unclear questions throughout the year. On 'counter-coup', see note 4 above. The points here, seeking to summarize the 'objective' consequences of the failed coup in conditioning the ensuing dialectics of events, are based on the author's own reading of a comprehensive flow of reporting.

⁷ Kingsley, P., "'We thought coups were in the past': how Turkey was caught unaware", *The Guardian*, 16 July 2016. Exactly how unaware relevant circles actually were has remained a topic of debate.

⁸ On the Turkish general election in 2015, see Özel, S. and Yilmaz, A., 'The Kurds in the Middle East, 2015', *SIPRI Yearbook 2016*, pp. 67–70.

⁹ For accounts of this chain of events, see e.g. Salih, C., 'Turkey, the Kurds, and the fight against Islamic State', European Council of European Affairs, 14 Sep. 2015; Bremmer, I., 'These 5 stats explain Turkey's war on ISIS—and the Kurds', *Time*, 31 July 2015; and Cook, S. A., 'The real reason Turkey is fighting ISIL', *Politico Magazine*, 21 Aug. 2015.

¹⁰ See e.g. Akyol, M., 'Why Turkish government pushes "global conspiracy" narrative', *Al Monitor*, 9 Jan. 2017; and Arango, T., 'In Turkey, US hand is seen in nearly every crisis', *New York Times*, 4 Jan. 2017.

Autumn 2016: a series of disruptive aftershocks

The dramatic coup event released a series of partially overlapping aftershocks, which were experienced differently by various domestic and international actors and spectators.

One shock related to the revelation (or claim), strongly marketed in the AKP narrative, of a highly developed degree of Gülenist infiltration, not only within security institutions such as the police and the judiciary, but also within civil society and the education and business world, and in the traditionally secularist cadres of the TSK. This infiltration of the Turkish military was commonly perceived to be largely a result of Gülen-affiliated officers filling vacancies created in the Gülen-inspired (and, at that time, AKP-supported) purges of 2008–13.¹¹

A second shock, during the regime-led post-coup unity mobilization within Turkey, was the perception of Western reticence in defence of the elected government, while taking a critical stance towards the AKP's repressive response and the creeping authoritarianism of the Erdoğan regime. This perceived absence of critically needed support for Turkish democracy against the various threats it faced angered the regime and its supporters (and others) and later fed into emerging Turkey–EU and Turkey–US acrimony. The dilemma for the West concerned how to credibly and reliably distinguish between (conditional) support for the elected government and showing (unconditional) solidarity with Turkey's democracy.¹²

The attempted coup was immediately followed by a massive, unprecedented purge, or series of purges, by the regime. This targeted not only suspected coup plotters directly, and huge numbers of people with suspected Gülenist links, but also—since the anti-Gülen purge coincided with, and had become part of, Turkey's broader multi-front war on terror—other categories sweepingly charged with terror links, especially pro-Kurdish politicians and intellectuals in both media and academia. The proclamation of a state of emergency, extended in stages into 2017, allowed for rule by government decree, expanding step-by-step the scope of the purge to all sectors of state and society: the military, police and judiciary, ministries and public corporations, media and civil society organizations, and private businesses. In Western and liberal circles, the arrests of leading pro-Kurdish Peoples'

¹¹ See e.g. Gurcan, M., 'Power struggle erupts in Turkey's security structure', *Al Monitor*, 12 Oct. 2016; and Karaveli, H., 'Assassination in Ankara. Russia, NATO, and Turkey's violent politics', *Foreign Affairs*, 3 Jan. 2017.

¹² For this elaborate discourse, see e.g. Bildt, C., 'Europe, stand up for Erdoğan', *Politico Magazine*, 2 Aug. 2016; Ozkirimli, U., 'Hej Carl Bildt, are you asleep? Should Europe still stand with Erdoğan?', *Open Democracy*, 2 Nov. 2016; Ulgen, S., 'Whither Turkey', *Project Syndicate*, 23 Sep. 2016; and Pierini, M., 'Handling Turkey's runaway politics', *Carnegie Europe*, 14 Nov. 2016.

