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Authoritarian at home and impulsive abroad - Erdoğan's foreign policy in the Middle East

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Turkey's role as a player in the Middle East has changed dramatically during the last years, as it has gone from being viewed as a role model to a problem maker in the region. This has been intertwined with president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's growing authoritarianism.

In domestic politics Erdoğan follows a certain compass, aiming at strengthening his grip, as with the snap elections scheduled for June 24, 2018, which will give him even greater executive power in his new presidential system, if he wins. But his foreign policy is characterized by impulsiveness and lack of understanding of the MENA region. Many of today's problems in Turkey – Erdoğan's quest for a one-man rule, the corruption scandals, the civil war with the outlawed Kurdish guerilla PKK (Kurdistan's Workers Party) and the Salafi jihadist terror that has hit the republic numerous times – can be traced back to the same roots: Ankara's fatal miscalculations on Syria after the eruption of the Arab spring in 2011.

But one red thread can be found in his Middle East policy: His attachment to the Muslim Brothers and its backers. Unlike many branches of the Muslim Brothers, however, he lacks a strategic thinking when he tries to navigate between reefs in the Arab world.

In his foreign policy, he has shown that is only ready to give in only to one thing: overwhelming power, as has been the case with Russia.

No longer a role model

Today's Turkey is a traumatized country. The republic, which some years ago appeared like a vibrant example for citizens of stagnant, authoritarian regimes in the Arab world, nowadays has lost its gloss and is heading towards the consolidation of a despotic rule.

Turkey is suffering from many wounds and a collective post-traumatic stress syndrome, which will take years to recover from. The failed coup in July 2016 and the referendum in April 2017, which gave president Erdoğan almost unlimited presidential powers, are only two explanations to this trauma.

There is another one: the disastrous geopolitical miscalculation in 2011 when the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government made an abrupt U-turn, away from its former foreign policy doctrine 'zero problems with the neighbors', and ended up having problems with an increasing number of neighbors. Syria became the most calamitous example, but not the only one.

Most people in Turkey admitted some years later that serious miscalculations were made in Syria. Even the deputy prime minister Numan Kurtulmuş admitted big mistakes and talked of the need of correction[i]. But one man has refused to acknowledge any wrongdoing across Turkey's southern border: the almost omnipotent Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

When peaceful demonstrators took to the streets in Syria in March 2011, Ankara was hoping that Bashar al-Assad's dictatorship in Damascus would crumble and give way to a government led, or at least shared, by the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brothers, favored allies of the ruling AKP.

But Turkey's government proved to have poor analysis on Syria, as well as on other Arab countries. Even though Turkey carries the legacy of the former Ottoman Empire, for centuries a colonial power in the Levant, today's Turkey has few Arabic speaking diplomats, insiders lament. You can easily hear Turkish analysts, as well as Arab scholars and diplomats, argue that Ankara's outlook towards the Arab world is arrogant.

Hubris in Ankara

When Ahmet Davutoğlu was newly appointed as foreign minister in May 2009, he launched his doctrine 'zero problems with the neighbors'. During his first week as foreign minister he explained it to a group of visiting European journalists, of whom I happened to be one. Davutoğlu claimed that it meant that Turkey was able to speak like the Europeans in Brussels and like the Arabs in Baghdad. But neither Davutoğlu nor Erdoğan, who was prime minister at that time, could grasp the situation in Iraq or Syria. The AKP government failed to understand that the spine of the Assad regime was its security branches with their long tentacles and utter savagery and that the Syrian regime was intent on survival at any cost.

Before the Syrian uprising president Erdoğan had fostered close relations with president Bashar al-Assad and tried to act as a mediator between Israel and Syria. In February 2010, when I interviewed Assad in his presidential palace in Damascus, he talked at length about Turkey's role as a mediator and the prospects for peace with Israel.[ii]

Erdoğan and his wife Emine even spent holidays with Bashar al-Assad and his spouse Asma[iii]. Turkey's strong man obviously thought he could maneuver the Syrian president. But he failed.

When civilians in Syrian cities took to the streets during the Arab spring of 2011, Ankara first asked Assad to open the door for the Syrian Muslim Brothers, so that they could play an influential role in Damascus[iv]. But the Muslim Brothers were anathema for Assad. After an Islamic uprising in Hama in 1982, the Syrian Muslim Brothers had been ruthlessly crushed by his father, Hafez al-Assad. Membership in the organization was punished by death, under the Syrian emergency law 49. Damascus lifted the emergency laws in April 2011, in a cosmetic move, but the merciless crackdown against the protesters and as well as the draconian punishment of the Muslim Brothers was unaffected.

