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The Coming Crisis in U.S.-Turkey Relations

By Gary Leupp
July 29, 2016

The abortive coup in Turkey on July 15, coming at a moment of Turkish-Russian rapprochement and mounting friction with the U.S. over the Kurdish independence movement in Syria, threatens to seriously damage U.S.-Turkey relations.

Whether or not the U.S. had anything to do with the coup, or is “harboring” its alleged mastermind, Fethullah Gulen, in Pennsylvania since 1999; and whether or not it winds up extraditing the reclusive imam to stand trial in a Mickey Mouse court, the very fact that the Turkish foreign minister warns that a U.S. failure to turn Gulen over will impact relations tells us this is serious.

And now I notice a Turkish newspaper aligned with the Erdogan regime is implicating retired U.S. Gen. John F. Campbell in the coup.

When the EU warns that Turkey if it re-establishes the death penalty (as Erdogan threatens to do, for people like coup plotters), it will never be accepted into the union; and when John Kerry warns that Turkey could be kicked out of NATO if it departs from “democracy”—yes, this is serious.

And so, some background.

The Turks Never Supported the U.S. War on Iraq

We forget about how much the world opposed the U.S. war on Iraq. Millions marched around the world on February 15, 2003 in a wave of antiwar statement unprecedented in world history. Governments of countries closely allied to the United States refused to accept Washington's argument for war. The failure of George W. Bush to prod France and Germany into his "coalition of the willing" revealed (or caused) a weakening of U.S. clout within the NATO alliance.

So did the vote of the Turkish parliament on March 1, 2003 to deny the U.S. the right to attack Iraq with tens of thousands of troops from Turkish soil. The Pentagon was counting on a strike from the north. A majority of legislators in this nation (with the second-largest army within NATO) approved the bill. But it failed to get the needed three-quarters vote.

Among those approving were Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a leader of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), who was to become prime minister just thirteen days later, less than a week before the war began. As either prime minister or president of Turkey since then, Erdogan has had to deal with the fall-out of the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, with which Turkey shares a 200 mile border.

Erdogan and the prime minister at the time, Abdullah Gul, conditioned their agreement to allow the attack from Turkey on U.S. promises of billions in more aid and willingness to permit Turkish troops to participate in the occupation of Iraqi Kurdistan. This deployment was indeed specified in the bill debated in parliament. The bill was in any case defeated, angering war mongering U.S. lawmakers already smoldering with indignation at France's "betrayal."

Destabilization Fears Realized

The Justice and Development Party (which still holds power today) was in fact divided on the Iraq War issue. But Turks across the political spectrum worried that U.S. actions would destabilize the region, by provoking conflict between Sunnis and Shiites that could spill over into neighboring countries, and could encourage Kurdish nationalism. The AKP and the Hizmet movement of Gulen are equally concerned about the latter problem.

Kurds are some 18 to 25% of Turkey's 75 million people and are the majority population in the southeast of the country. The Kurdish-majority region extends across northeastern Syria into northern Iraq and northeastern Iran and is populated by around 30 million Kurds. Half of these live in Turkey.

Kurds are often described as the world's largest stateless nation. Had the French and British colonialists victorious in World War I decided to divide up former Ottoman territories rationally, they would have carved out a single Kurdish state encompassing parts of modern Iraq and Syria, if not Turkey and Iran. Instead they placed the Kurds under Arab rule.

Facing discrimination and denial of language rights, Kurds have been struggling for self-determination in all these countries for many decades. Occasionally the CIA has found them

useful allies, as when, between 1969 and 1975 it cooperated with the Shah of Iran to arm Iraqi Kurds to fight Saddam Hussein. But when the Shah struck a deal with Saddam, U.S. support for the Kurds evaporated.

U.S. support for any Kurds anywhere has always been opportunistic and insincere. But presently the U.S.—having virtually broken the Middle East—needs close ties with the Kurds (practically the only people in the region other than the Israelis who like the U.S.) to achieve its various goals in the region.

In 1984 the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) of Turkey began a “people’s war” for independence. While a majority of Kurds in Turkey tell pollsters they do not favor an independent Kurdish state, the armed rebellion has been off and on again, resuming last year when an agreement to remove some 1500 PKK fighters from Turkey to Iraq’s Kurdistan Region fell through and Turkey attacked PKK forces operating in Syria in solidarity with local peshmerga against ISIL.

Of course, the disorder in Syria stems in large part from U.S. actions, which haven’t always dovetailed with the needs of Erdogan, president of the country with (I repeat) the second largest army in NATO.