Democratic Party (HDP) lawmakers, as well as several internationally renowned journalists, were particularly criticized.¹³

With the total number of those arrested, detained, suspended or dismissed by the end of 2016 exceeding 100 000, or in the millions if all affected family members and dependants are included, and with no opportunities for appeal available under the state of emergency, far-reaching questions arose as to when and how this massive crackdown could be terminated.¹⁴ There were also concerns over how the country's economy was supposed to manage with such a massive depletion of skills and labour, and over the fate of liberal democracy and the rule of law.¹⁵

A third, parallel shock (and a contrasting reality of the war on terror) was the terror attacks and bombing campaigns allegedly perpetrated by the PKK (or its splinter group, TAK) and IS, respectively. In 2016, before and after the coup attempt, there were significant attacks in Istanbul (12 January), Diyarbakir (13 January), Ankara (17 February), Ankara (13 March), Nusaybin (18 March), Istanbul (19 March), Nusaybin (21 March), Diyarbakir (31 March), Istanbul (7 June), Ömerli (23 June), Istanbul (28 June), Gaziantep (20 August), Istanbul (10 December) and Kayseri (17 December). Also in this wave of violence was the murder of Russian Ambassador Andrey Karlov on 19 December in Ankara. The total number of deaths from these attacks was 258. Add to this figure the number of fatalities in the lethal 15 July coup attempt—some 265 (including some 100 coup plotters, according to Prime Minister Yildirim)—and the total becomes 523, to which can be added thousands more wounded victims of the violence. Overall, for a country not at war, this is a very high toll by any relevant country comparison.¹⁶

A fourth shock, which preceded the coup, was the burden of having to cope with a refugee population nearing an estimated 3 million as a result primarily of almost six years of devastating civil war in neighbouring Syria (and Iraq), with the very real potential of many more refugees in the future. This burden also had serious implications for Turkey's interaction with the

¹³ See e.g. Gotev, G., 'Turkey arrests leaders of pro-Kurdish HDP party', Euractiv, 4 Nov. 2016; and 'EU lawmakers criticize Turkey over press freedom', Hurriyet Daily News, 28 Oct. 2016. For exercises in attempted quantification of the massive, 'unprecedented' purge, or purges, see the gradual updates published by the website Turkey Purge, <<http://turkeypurg.com/>>; and e.g. Gursel, K., 'Settlement schmettlement: Turkish purges target Kurds', Al Monitor, 18 Sep. 2016; Bozarlan, M., 'Is Turkey wiping out Kurdish institutions during lengthy state of emergency?', Al Monitor, 11 Jan. 2017; and Hincks, J., 'Here's a time line of the insane number of people Turkey's president has fired since July 15', *Time*, 23 Nov. 2016.

¹⁴ Exact numbers quantifying with precision the comprehensiveness of the purge, as it affects the state apparatus, political circles, the business and education worlds and civil society, are hard to come by, both owing to the politicized nature of featuring figures and since categories of 'purges' often overlap.

¹⁵ See e.g. Habibi, N., 'Can Turkey's economy come back from coup and massive purge?', Informed Comment, 28 July 2016; and *Financial Times*, 'Lira's fall imperils Erdogan's grand designs in Turkey', 12 Jan. 2017.

¹⁶ See e.g. 'Assassination in Turkey comes amid wave of violence', *New York Times*, 18 Dec. 2016.

EU over both migration regulation and the struggle against violent jihadist and other forms of terrorism.¹⁷

A final shock—or rather, fundamental problem—was the cumulative impact of all the above on the Turkish economy, with most economic indicators at the end of 2016 pointing towards real risks of painful economic decline as measured by such indicators as gross domestic product (GDP) growth and the (rapidly falling) value of the lira.¹⁸

As a result of these deeply troubling events, President Erdoğan lamented in his 2017 New Year speech: ‘Turkey has been waging a new war of liberation in the recent years’ and is under ‘a major attack . . . Our national unity, our territorial integrity, our institutions, economy, foreign policy, in short all our elements that keep us standing as a state are under a major attack.’¹⁹

The events of 2016 gave fresh momentum to Erdoğan’s pressure for constitutional change to a presidential system, which would give the president executive power over Turkish law, allowing him to form a government independently of parliament and to appoint his own aides, ministers and deputies, while abolishing the post of prime minister.²⁰ This issue, which at the time of writing the Turkish Parliament had only just started to debate, constitutes the pivotal point of political dispute in crisis-ridden Turkey’s political discourse at the end of 2016.