Breaking relations with Damascus

When the schemes of Ankara did not work, Turkey in August 2011 made an impulsive move and broke its relations with Damascus. This proved to be a core mistake. Turkey acted without deeper analysis and contributed to what soon became a wildfire. With Pandora's Box wide open, the Syrian crisis became a proxy war with many actors – among them Iran, Hezbollah, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Russia and the U.S. – who were all driven by their own agendas. Turkey became one of these actors at an early stage. Ankara committed itself to a regime change by military means in Syria, not listening to seasoned voices in Ankara who argued that this was not feasible. One well-placed Turkish source described the disastrous policy mistakes to me:[v]

> "For a regime change policy to succeed by external military intervention (apart from the international law aspects of the issue), two conditions are required: Firstly, a strong opposition is needed which could take over when the ancient regime falls. If that condition is not met, even if the existing regime falls in some way, it is almost obvious that a new power struggle between various opposition groups, maybe an even more bloody one, would follow. A second condition for a regime change policy to succeed is, there should be a minimum amount of consensus among the relevant international powers. None of these two conditions were met in Syria. Please also note that Turkey had no previous experience of a regime change policy in other countries. So we can say, Ankara engaged itself for a policy it had no experience of, and that without making any proper analysis."

Deaf to criticism Ankara opened its southern borders for weapons and foreign fighters who were willing to join a militarized rebellion, supported by two Gulf rivals, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, who both wanted to have the upper hand in Syria. Inside Syria, Turkey and Qatar by the time started to fund Ahrar al-Sham, one of the biggest armed groups in the north, while the Saudis funded the rebels of Jaish al-Islam, which had its stronghold in the countryside around Damascus (Eastern Ghouta). Later they were driven out by the Assad regime, supported by its allies – Russia, Iran and Shiite militias like Hezbollah.

Assad's cynism

In the early summer of 2011 Damascus released hundreds of diehard Salafi jihadists from the Sayidnaya prison. The cynical plan of Assad was to let them become key actors in the killing fields. Assad and his security apparatus knew the Salafi jihadists in its own prisons well after the Iraq insurgency, when Syria for some years became a 'rat line' for jihadistswho volunteered to fight the Americans.[vi] In early 2003, at the start of the US invasion in Iraq, Syria's top Sunni authority, the 92 year old Grand Mufti, Ahmad Kaftaro, encouraged suicide bombings in Iraq. 'I call on Muslims everywhere to use all means possible to thwart the aggression, including martyr operations against the belligerent American, British and Zionist invaders', he said in a statement, which by no means was prevented by the Syrian regime.[vii]

While reporting from Damascus in March 2003, I saw young Syrian Sunni men lining up in front of the Iraqi embassy, still controlled by Saddam Hussein. These young men wanted to join the fight against the US invaders in Iraq. As I talked to some potential insurgents, Syrian police officers in uniforms stood idly by.[viii] This traffic from Syria, to help the insurgency in Iraq, was at its height in 2005–2007. It did not, however, prevent the US from extraditing suspect Al Qaida members to the Syrian torture chambers. When Assad wanted to improve relations with Washington in 2009, he hosted visitors like John Kerry, a senator at the time, and sent scores of jihadists to prison – only to release them when a civilian and peaceful protest broke out in Syria some years later.

In 2011 Assad apparently wanted to create 'the perfect enemy' inside Syria, fighters who would scare the West from intervening. He expected that it would not last long until the Salafi jihadists would take the lead in the opposition. Damascus got what it wanted, or maybe more – ironically with indirect help from Turkey and Sunni Gulf states who provided the fighters with weapons, money and a free passage into

northern Syria. The jihadists in the Nusra Front and ISIS after some time got the upper hand in the rebellion, whereas moderate rebels in the Free Syrian Army were devoured by hardliners or targeted by the regime's barrel bombs.

