Turkey at a geopolitical crossroads

A conversation with Adam Szymanski

Jim Blackburn, Adam Szymanski
27 May 2016

Once again, Turkey finds itself at the centre of a storm of conflicting international interests. As neither the deadly chaos in the Middle East nor the refugee crisis show any sign of letting up, the issue of Cyprus rumbles on. Meanwhile, the country’s domestic politics remain something of a minefield. Jim Blackburn of New Eastern Europe (Poland) speaks to Adam Szymanski.

Jim Blackburn: Turkey has taken in nearly three million refugees since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War (with more expected in the future). The European Union has agreed to provide some funding to help the Turkish government deal with this influx, but it seems like an overwhelming amount of displaced persons for one nation to take in. How has this affected Turkish society and where exactly are these refugees mainly located?

Adam Szymanski: The influx of refugees from Syria (which results from the Syrian conflict and is connected with the “open-door” policy of the Turkish government) has in recent years become a large problem for the Turkish state and society. At the end of 2013 there were about one million people from Syria only (there are also refugees from other countries like Iraq), at the end of 2015 it was already about 2.5 million Syrian refugees. By the end of 2015, only about 300,000 of them lived in 25 camps in the Turkish provinces near the border with Syria (primarily in Kilis, Sanliurfa and Gaziantep). The rest went to cities and towns in different parts of the country. Most refugees live in southern and south-eastern Turkey – from Sirnak to Mersin and Karaman –, as well as in Ankara and Konya provinces in central Anatolia, Istanbul and provinces in north-western Turkey between Ankara and Istanbul.

Though Turkey has been facing the problem of refugees for many years, the formal-institutional framework has yet not been adjusted to the current situation. This is troublesome for the Turkish state, particularly in the context of the agreement with the European Union. In 2014, Turkey adopted regulations on the temporary protection of people coming from Syria and other countries. This means that they have the status of “guests” who are permitted to stay on Turkish territory only for a limited time. They have a limited right to work (although the Turkish government recently adopted regulations making access for these people to the Turkish labour market easier), likewise with access
to education and healthcare. The adjustment of Turkish law to international and EU law in this field is still a work in progress.

However, from the point of view of Turkish society, most problems concern social and economic issues, which often generate tensions. It is true that we can often observe a sense of brotherhood among Turks who help Syrian refugees treating them as mujahir – persecuted or forced to flee like the Prophet Muhammad and people from Mecca. And the establishment of camps for Syrian refugees has brought some benefits for Turks too, particularly in certain regions. They have been employed as administrative staff in the camps or in the facilities organized for Syrians like grocery shops, laundry rooms and health and education centres. On the other hand, the maintenance costs of the camps and their facilities are high and the need for more aid for the refugees is constantly growing.

Moreover, competition between Syrians working illegally for very low wages and legal Turkish wage earners has developed – to the disadvantage of the legal worker. The appearance of increasing numbers of people also resulted in a rise in the cost of living and in housing prices – with regard to both renting and purchasing property.

Turkish institutions such as schools and hospitals are also under strain. The schools are not able to guarantee education services for all Syrian children (particularly outside the camps). This includes special Turkish language courses. The hospitals have difficulties admitting all the additional patients, whose numbers are increasing as a result of illnesses that sometimes spread in the refugee camps due to the lack of proper medication and sanitation. The Turkish residents of nearby towns complain that they have to now share their water supply, sewage systems or green areas with the Syrian refugees.

The safety of both Turkish and Syrian people living in the regions along the border with Syria is also an issue, as well as the internal security of the Turkish state. While there is a legal influx of refugees, there are also illegal gangs smuggling petrol and other goods. The smugglers have sometimes attacked the border posts in the past. Petty crime and black markets have also developed in the regions neighbouring Syria.

Unrest is frequent in the camps. This is in part because of a lack of sufficient resources that can be delivered to the refugees living in such close proximity, which enhances frustration among refugees. There are also psychological problems connected with living far away from home, the lack of a purposeful life and the opinion that there is no opportunity for “self-realization” in Turkey.

Another security problem concerns refugees living outside of the camps. They do not always reside in houses or flats. They often live in ruins or even in the open air. This makes them vulnerable to all kinds of abuse, which is particularly true with regard to women and children. There are reports for example of many cases of sexual violence.