Turkish foreign policy 2016: a double about-face

At the extra party congress of the ruling AKP in May 2016, three important and linked policy announcements were made: (a) the prioritization of the presidential system; (b) the replacement of the Prime Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, with Binali Yıldırım; and (c) in terms of Turkey’s foreign policy, as announced by Yıldırım, the aim to ‘increase the number of friends and

¹⁷ During 2015, however, Turkey made considerable efforts to guard against this potential, notably by erecting a 330-km fence along its borders with Syria and Iraq to hinder illegal crossing. According to a Turkish General Staff statement, nearly 425 000 people from 74 different countries were captured in 2016 trying to illegally cross Turkey’s border, in addition to foreign fighters from 68 different countries being prevented from joining IS. The statement also mentions that Turkey has spent \$25 billion since 2011 in catering for the country’s estimated 3 million refugees. See e.g. Sharma, S., ‘Turkey “months” from finishing 900km Syria border wall’, *Middle East Eye*, 2 Nov. 2016. On the refugee crisis and its impact on Turkey, see chapter 7 in this volume.

¹⁸ See (note 13). See also Kömurculer, G., ‘The unbearable fragility of the Turkish lira’, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 13 Jan. 2017; *Hurriyet Daily News*, ‘Turkey’s top bosses warn of serious economic risks, urge maintenance of key institutions’, 12 Jan. 2017; and Candar, G., ‘Turkey faces financial disaster’, *Al Monitor*, 13 Jan. 2017.

¹⁹ *Hurriyet Daily News*, ‘Turkey is in a new war of liberation: President Erdoğan’, 31 Dec. 2016; and *Hurriyet Daily News*, ‘Erdoğan: Istanbul attack aims to create chaos’, 1 Jan. 2017. See also Dogan, Z., ‘What’s behind Erdoğan’s call for “national mobilization”?’’, *Al Monitor*, 19 Dec. 2016.

²⁰ Dearden, L., ‘Turkey slides towards authoritarian rule as commission approves plan to increase powers for President Erdogan’, *The Independent*, 30 Dec. 2016.

decrease the number of enemies'.²¹ As Foreign Minister and then Prime Minister, Davutoğlu had been the chief architect of a foreign policy line branded as neo-Ottoman and pan-Islamist, which was seen by spring 2016 to have landed Turkey in a dead-end, strategically necessitating retreat and reorientation.²²

These decisions should be viewed in the following context. In spring 2016 Turkey and the EU faced a serious migration crisis, leading the two sides to a landmark, albeit highly controversial, migration deal agreed on 18 March. The EU–Turkey Statement encompassed five key components: (a) re-energized talks on Turkey's EU membership bid; (b) the EU allocation of sizeable funds to assist Turkey's integration of migrants; (c) Greece to return to Turkey all 'irregular migrants' crossing the Aegean from Turkey from 20 March; (d) the EU to receive and resettle one Syrian migrant for each Syrian migrant being returned to Turkey; and (e) the EU (under certain, latterly hotly contested, conditions) to render visa liberalization for Turkish citizens to Schengen countries in Europe.²³

By the time of the crucial European Council gathering in mid-December 2016, some nine months after its signature, the EU–Turkey Statement remained in the balance (although seen as a net success in preventing Aegean crossings). The events of the intervening period, notably Turkey's failed coup and its aftershocks, served to add difficulties to the broader EU–Turkey relationship, rather than to serve as a vehicle to upgrade the relationship strategically, as envisaged in March. Mutual recrimination rather than confidence building became the order of the day, and the European Parliament's majority decision in November (reacting to the climate of excessive purges in Turkey) to recommend that EU governments suspend further integration talks was a significant and telling event. However, the European Council subsequently adopted a 'play safe and stay the course' ruling: there would be no interruptions in the dialogue with Turkey, but also no new chapters on the negotiating table and no visa liberalization (until Turkey met EU demands on terror laws).²⁴

²¹ See e.g. Genc, K., 'Turkey is about to change', *Huffington Post*, 26 May 2016.