The result became a disaster for Syria – and to a lesser degree for Turkey which soon had three million Syrian refugees on its soil and no sight of a political solution in its neighboring country. Syria became a battle zone with many front lines and interests. A Turkish scholar, Hakan Güneş, has compared the situation with how Pakistan once enabled the Taliban to grow inside Afghanistan, only to discover that the Taliban soon became an internal problem for Pakistan.[ix] The Independent's veteran correspondent Robert Fisk came to a similar conclusion: Turkey had taken on Pakistan's role as an arms funnel and rest-and-recreation center for Syria's mujahedin, asking if Turkey would soon become the Pakistan of the Middle East.[x]

Turkish journalists in the opposition paper Cumhuriyet, who tried to uncover details about secrets arms transfers across the border, were soon targeted by the AKP regime. In June 2017 a member of parliament from the main opposition party CHP, Enis Bergeroğlu, was sentenced to 25 years in prison for alleged espionage, i. e. for handing over a video film to Cumhuriyet which was said to show how Turkey's intelligence agency was transporting weapons into Syria. The former editor-in-chief Can Dündar fled to Germany, whereas other renowned journalists and board members of Cumhuriyet were held for months or more in Turkey's high security Silivri prison, charged with heavy sentences, before they were released on bail.

A Kurdish quest for autonomy

While this was taking place on Turkey's southern border, another drama was unfolding in the Syrian north: A Kurdish quest for autonomy started to grow in places where the Assad regime had withdrawn its troops. Here again Assad was the shrewd, calculating player, while Erdoğan acted out of impulse.

By withdrawing the Syrian Army from northern Syria, Assad wanted to let the Syrian Kurds create problems for Turkey and possibly destabilize it. Ankara did not understand Assad's tactics of using non-state militant actors for his own interest – although the Syrian regime had been an expert in this field for decades.

One Turkish foreign policy expert, who wishes to remain anonymous, commented dryly that Assad succeeded with his aims, both in the release of the jihadists and in the withdrawal of his army from Syria's border to Turkey. The expert continued:[xi]

> "Since AKP's priority in Syria was the overthrow of the Assad regime, one would rationally expect that Ankara would act to preempt these tactics of Assad. However, the AKP did just the opposite! Assad succeeded in both these two critical tactics almost perfectly, I suppose, even beyond his own expectations, very much thanks to the policies implemented by the AKP. While Assad opened the doors of the prisons for jihadists, the AKP opened Turkey's borders for them."

Many Turkish foreign policy experts prefer not to be named, but their messages often point in the same direction: To protect

Turkey's interests, Ankara should have cooperated with the Kurds in Syria, not demonized them. 'There were many ways to find a common ground with the Kurds in northern Syria', one source who used to be close to power circles tells me.

This is also the credo of the former editor-in-chief of the Turkish paper Radikal, *Ezgi Başaran, in her book Frontline Turkey: The Conflict at the Heart of the Middle East*. She writes: [xii]

> "In the current climate, reinstating a peace process with the Kurds would be a huge undertaking. Yet I firmly believe that it is the only thing that would set the country on the path to a stable democratic future, a society at peace with itself and a status worthy of respect on the international scene."

Nowadays the Syrian Kurdish PYD (Democratic Union Party) is declared a terrorist organization by the AKP, "because it is a branch of PKK, which is true, therefore unfit for any contact and cooperation", as one Turkish analyst puts it. However, not so long ago, AKP made several cooperation attempts with PYD. A well informed source said to me:

> "The AKP government even flew PYD's leader Salih Müslim by government jets to Ankara several times for negotiations. Ankara insisted very hard on Müslim that PYD should participate in the fight to take down the Assad regime. But the PYD did not agree. I don't want to go into details of these negotiations. But just imagine if Salih Müslim had accepted Ankara's proposals and joined the fight with other AKP supported groups to knock down the Assad regime, would PYD still be demonized by the AKP today?"

When the fighters of PYD's military wing, YPG (People's Protection Units), fought against ISIS in Kobane in 2014, Turkey's army remained passive and did nothing to help the Kurds. This outraged not only Kurds in Syria, but also Kurds in Turkey, including Islamic conservatives who used to vote for the governing AKP.

In June 2015, after a parliamentary election that shocked president Erdoğan, the pro-Kurdish party HDP, People's Democratic Party, managed to get even Turkish votes and reached well above the ten percent threshold to the parliament. After that it did not take long before Ankara broke the peace process with the PKK.

Erdoğan chose the war, instead of paving the way for peace with the Kurds. He felt a threat from the charismatic young HDP leader, the lawyer Selahattin Demirtaş, a Kurd whose message appealed to many Turks in 2015. Demirtaş wanted to be a leader of all peoples of Turkey and was not willing to give Erdoğan the presidential powers he was yearning for. Demirtaş also held a defiant tone against the PKK hardliners in the Qandil mountains in northern Iraq:[xiii]

> "We called on the PKK to stop fighting against Turkey. I repeat this call every day. The two sides should take their fingers off the trigger and the weapons should be silenced."