JB: Turkey is currently at the centre of a storm of conflicting international interests defined by the United States and the Kurds in the fight against ISIS, the European Union and the refugee crisis, Russia’s interest in keeping Baschar al-Assad in power – and the lingering unresolved issue of Cyprus. Turkey itself seems to be focused most prominently
on fighting the Kurdish people of its own country. What is in essence driving this conflict with the Kurds? And is there a possible resolution that would satisfy both sides?

AS: The conflict is rooted in the foundations of the Republic of Turkey and connected with the role of Turkish nationalism (milliyetçilik), which still plays a substantial role in Turkish politics, although other forms of nationalism have appeared as well, including so-called Muslim nationalism. The concept of the unity of nation and state, developed after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in order to strengthen the territorial integrity and independence of the new state, has always been a major constitutional principle. It has led to the development of the model of the centralized state and the concept of citizenship based on the constitutional rule that every citizen of the Republic of Turkey is a Turk. As a result, minorities and their rights were not recognized in this state for a long time. With the development of Kurdish identity (nationalism), and its manifestation in the social and political life of Turkey, the so-called Kurdish issue appeared. Although it has many dimensions, including the question of political and cultural rights and the economic underdevelopment of south-eastern Turkey, the Turkish government has associated it for a long time solely with a problem of terrorism, mainly as a conflict between the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) and Turkish security forces.

At the turn of twenty-first century the situation did change. The situation of Kurds improved in terms of rights, mainly due to Turkey’s EU pre-accession process, which required reforms in the area of minorities. The AKP (Justice and Development Party) seemed to be the party that’s come closest to solving the Kurdish situation, even starting talks in recent years with the imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan as part of the peace process. However, it appears that the AKP (and interestingly most opposition parties), still gives absolute priority to the principles of national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and the positive approach to the Kurdish issue is just a game aimed at securing electoral support.

This became obvious when the Syrian Kurds started to gain a kind of autonomy in Rojava in 2013. Turkish government officials then expressed their strong opposition to this kind of activity. Following electoral losses in the June 2015 parliamentary elections, the brotherhood previously declared with Turkish Kurds was transformed into nationalistic rhetoric. The next step was a firm reaction to the breaking of the ceasefire by the PKK (which was also not honest about its real intentions concerning the peace process). As a result, the conflict escalated on both sides. A call for a kind of autonomy from the pro-Kurdish HDP (Peoples’ Democratic Party) was met with strong opposition from the Turkish government.

It seems again that for the governing elite there is no Kurdish issue, only the terrorist activities of the PKK and the Syrian PYD (Democratic Union Party), which has close links to the PKK. The Turkish government’s policy has recently aimed to convince the international community, first of all the United States, that the Syrian PYD should be recognized as terrorists (although the PYD helps the US in the fight against ISIS). That is why, after the terrorist attacks in Ankara in February and March 2016, the Turkish government immediately announced that people connected with the PYD were behind the attacks, although it appeared later that it was members of the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK) - a break-away faction of the PKK. Because of this, the return to peace talks (appealed for by the international community) is very problematic.
Further on the Kurdish issue, the Kurdish people of Syria with support from the United States founded the autonomous region of Rojava in 2013, which has great potential for future statehood. It is by many accounts a safe, stable and secular region. It has a population of five million (accounting for almost a sixth of the world’s 32 million Kurdish people), with a constitutional government based on direct democracy, gender equality and freedom of religion. Could this state, if brought to fruition with the support of the United States and the European Union, have the possibility of becoming a bastion or model of a democratic secular state in the Middle East? Is there any possibility, perhaps in the long-term, for Turkey to support such a neighbour state, especially since Rojava seems to embody the Turkish philosophy of Kemalism and the Six Arrows?