²² See e.g. Dalay, G., 'Turkish foreign policy after Davutoglu: continuity vs. rupture', Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 14 July 2016; Coşkun, B. B., 'The post-Davutoglu era in Turkish foreign policy', *E-International Relations*, 3 June 2016; and Hudson, J., 'America loses its man in Ankara', *Foreign Policy*, 5 May 2016.

²³ Collett, E., 'The paradox of the EU–Turkey refugee deal', Migration Policy Institute, Mar. 2016. See also the discussion on migration in chapter 9 in this volume.

²⁴ Kanter, J., 'European Parliament votes to suspend talks with Turkey on EU', *New York Times*, 24 Nov. 2016; Rankin, J. and Shaheen, K., 'Turkey reacts angrily to symbolic EU Parliament vote on its membership', *The Guardian*, 24 Nov. 2016; Aydintasbas, A., 'Dear Europe: don't drop Turkey', *Washington Post*, 13 Dec. 2016; and European Council Resolution 15/12/2016, defining EU–Turkey relations and including 'conclusions on migration, security, economic and social development, youth, Cyprus and external relations'.

In March and April the other key foreign policy issue was then the pressing need to adapt to emerging realities, especially in Syria, and to simplify the foreign relations equation, seeking more friends and fewer enemies. As a result not least of its own earlier policy choices—notably the June 2015 decisions to reopen the war with the PKK and to officially and fully join the US-led anti-IS coalition—Turkey found itself involved in at least four separate, simultaneous and costly military conflicts plus several conflict-ridden bilateral relations, most but certainly not all linked to the Syrian crisis. These included: (a) military support of anti-Assad rebel groups in Syria; (b) war against the PKK in south-eastern Turkey; (c) active partnership in the US-led struggle against IS in Syria and Iraq; and (d) conflict with Russia. The last of these resulted from the two being on opposite sides in the Syrian civil war (after Russia became actively involved militarily from September 2015) and Turkey’s downing in November 2015 of a Russian SU-24 combat aircraft, which led to a comprehensive package of punitive actions by Russia.²⁵ In addition, and in stark contrast to Davutoğlu’s now ridiculed motto ‘zero problems with all neighbours’, there were also lingering diplomatic conflicts with Israel, Egypt and others.²⁶ Thus, by the time of the AKP May 2016 congress, there was a clear and pressing national need to finally signal a change of course.

As a result, the AKP started to communicate that it was now ready and eager to normalize relations with Israel and Russia. In the case of Russia, normalization cost the Turkish President an apology for the downing in November 2015, but the gain was prospects of economic relief combined with renewed openings for Turkey as a player in the Syrian and Iraqi security processes. The policy also paved the way for the subsequent about-face in Turkey’s foreign and security policy, namely a reorientation of Turkey’s priorities and partnerships in Syria (see below).²⁷

An important variable in this context and for the remainder of the year (and one affecting US–Turkey relations), and a key manifestation of the parallelism between domestic political processes and foreign policy reorientation, was the link between the ongoing military campaign against the PKK (and the intensified political intimidation campaign against the broader Kurdish movement) inside Turkey and increasing Turkish concern at the US-supported role of the Syrian Kurds. A collision of interests had, as mentioned, emerged as a result of the USA’s need for proven and tested Kurdish

²⁵ See e.g. Grove, T. and Ostrouk, A., ‘Putin to keep up pressure on Turkey over shootdown’, *Wall Street Journal*, 3 Dec. 2015; and *Financial Times*, ‘Tensions between Russia and Turkey reach new peak’, 15 Feb. 2016.

²⁶ Zalewski, P., ‘How Turkey went from “zero problems” to zero friends’, *Foreign Policy*, 22 Aug. 2013.