But the leftist Kurdish guerilla jumped into the war in 2015, even though both sides must have known, after the devastating conflict in the 1990's, that this is not a war that can be won. I remember from travels in Turkey's south east how both Kurdish civilians and mayors used to talk about the peace process as necessary – but how hard

it was to reach a conclusion. In the summer of 2015 it was suddenly laid in ashes, by both Erdoğan and the PKK.

When jihadi terror attacks struck vital interests in Turkey, Ankara started to rein in jihadists and tighten the republic's approximately 900 km long border to Syria. But this was too little, too late. The genie was already out of the bottle. ISIS not only had declared its infamous Caliphate in north west Iraq and north east Syria, but had active cells in Turkey. When the offensive against ISIS intensified, the jihadists answered with new attacks on civilian targets in Turkey.

Apologies to Russia

Turkey's downing of a Russian fighter jet in November 2015, followed by a trade war and a hard response from Putin, led to new U-turns from Erdoğan. Seven months after the incident over Syrian soil, on June 27, 2016, the Turkish president made a rare gesture: an unequivocal apology to Russia. Erdoğan stated that Turkey never had any intention to shoot down a Russian jet and expressed willingness to do everything possible to restore friendly ties. This led to a softened attitude from Putin, strengthened by Turkey's dependence on Russian energy. If there were also hidden payoffs from the Russian side – like intelligence sharing about a planned coup d'état in Turkey – is impossible to prove for outsiders. But given the timing – the apology came a good two weeks before the coup attempt on July 15– it seems plausible.

Putin undoubtedly made important geopolitical gains by weakening NATO. In an unprecedented move Turkey, a NATO member, committed itself to buying the Russian S-400 anti-missile defense system and showed interest for more military imports from Moscow. Russia will also build Turkey's first nuclear power plant. Russia thus became the eastern ground for Erdogan's 'political acrobatics with the Western world', as the Turkish columnist Burak Bekdil puts it. [xiv]

The new Russian-Turkish friendship – although never more than tactical –changed the course of the war in Syria. Ankara silently accepted not to confront Russia's core interests, which helped the Assad regime to regain control over Eastern Aleppo, and Turkey became one of the key players in the Russian led talks in Astana.[xv] The Syrian opposition felt increasingly abandoned by Turkey.

President Putin, a strategist, aimed at making Russian inroads in the Middle East by beefing up Assad, no matter what war crimes his regime had committed (which many Arab autocrats noticed as the opposite to president Obama's previous unwillingness to stand up for Mubarak during the Arab spring). But president Erdoğan, a tactician, lacked a consistent policy in the Middle East. With no prospects of a regime change in Damascus, and with his increasing dependence on Russia, he changed his focus and aimed at quashing the Syrian Kurds of PYD/YPG.

Turkey's military intervention in Jarablus, part of its Euphrates Shield Operation, resulted in a Turkish buffer zone that prevented the PYD from linking up two enclaves. Turkey's control of the buffer zone started to look like an annexation project, a European observer explained to me. Electricity grids were joined to Turkey.

Erdoğan also started to criticize the Lausanne Treaty of 1923, which had given Turkey its modern borders under Atatürk. Pro-government media followed in the footprints of the president and showed maps of a 'greater Turkey', Misak-i milli, from 1920, between the end of World War 1 and the Lausanne Treaty.[xvi]

On the Syrian battlefield tensions grew between Turkey and United States, two NATO allies who support different fighters. In Turkey the government's frustration was mounting as the U.S. chose to partner with the Syrian Democratic Forces, SDF. Even though the group has Arab elements, its command lays under the YPG and the backbone of the fighters are Kurds trained by the PKK. In the eyes of the Turkish government, this meant that their NATO ally was empowering terrorists. But for Washington, Turkey's 'Euphrates Shield' was not a viable alternative in the offensive against the former ISIS stronghold Raqqa.[xvii] A European observer noted that Turkey had wished to see Damascus taking control again of a liberated Raqqa, rather than the PYD, which raised the flags of the imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan as they entered the former ISIS capital. [xviii]

When neither Russia nor the United States was willing to give Turkey a green light to go further east in Syria, the Turkish army instead launched a new offensive against the PKK leadership in Qandil in norther Iraq.[xix]

Aftermath of a failed coup

If you look into Turkey's illness that followed after the disastrous Syrian mistake, the worst blow was the failed coup that started on a warm Friday evening in July 2016 and led to a death toll of more than 260, including putschists, and the bombing of the Parliament. The conspiracy was amazingly amateurish. The military plotters were suppressed after a night of fighting when thousands of civilians heeded the calls from the minarets and president Erdoğan's message via a FaceTime talk with CNN Türk to protect the nation.