The establishment of an independent state in northern Syria (Rojava) is rather impossible, even from a long-term perspective (the Syrian conflict and ISIS factor will prevent it in the short to medium-term) because it is against the interests of the most important political actors, including the Assad regime, Russia, Iran and Iraq (the two latter states have Kurdish minorities; there is even the regional Kurdish government in northern Iraq), not to mention Turkey. It seems too that for the United States (which also takes its Turkish ally’s interests into consideration) and EU countries, the only acceptable option is a federal Syrian state with a Kurdish component. Turkey views any kind of autonomy as being against its interests. There is a fear that it may have a kind of spill-over effect which in the short-term perspective will intensify the Turkish Kurds’ aspirations for a kind of autonomy, and in the long-term may lead to the establishment of a Kurdish state consisting of parts of Iraq, Syria and Turkey (maybe also Iran). While this last scenario cannot be excluded, it is not very probable.

If any kind of political structure appears in Rojava, it is doubtful that it can be democratic and secular. Of course, some types of democratic mechanisms are possible (e.g. direct democracy institutions) but then the question is what model of democracy would appear. In my opinion it would be a mix of local traditions and the influence of western modernity. The secular characteristics of this structure would be doubtful as well – Kurds are quite often very religious, not to mention other ethnic groups who would inevitably be part of the society.

Concerning Russia, the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 was definitely not received positively by Turkey. The downing of a Russian aircraft in November 2015 strained tensions between the two as never before in recent memory, together with Russian intervention in Syria and the presence of Russian forces in neighbouring Armenia. Are proxy or hybrid conflicts between the two countries a real concern or is this in a sense political posturing?

We can observe a change in relations between Turkey and Russia after the end of the Cold War. In the 1990s, economic relations, primarily in the energy sector, were developed (mainly new gas pipelines). Both states also had a similar attitude towards the Black Sea region, supporting a kind of status quo in which Turkey and Russia played a key role and NATO had only a limited presence in the region. On the other hand, apart from historically rooted suspicion, there were many political problems surrounding rivalries related to winning influence over the former Soviet republics.

The situation changed at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The AKP government
decided to pursue a more multidimensional foreign policy. This meant the development of relations with different partners and less dependence on the United States. Because of this shift, changes in relations with Russia and Turkey’s Middle Eastern neighbours were noticeable. A crisis in relations with the United States after 2003 (the war in Iraq) and worsening relations with the European Union since 2005 were favourable factors in this context. Turkey stopped supporting the Chechens and the Russians stopped supporting the PKK. Economic relations in many fields were developed, particularly in the construction and energy sectors (including new areas such as nuclear energy), and social contact increased (e.g. increasing number of Russian tourists in Turkey and a rise in mixed marriages).

The Crimean issue did not change much, in contrast to the Syrian conflict. When the Syrian conflict broke out, differences between Turkey and Russia concerning the future of Assad were not a substantial problem at first. It started to be one after the shooting down of the Russian aircraft. This had many negative consequences for Turkey and its interests. When it comes to the long-term forecast, of course, much depends on the future of Syria, but in my opinion, relations will gradually improve – though probably not regain the level from before the aircraft incident. We can already observe some steps on the Russian side to showing improvement though, with the end of the ban on airline flights to Antalya and allowing some Turkish tour operators to work in Russia again.

**JB:** And finally concerning Russia, Slavoj Zizek recently coined the term “Putogan” – a combination of the names Putin and that of Turkish president Erdogan. Zizek claims the two live in worlds of “paranoiac fantasy”; they “more and more stand for the two versions of the same political regime – one that, while formally remaining democratic, de facto functions in an authoritarian way”. This is undoubtedly true of Putin, but what is your opinion on the government of Erdogan, who has come under increasing scrutiny both domestically and abroad?

**AS:** An increasing number of commentators compare Russia and Turkey with reference to its leaders and political regimes. Interestingly, the comparison has also recently included other nations such as Hungary, Poland and some of the Balkan states. Political scientists are now discussing the question of whether Turkey is still a kind of hybrid regime between democracy and authoritarianism, or if it is rather going into the direction of the authoritarian system. Since 2005 (when democratic reforms slowed down) talk of Turkey as an unconsolidated democracy has been less frequent.

There are many examples confirming authoritarian tendencies. A permanent component of Turkish political culture is the attempt to strengthen the executive power at the cost of legislative and judiciary power, with the current plan being to introduce a new presidential system, a la Turca, replacing the existing parliamentary one. There are also moves towards limiting the rule of law and some key human rights, first of all – freedom of expression and media.