²⁷ Uysal, A., ‘Turkey normalizes its relations with Israel and Russia: reasons and ramifications’, *Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies*, 31 July 2016; and Engdahl, F. W., ‘Russia, Turkey, Israel and a new balance of power’, *New Eastern Outlook*, 23 Oct. 2016.

'boots on the ground' and Turkey's increasing alarm at seeing the Kurds enabled, with US air support, to exploit the anti-IS struggle for their own ends, which included connecting the three cantons (Jazira, Kobane and Afrin) in a contiguous corridor along Turkey's south-eastern border.²⁸ This conflict of strategic interests would only grow throughout the remainder of the year.²⁹

By early July 2016 the twin process of Turkish foreign policy reorientation was in full swing: normalization with Russia and a change of priorities in Syria (de-emphasizing the anti-Assad stance but further upgrading the anti-PYD/YPG stance). In the midst of this complicated and evolving foreign policy context erupted the attempted military coup, which served as both a game changer and an accelerator of events. Reflecting the emerging, albeit still tentative, policy reorientation, President Erdoğan chose Russia and Putin for his first post-coup visit abroad.³⁰

Changing priorities in Syria: the second about-face

In August, after a period of IS shelling of Turkish border towns and in an apparent reaction to SDF advances west of the Euphrates, the post-coup purged TSK was ordered to enter Syrian territory alongside Free Syrian Army units brought over from the Aleppo front. This surprise step, named Operation Euphrates Shield, albeit apparently cleared with Russia and to some (contested) extent also with the USA, was explained as a necessary offensive against IS inside Syria.³¹ However, it gradually became clear that another, at least equally important, Turkish motive was to prevent the Syrian-Kurdish PYD/YPG from connecting the three cantons in the border area. A third motive was also hinted at: to unilaterally establish a safe area for refugees, long demanded by Turkey multilaterally.³²

Regardless of the motives (including domestic post-coup considerations), the Turkish intervention clearly served to add further complications and policy dilemmas to the northern Syrian war zone, with the outgoing Obama Administration in a hurry to launch offensives against IS in Mosul and

²⁸ For background on the Kurdish agenda, see Özel and Yilmaz (note 8).

²⁹ See e.g. BBC Monitoring, 'Turkey v. Syria's Kurds v. Islamic State', 23 Aug. 2016; Walsh, N. P., 'Washington's Syria headache: keeping Turkey and Kurds apart', CNN, 31 Aug. 2016; and Jones, D., 'Turkey increases pressure on the Syrian Kurds', VOA News, 23 Nov. 2016.

³⁰ PBS NewsHour, 'Erdoğan visits Russia after coup attempt stirs tensions with the West', 9 Aug. 2016; and Okello, C., 'Turkey's Erdoğan warms to Russia after West coup response', RFI, 8 Aug. 2016.

³¹ Whether, and to what extent, the USA was consulted or notified remained unclear throughout the year, at least in part due to ensuing divergent views related to the siege of Al Bab.

³² Hacaoglu, S., 'Erdoğan plans Syria's "safe zone" as military campaign widens', Bloomberg, 19 Sep. 2016; and Coskun, O. and Gurses, E., 'With Syria "safe zone" plan, Turkey faces diplomatic balancing act', Reuters, 6 Sep. 2016.

Raqqa, and Russia ready and eager to win the pro-Assad war in Aleppo and then seek Turkey's assistance in winning the peace.³³

Towards the end of the year the focus of attention in this part of the Syrian war was on the town of Al Bab, held and fiercely defended by IS but under siege by TSK-Free Syrian Army forces (who had reached this war zone ahead of the competing YPG and Assad forces). Turkish soldiers—conscripts and officers—were now involved in the fighting and suffering costly casualties both inside Turkey and in neighbouring Syria.³⁴