After that not only suspects within the military were hunted down. There were also widespread purges of civil servants and university teachers, who were apparently innocent from a military involvement in a plot to overthrow the government. Having a bank account in Bank Asya, previously owned by the Turkish-Islamic Gülenist movement, was in many cases the sole reason for losing a job.[xx]

Bank Asya used to provide bank services following Turkish laws and regulations. The Bank's inauguration ceremony was honored by AKP dignitaries, including Erdoğan himself and the former president Abdullah Gül – a sign of how strong the ties used to be between the AKP and the Gülen movement. But the leader of the movement, Fethullah Gülen, a preacher who has been exiled in Pennsylvania since 1999, is now designated as a terrorist leader by Ankara. Until the first cracks started to show in 2013, during the Gezi protest, Gülen's schools, universities, business and media empire were allies to the AKP government. Today the Gülen movement is labelled FETÖ – an acronym for 'Fethullah terrorist organization', and blamed for being behind the attempted coup.

Since the failed coup more than 150 000 persons have lost their jobs and income, and scores of sacked civil servants have

been blacklisted in an official gazette. Few employers dare to hire the blacklisted. One year after the failed coup, some university teachers in Istanbul showed me how they tried to collect money to help their unfortunate colleagues. But raising money for those who were fired was also a dangerous undertaking, so the fundraising had to be done in a clandestine way.

Another feature of *Yeni Türkiye*, or the New Turkey, as Erdoğan calls the republic, is the silencing of media outlets and journalists who are not government loyalists. His crackdown on the media started in 2009 with huge fines ($2.5bn) on what used to be Turkey's biggest media consortium, the Doğan media group. In early 2018 this conglomerate was bought by Erdoğan loyalists, the Demirören consortium, which was said to control 70 per cent of Turkish media just before the June 2018 elections.

Turkey is often said to be the country in the world where most journalists are held behind bars.[xxi] The witch hunt on media outlets and professionals that are not loyal to the government has led to a situation where 'democracy is dying in the dark', one veteran journalist in Istanbul said to me with sadness in his eyes.[xxii]

But ministers or government officials in the highest echelons, who used to cooperate with Gülenist some years ago, go on as usual in many cases. But the noose has tightened against some circles in the AKP who have been acting against Erdoğan's one man rule.[xxiii]

The Turkish strongman does not want critics around. Turkish observers argue that president Erdoğan started to show signs of paranoia during the Gezi protests in 2013, when hundreds of thousands of protesters contested an urban development plan for the Taksim Gezi Park. But the protest, to which people from various political trends gathered, was more than that: It was also a rally against Erdoğan's authoritarianism.

Support of the Muslim Brothers

Turkey, which used to have considerable business contracts in Muammar Gaddafi's Libya, started to support the revolt in this North African 'Jamahiriya' only after some hesitation in 2011. Just like in Syria, Ankara bet on a Libyan horse with connections to the Muslim Brothers (MB). This angered MB's Sunni Arab opponents in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates even further.

In Palestinian politics Erdoğan has fostered relations with both Hamas, a Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brothers, in Gaza and with President Mahmoud Abbas's Palestinian Authority in Ramallah. After Operation Cast Lead, Israel's war with Hamas in the winter of 2008–2009, Turkey's strongman sided with Hamas and the victims in Gaza. At the World Economic Forum in Davos he neglected the diplomatic protocol and said, just before leaving the stage where he sat with Israel's Shimon Peres, that 'when it comes to killing, you know very well how to kill'. He was well aware that his outburst would score points at home.