We know that Turkish Army unhappy with intervention in Syria in general, and with bad relations with Russia

What Have You Done, America?

I imagine many Turks are thinking as follows.

You foolish Americans! You invade Iraq, a country you know nothing about, and smash everything. You deprive the minority Sunni Arabs of the jobs and privileges they had in the two most important secular institutions in their country—the Baath Party and Iraqi Army—both of which you dissolve. That produces very alienated Sunnis who readily listen to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, that Jordanian jihadi who had had to flee Afghanistan, as he establishes (for the first time!) a branch of al-Qaeda in Iraq in October 2004.

Then you pay tribal leaders to organize armed resistance to al-Qaeda (during the so-called “surge” of 2007) only to drive the jihadis next door into Syria where they morph into ISIL, establish their capital at Raqqa, and sweep back into Iraq in 2014 capturing Mosul, Ramadi and Fallujah; slaughtering, raping and enslaving Yezidis; and proclaiming themselves to be an Islamic State under a Caliph.

Then—having destroyed Iraq, and having created the conditions for the emergence of ISIL in that country—you move next door to Syria for your next regime change. As heads of state fall elsewhere in the “Arab Spring,” your secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, declares (in 2011) that Bashar al-Assad has “lost legitimacy.” You and you allies aid armed rebels against the government of Syria, producing a war that pits the national army against a vast array of groups that generally coordinate with al-Nusra (al-Qaeda in Syria) if not ISIL.

All the while your drones quietly kill hundreds of civilians from Pakistan to Somalia. And as a result of all the misery you spread, Afghans, Iraqis, Syrians, Libyans, Somalis and Yemenis are pouring into Europe, producing more racism and terrorism!

Impact of the Iraq War on Turkey

All of this impacts Turkey, much more than it does the U.S. The fighting in Iraq has not spilled over into Iraq as it has into Syria, aside from the occasional ISIL terror attack. But the refugee crisis produced by U.S. meddling in the region has Turkey flooded with Iraqi and Syrian refugees, complicating its relations with Europe, which begs Ankara to accept more and not pass them on.

For what it's worth: Turkey (population 75 million) hosts about 2.5 million Syrian refugees at present; Germany (81 million) hosts 600,000. Angela Merkel is desperate to get Erdogan to accept more.

The more important result of the U.S. war on Iraq, from the Turkish ruling-class standpoint, is the encouragement lent to Kurdish movements for self-determination in Syria and Iraq. (Again, an independent Kurdistan anywhere is a nightmare for the Turkish nationalists.)

The nightmare might be realized soon. Masoud Barzani, president of "the Kurdistan Region" (Iraq's only official "autonomous region") since 2005, has announced a referendum on independence by October, three months from now. Ongoing conflict with Baghdad over the sharing of oil revenues, territorial issues, and the handling of the national budget have only strengthened secessionist sentiments.

A number of ranking U.S. officials including Joe Biden have spoken in favor of an independent Iraqi Kurdistan. Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and the current Israeli Justice Minister back the idea; so does the Knesset. The Financial Times reported last year that Israel was buying three-quarters of its oil supplies from the Iraqi Kurds.

Ankara actually seems resigned to the emergence of an Iraqi Kurdistan; Erdogan has feted Barzani (a long-time CIA asset) and other envoys of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Turkey. Barzani signed on to the agreement mentioned above to relocate PKK fighters from Turkey to Iraqi Kurdistan, and has urged PKK in Turkey to work towards autonomy peacefully.

But Turkey has also bombed Kurdish sites in Iraq and Syria (to hit PKK guerrillas fighting Islamists). Since last December it has deployed forces in Iraqi Kurdistan, perhaps by agreement with Barzani but without Baghdad's permission. Iraqi Foreign Minister Ibrahim Jaafari keeps demanding their withdrawal, describing their presence as an outright "territorial violation" having "no justification."

Turkey Followed the U.S. Lead on Syria

Erdogan (who became Prime Minister in March 2003) and Bashar al-Assad (who became Syrian President in 2000) had a cordial relationship up to 2011. (Indeed, according to Stephen Kinzer,

Erdogan considered the Syrian leader, twelve years his junior, as his “protégé.” In 2004 Erdogan flew to Damascus to sign a bilateral free trade agreement. In 2008 Turkey brokered Syrian-Israeli talks about the Golan Heights. In April 2009, Turkey and Syria held “unprecedented” three-day military maneuvers along their border as “a step farther in their ever expanding cooperation.”