In parallel, at the main front of the Syrian civil war in Aleppo, Turkey, under a new agreement with Russia, had to watch in silence as the combined forces of the Assad regime–Russia–Iran–Hezbollah reconquered eastern Aleppo, an undertaking carried out at great humanitarian cost and incurring international condemnation.³⁵ Seeing the opportunity to re-establish lost relevance, the Turkish leadership pragmatically offered its services first to mediate the evacuation of rebels and civilians from devastated eastern Aleppo and then, in a trilateral format combining the former foes of Turkey, Russia and Iran, to conceive and launch a ceasefire arrangement across Syria.³⁶ After a trilateral foreign ministerial meeting in Moscow on 20 December (which coincided with the murder of the Russian Ambassador in Ankara), a Putin-led peace conference was scheduled to take place in Astana in Kazakhstan on 23–24 January 2017, involving most of the players in the Syrian crisis (but with IS and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, formerly Al-Nusra, explicitly excluded, and the USA and UN seemingly not involved or invited).³⁷

Thus, after nearly six years of active participation through various proxies in the rebellion against President Assad, Turkey was now facilitating the pro-Assad side's victory in Aleppo, organizing the evacuation of rebels and civilians and seeking to convince formerly supported rebel groups that their best chance was to accept the truce and the proposed peace talks, now conceived by the unlikely trio of Russia, Iran and Turkey.³⁸

³³ See e.g. Ackerman, S., 'US and allies prepare to take Raqqa from Isis as battle for Mosul continues', *The Guardian*, 26 Oct. 2016; and Middle East Eye, 'Aleppo offensive: Western leaders condemn Russia as rebels call for truce', 7 Dec. 2016. See also discussion of the international military activities against IS in chapter 3 in this volume.

³⁴ On the other hand, the Turkish General Staff reported in early Jan. of having 'neutralized' (meaning captured or killed) 2085 militants during Operation Euphrates Shield, of which 1775 were said to be IS militants; *Hurriyet Daily News*, 14 Jan. 2017.

³⁵ On Aleppo see chapter 3, section I, in this volume.

³⁶ See e.g. Akulov, A., 'Moscow declaration: Russia, Turkey and Iran join together to end Syria's tragedy', Strategic Culture Foundation, 21 Dec. 2016.

³⁷ Solomon, E. et al., 'Syrian rebels in secret talks with Moscow to end Aleppo fighting—Turkey-facilitated negotiations without US show how Washington could become sidelined', *Financial Times*, 1 Dec. 2016.

³⁸ Whether the Turkey–Iran relationship will stand the test of a sustained trilateral format, before Astana and beyond, is discussed in Doğan, Z., 'Turkish–Iranian rivalry may derail Syrian peace efforts', *Al Monitor*, 3 Jan. 2017. See also Gurcan, M., 'Russia pleased with deepening

The year also ended on a note of deep Turkish frustration with the outgoing Obama Administration, including over perceived US feet-dragging on the issue of Fethullah Gülen's extradition. Instead, hopes were pinned on the incoming Trump Administration and its perceived willingness and ability to prioritize Turkey as an ally, and Erdoğan as a partner.

Conclusions

Domestic developments in Turkey during its 2016 *annus horribilis*, in parallel with enhanced risk exposure following its foreign policy reorientation, will unavoidably remain lasting ingredients in Turkey's continued struggle for identity, stability and political legitimacy. Several basic questions remain to be answered. Is Turkey's move towards authoritarianism (as per the current constitutional amendment) compatible with remaining anchored in partnership with the West (namely the EU, USA and NATO)? Can political stability be realized by force/imposition? Can there be economic growth in such conditions? How can there be stability without legitimacy, and how can there be legitimacy without mechanisms for consensus building?

For the EU, these questions probably imply having to handle differently the balance between recognized economic and security interdependence, the migration crisis and the real risks of political estrangement during the years to come. This implies more *realpolitik* and less effort towards genuine integration, based on the Copenhagen criteria and the EU's core values. Similarly, for the USA and NATO, at issue is how to refine, or redefine, the balance between perceptions of a new, substantially different Turkey under the long-term absolute leadership of a strong and independent-minded president with Islamist credentials, and a continuing need for Turkey as a strategic ally in a turbulent Middle East and against an assertive Russia.