However, AKP politicians and president Erdogan claim that they want to establish a real, “advanced” democracy, within which it is the people who govern, not only the elites. It seems that the crucial problem in Turkey is, apart from the dysfunctional impact of populism, a specific perception of democracy by the current governing elites. They understand it very narrowly as limited to the existence of free elections (and referenda)
but they do not pay attention to the role of citizens in between these elections. Their understanding of democracy is majoritarian. The AKP was elected by the majority of citizens and it can decide about the state affairs on their behalf. They represent “the nation” and want to protect its interests. However, “the nation” to them is actually only the part of Turkish society that supported the AKP in the election. The opinions of the rest are not taken into consideration. Moreover, very often people who belong to different kinds of “minorities” are treated as enemies of the state and nation (because “they” are not with “us”, i.e. they do not share “our” point of view). They are grouped together with foreign enemies, and can be persecuted because they insult the president or support terrorism, although in reality it is often about punishing those who invoke their natural right to express a critical opinion about a policy pursued by the government and the president.

The current unstable situation in Turkey, because of the terrorism of both ISIS and PKK, is an additional factor favouring the development of authoritarian tendencies. Interestingly, the recent terrorist attacks in Ankara and Istanbul (February and March of 2016) prompted president Erdogan to call for the extension of the definition of a terrorist (anti-terror law) to include people who in some way support terrorism (which means a return to the 1990s). This refers to “so-called” journalists, academics and other groups (including authors and artists). It may mean an extension of legal measures aimed at critics of the AKP policy towards the Kurds. Many AKP politicians and Erdogan suggest the unstable situation requires a strong and effective executive power. In their opinion, this is possible only after the introduction of the aforementioned presidential system. However, in Turkey such a system could not be balanced by the checks and balances that exist in the United States.

**JB:** The last aspect of the international storm, though not the least if Turkey ever hopes to join the EU, is the situation on the island of Cyprus. Here some progress has been made, with both the presidents of the northern Turkish Cypriots and the southern Greek Cypriots coming together in December 2015 to jointly wish everyone in Cyprus a happy holiday on national television (an unprecedented event). There has been some negotiation too on healing the great divide created on the island back in 1974. The sticking point seems to be that for the southern Republic of Cyprus (an EU member state), Turkish troops must leave Cyprus, this is non-negotiable. The Turkish Cypriots are not enthusiastic about this demand to say the least. How did such a complex situation develop in Cyprus? And, under the current Turkish government’s watch, is there any chance of a resolution capable of reuniting the two sides?

**AS:** There have been many attempts to resolve the Cyprus issue in the past, including the 2004 Annan Plan – where proposals for a “United Republic of Cyprus” were rejected by the majority of Greek Cypriots in a referendum (while the majority of Turkish Cypriots accepted them). After Mustafa Akinci won the presidential elections in the northern part of the island in 2015, many people hoped that in 2016 there could be a kind of agreement between him and the president of the Republic of Cyprus Nicos Anastasiades, about the establishment of a common unified state. At the turn of 2016 there was talk that in the coming year we could expect to observe a real breakthrough. It is true that some progress was made, first of all when it comes to the political system of a future united Cyprus. However, there are still many disputed issues, among others very difficult issues concerning the demography, property and energy resources, as well as the presence of
In my opinion, it will be very difficult to solve these issues this year or even in the next few years. A positive approach on the part of the Cypriot leaders alone is not enough. The aforementioned issues have historical roots, or are connected with the lack of trust between the two Cypriot communities, or concern the issue of national interests and security. This is what makes the talks so difficult and the situation will remain unchanged, even after the parliamentary elections in May 2016 in the Republic of Cyprus. A further unfavourable factor may be the collapse of the Turkish Cypriot coalition government (April 2016).

**JB:** Recently, Turkey’s most widely circulated newspaper *Zaman* was taken over by the government. This is primarily because it was sympathetic to the Gülen movement. For the uninitiated, can you explain who Fethullah Gülen is and why the Gülen movement is now considered a terrorist organization by the Turkish government?