Meanwhile, relations between the U.S. and Syria were about as good as you might expect, given that Syria was on the State Department’s (rather arbitrary) blacklist of “terror” sponsoring nations (for supporting Hizbollah and Hamas, mainly) and the State Department dominated by protagonists of “regime change” in Syria on behalf of Israel. The U.S. maintained an embassy in Damascus. Colin Powell met with Bashar al-Assad in May 2003. Hillary Clinton pronounced Assad a “reformer.”

Then came the “Arab Spring,” giving Clinton the pretext to demand the resignations of Mubarak in Egypt, Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen, and Assad in Syria, while (as leaked emails show) she played the crucial role in bringing down Gadhafy in Libya with obviously horrific consequences.

After observing (with shock) the fall of Ben Ali in Tunisia in January 2011, the Obama administration watched the deteriorating situation in Egypt inspired by Tunisian events. First defending the beleaguered Hosni Mubarak as something other than a “dictator,” it finally notified Cairo that Mubarak would have to step down, as he indeed did dutifully on February 11. Clinton must have played an important role in this “regime change” too.

Next, in May, Obama and Clinton arranged for Saleh, president of Yemen and key U.S. ally after 9/11, to step down as well in accordance with what Clinton termed “the legitimate will of the people.” (This produced a chaotic aftermath and Saudi invasion directed against Yemeni Shiites now aligned with the former president.)

Then, on August 18, 2011, as protests against Assad spread in Syria, Clinton pontificated: “The transition to democracy in Syria has begun and it’s time for Assad to get out of the way.” President Obama agreed. “For the sake of the Syrian people,” he announced, “the time has come for President Assad to step aside.” These statements indicated that the U.S. would use covert and overt means to effect “regime change” in Syria.

In Turkey, Prime Minister Erdogan hesitated. He had prided himself for years on his “zero problems with neighbors” policy and had a particularly close relationship to Damascus. But he also needed to tow the U.S. line. So on November 11, trailing the U.S. by three months, Erdogan declared in a televised statement that Assad should leave. “Just remove yourself,” Erdogan told his protégé bluntly, “from that seat before shedding more blood, before torturing more and for the welfare of your country, as well as the region.”

Second Thoughts after the Coup

But now—five years later—there seems to be some backtracking on that. Just two weeks before the July 15 coup, Erdogan sent a letter of apology to Putin for the downing of a Russian fighter jet that had briefly strayed from Syrian airspace (where it was authorized by the

Syrian state) into Iraqi space last November. Turkey's own involvement in supporting factions of the opposition was bringing it into serious conflict with Russia, producing painful economic consequences. But since the apology, Russian tourists are flocking back to Turkey's seaside resorts.

Erdogan is scheduled to meet with Assad's patron Putin in St. Petersburg Aug. 9. A senior associate at the Carnegie Moscow Center, Alexander Baunov, says they may even form an alliance of "two developing economies with an ideology of sovereign values as a union of the deceived against the West."

Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım announced July 20 that "I am sure that we will return [our] ties with Syria to normal. We need it. We normalised our relations with Israel and Russia. I'm sure we will go back to normal relations with Syria as well." No word about Assad's removing himself from his seat!

The coup has changed everything. Or maybe the defeated coup plus the rapprochement with Russia publicized in late June, plus the (planned?) mass detentions of anti-AKP forces, especially in the military, police, judiciary, journalism and education have put Erdogan in a more powerful position to, among other things, resist U.S. pressure to obey.

They might even, in these strange times, when alliances are fraying, cause a split between Turkey and NATO. The Turkish foreign minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, plans to demand Fethullah Gulen's extradition during an upcoming visit to Washington. He will present the official line: that the Hizmet ("Service") movement of Gulen, in particular its large international network of science-oriented schools including a large percentage of the schools in Turkey, is really designed to indoctrinate people, establish a network of such people in all the institutions (colleges, military, judiciary, police, diplomatic corps, etc.), and use the network to bring down the government, bringing Gulen's supporters to power.

Ankara calls Hizmet the "Fethullahist Terror Organization" (FETO). Frankly, as I view the evidence, Hizmet seems pretty above board. I have seen no reports of Islamist, much less terrorist, content in the charter schools in the U.S., which actually have a pretty good rep. A study by the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia and Temple University found that the schools "have consistently promoted good learning and citizenship, and the Hizmet movement is to date an evidently admirable civil society organization..."

The worst accusation I've seen is that the international schools (from the U.S. to Central Asia) are used to generate funds channeled to finance Hizmet operations in Turkey. I'm not sure that's even illegal.

Gulen (b. 1941) apparently believes sincerely that Islamic religious piety is a very good thing, and the primary thing; but that the Muslim in the modern world needs to be well educated, tolerant of diversity, and have a work ethic suitable for a free market economy.