After Israeli commandos' deadly assault in 2010 on Mavi Marmara, a convoy which was set to break Israel's blockade on Hamas ruled Gaza, he lambasted Israeli politicians again – only to change his tone[xxiv] in 2016 when Turkey normalized its relations with Israel and relatives of the Turks who died in

the attack could get compensation in a deal worth 20 million dollars.[xxv]

Like Turkey, the current the Emir of Qatar, sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, and his predecessor and father, sheikh Hamad, have been staunch supporters of Hamas – Qatar for instance gave a safe haven to the former Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal. When a Sunni quartet, led by Saudi Arabia, started to boycott Qatar in the early summer of 2017, president Erdoğan acted out of instinct and rallied behind sheikh Tamim, a supporter of the Muslim Brothers' many branches in the Arab world. Turkey promised to send troops to back up the Emir, to prevent a palace coup or an invasion by Qatar's Big Brothers, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This caused a deep rift within the Arab world. The GCC, hitherto the only successful example for the Arab League, imploded. The governments of Egypt, UAE and Saudi Arabia were frustrated to see Turkey siding with Qatar, 'while Iran is nodding in approval', as one well-placed source in Cairo commented to me.[xxvi] The source continued:

> "Qatar will not easily surrender; they have money and they have Al Jazeera. Turkey and Iran, two of the most powerful non-Arab countries in the region, are on their side. If the US does not make a firm decision, why should Qatar change? But Qatar has to make some changes, otherwise they will be kicked out of GCC. And then they will discover that Turkey and Iran are even nastier to be dependent on than Saudi Arabia."

An impulsive gambler

Turkish observers followed the crisis from a different angle, noting that Erdoğan once again acted as an impulsive gambler in his foreign policy. Turkey had already had a standoff with Egypt, a Sunni rival on the other side of the Mediterranean, since the coup against the former president Mohammed Morsi in 2013. When Ankara stood with Qatar during the Gulf Crisis, Turkey took the risk of losing Saudi Arabia, an investor in the Turkish economy, as well.

Turkey's relations with Iran irritated the Trump administration. As president Trump decided to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal, the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), Turkey's dwindling economy seemed took another blow, in light of Trump's plans to impose secondary sanctions on foreign countries that are doing business with Iran.

Under previous sanctions on Iran, Turkey used to get a leeway and kept trading with Tehran, even functioning as a middleman in money transfers, with oil-for-gold sales. But this later led to court cases in the United States and drew the ire of the Trump administration.[xxvii] Given Trump's hawkish approach to Iran, the United States is not likely to show any clemency to Turkish trade with Iran under new U.S. sanctions.

Many losers in Turkey

When you try to identify the losers in today's Turkey, you find that president Erdoğan is one of them, even though he was the victor in the referendum on constitutional changes in April 2017. This gave him extensive powers – control of the executive, legislative and judicial branches of the government – that he already implemented in practice before the referendum. The entirety of the constitutional amendments will be

implemented after the next presidential and parliamentary elections on June 24, 2018.

For the anti-Erdoğan camp there seems to be only one way to get a Turkish republic with checks and balances: if Erdoğan loses these crucial elections. The results of the 2017 referendum, where the Yes (Evet) campaign got only 51.4 percent, gave the anti-Erdoğanists some hope. Many citizens also feel an increasing fatigue of the president's roaring dominance in state controlled media. The heavy fall of the Turkish lira plays into the hands of the opposition presidential candidates – primarily Muharrem Ince from CHP, Meral Aksener from Iyi Parti (the Good Party) and the incarcerated former HDP leader Selahattin Demirtaş. If president Erdoğan will not get an absolute majority in the first round of elections on June 24, he will have to meet the strongest candidate in a second round on July 8. In spite of the differences between the main opposition candidates they have promised to support whoever becomes the frontrunner against Erdoğan in a second round.

Even though the right wing politician Meral Akşener comes from a Turkish nationalist camp, she has joined Muharrem Ince in a call for the release of Demirtaş ahead of the elections. While declining to accept Kurdish as an official language, she has stated that she is in favor of teaching Kurdish at private schools. Such statements coming from a politician, who used to be seen as an ultra-nationalist, shows how important the Kurdish electorate is.

The opposition candidates have obviously come to the conclusion that the only remedy in sight against a one-man rule is a broad-based platform for the possible opposition candidate in a second round of presidential elections. If that happens – although the prospects seem bleak given Erdogan's omnipresence and a Supreme Election Board that accepts unstamped ballots – Turkey could regain some of its lost reputation, as a source of inspiration for democratic forces in the Middle East and in the region at large, including Caucasia and Central Asia.

But if authoritarianism prevails, Turkey as a democratic role model for a troubled region will remain a sad image from the past.

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