**AS:** When it comes to the specificity of Islam in Turkey, we can talk about the presence of different religious orders (*tarikats*) and more contemporary religious movements (*cemaat*). They play an important role not only in the religious life of Turks but also in social, economic and political spheres in Turkey. The Fethullah Gülen movement is one of the best-known and influential Turkish religious movements (although the AKP government has tried to limit its influence in recent years in Turkey). Its leader, Fethullah Gülen, currently lives in the United States. His movement is present in Turkey and in a number of other countries (primarily in Turkic former Soviet republics, but also many other countries including Poland). The movement’s activities abroad are about popularizing Islam and its values, along with Turkish culture and the thoughts of Gülen on such issues as the compatibility of Islam and democracy, and the promotion of interreligious dialogue. This is to be achieved mainly through educational measures (the movement has many secular, usually international schools at different levels in a number of countries) and the organizing of special foundations for language and culture courses, excursions, lectures and conferences – as well as cultural events, which are very often in cooperation with other religious communities and churches. The movement has also its own media – newspapers (including *Zaman*), TV and radio channels active in Turkey and abroad. Supporters of the movement in Turkey are present in a lot of private enterprises and holdings, as well as public institutions including the judiciary and police.

The Fethullah Gülen movement was very important for the AKP in gaining the support of the electorate (*Zaman* clearly sympathized with the party in the 2007 elections) and later – at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century – in diminishing the role of the army in Turkish politics (with the well-known court cases against army officials, among others, in trials such as those pertaining to Ergenekon or Balyoz being made possible thanks to the involvement of the Gülen movement and its supporters).

However, since 2010, the movement and Fethullah Gülen himself have been critical of the authoritarian tendencies in Turkey. This was noticeable during the Gezi Park protests in 2013. The change in the AKP’s attitude towards the movement occurred at the end of 2013, when alleged corruption implicating government officials was revealed by police and prosecutors connected with the *cemaat*. It was a kind of critical juncture. The Fethullah Gülen movement began to belong to the increasingly long list of state enemies,
as defined by Erdogan and AKP politicians. Different kinds of actions have since been directed against a so-called “parallel state” comprising various institutions: police, universities, banks and companies connected with the movement (it is already now a kind of insult in Turkey to call somebody “a parallel”). The operation also concerns the media, including the daily newspaper Zaman, whose chief editors were arrested and which was later taken over by a board of trustees. The Turkish authorities want the US to extradite Fethullah Gülen and define the movement as a terrorist organization (together with ISIS, the PKK and the Syrian Kurds from PYD). This is in essence an attempt by the AKP to implement more measures against the movement that became an important opposition force against the government in 2013-14.

**JB:** And concerning eastern Europe, the top choice for Turkish students to study abroad has become Poland. Why do you think this is? Is there a proportion of students who are Kurdish as well? And finally, does your personal experience at university leave you with a sense of optimism or pessimism for the future of Turkey?

**AS:** It is true that an increasing number of the Turkish students (BA, MA, and PhD) are coming to study in Poland – this concerns both Erasmus short-term students (among whom there are currently more Turks in Poland than in Germany) as well as regular long-term students. The reasons for this are the relatively low costs of studying and living in Poland, in comparison to other EU countries (such as the UK and Germany), and the high quality of education. Moreover, Turkish students quite often repeat the sentiment about the similarity between the people of both countries when it comes to such characteristics as hospitality (although they differ in terms of culture and religion). When it comes to Kurds, I observe a large number of students from northern Iraq – thanks to the EU Erasmus Mundus programmes. However, there are also quite a lot of Turkish Kurds. I personally observe an increasing number of PhD students in this context.

Although the current political situation in Turkey is not promising in terms of the democratization process, I am quite optimistic about the future of Turkey. When I observe Turkish students (both in Poland and Turkey) I see a lot of people from a young generation who share democratic values and are aware of the importance of these values for the future of their state and society.

*New Eastern Europe*

**Published 27 May 2016**

Original in **English**

First published in *New Eastern Europe, 13 May and 20 May 2016*

Downloaded from eurozine.com (https://www.eurozine.com/turkey-at-a-geopolitical-crossroads/)

© Adam Szymanski, Jim Blackburn / New Eastern Europe / Eurozine