In his youth, growing up in Turkey's officially secular society, Gulen concluded that the nation needed to become more religious, more Muslim. But he accepted the premise of Mustafa Kemal

Ataturk (the founder of the Turkish republic) that Muslim society needed to embrace and accept western culture in general. On the other hand, he felt the degree of secularism enforced by the regime backed by the strongly secular army was too severe. (Why should the state ban headscarves on university students?) He became a moderate Islamist, active in a couple soon-banned political parties.

In 1999 Gulen sought medical treatment in the U.S. and has lived ever since in Pennsylvania. Between 2003 and 2013, using his wide connections in Turkey and internationally, as well as his school network's graduates as agents of change, he aligned Hizmet with the AKP. They were both proponents of Islam, but also democracy and tolerance. The AKP regime tossed out a court verdict declaring Gulen a "terrorist."

Things went wrong in 2013 when elements in the judiciary pursued corruption charges against AKP officials, and Erdogan concluded that the charges were a Hizmet plot. (There are, in fact, many in the Turkish judiciary who share Gulen's views.) Hence the designation of Hizmet once again as "terrorist organization."

Since then, Turkey has been at war against the Assad government in Syria as well as the peshmerga in Turkey, Iraq and Syria while also (occasionally) bombing ISIL in Syria. It has been accused repeatedly (by Russia and others) of trafficking in ISIL and al-Nusra oil and supporting these groups with weapons and goods. A rapprochement with Russia would probably require a clean break with these groups and also an end to regime-change efforts in Syria.

A Possible Re-alignment

On the day of the coup, Putin called Erdogan to assure him that Moscow opposed it. (Obama called later.)

Former, still influential U.S. government officials headed by Eric Edelman (former U.S. ambassador to Turkey, extremely unpopular due to his imperial mentality) addressed an open letter to Erdogan on March 30 of this year. It protested his many violations of human rights. Signed such neocons as Elliot Abrams, Douglas Feith, Robert Kagan, Dennis Ross, Paul Wolfowitz, Anne-Marie Slaughter, and L. Paul Bremmer, it demanded that Erdogan "address these troubling issues" to "strengthen the U.S.-Turkey relationship."

Some of the above—plus the grotesque columnist Charles Krauthammer, and the former Defense Department official and American Enterprise Institute "resident scholar" Michael Rubin—have since called for a coup. And as I mentioned, it's been reported that retired U.S. Gen. John F. Campbell was involved. On the other hand, former CIA columnist Philip Giraldi, pointing to the immediate crackdown and arrests of thousands, thinks "the uprising was basically a set-up." Erdogan has even called it a "gift from God," presumably because it allows him to strike out at his secular opponents with the support of the deeply religious Anatolian peasants who form his base.

In any case, we can be sure that the U.S. will deny any involvement (even if emails appear from nowhere seeming to indicate this) and reaffirm its commitment to a democratic Turkey. But it

will refuse to extradite Gulen, who has powerful friends in this country, including the Clintons. (His “Alliance for Shared Values” organization has contributed over half a million dollars to the Hillary Clinton campaign and to the Clinton Foundation.)

Is it not possible that, if the U.S. says no to the Gulen extradition demand, the rather temperamental Erdogan will crack down further on his opposition, knuckle down on the PKK, work with any willing ally to suppress the Syrian Kurds—and turn against a mistrusted U.S. to a reliably businesslike Russia?

Moscow had a warm relationship with Turkey up to the shooting down of the Su-24 last November. And it’s not concerned with Erdogan’s implementation of John Kerry’s standard of “democracy” necessary to retain NATO membership.

Is it not possible that, to stave off further coup threats, and to repair relations with neighbors damaged by its prior self-destructive adherence to Washington’s line, Turkey’s leaders will break with the U.S. on the Syrian regime-change program, warm up to Russia once again (due to mutual interests), reconcile themselves to the existence of a secular state in Syria, (co-guaranteed, perhaps, by the U.S. and Russia), and stand firm in the Gulen extradition demands?

And maybe even, in thoroughly consolidating power and punishing opponents, risk Turkey’s expulsion from NATO. The organization is according to its charter “founded on principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law.” But the Turkish State of Emergency and its mass detentions, its blanket ban on academics’ travel, its targeting of journalists inevitably raise Kerry’s question.

Things are changing. If Britain can quit the EU, Turkey can surely leave (or get booted out of) NATO. Either way is fine. That can only work to restrict NATO’s access to the Black Sea, and its ability to provoke Russia, which can only be good.