



**Middle East
Research Institute**

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Turkish Policy: Consequences of the Referendum

At a special MERI roundtable, diplomats, policy makers and experts debated Turkish foreign policy after the April referendum. Read the full report.

On 10 May 2017, the Middle East Research Institute (MERI) hosted a roundtable with diplomats, policy makers, academics and other experts to discuss Turkish foreign policy after the 16 April 2017 referendum. The event was aimed at better understanding the implications of the vote within Turkey, as well as regional and international consequences regarding issues such as security, the economy and trade. The roundtable was held under the Chatham House rule, hence no statement here is attributed to individual participants.

The referendum was held to approve 18 amendments to the Turkish constitution that were proposed by the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). The amendments will introduce radical changes in the way policies and decisions are made in Turkey, and have major implications on the country's domestic and foreign policies. Given Turkey's geopolitical importance and its role in the modern power dynamics of the Middle East, its neighbours wish to fully appreciate the impact of the referendum results on the future of the region.

The Turkish Parliament is believed to continue to play a major role in terms of legislation and holding the executive institutions to account. It is the first time in Turkish history that the Parliament has been enabled, at least in principle, to hold the President of the Republic accountable for his/her actions. In practice, however, such powers may never be exercised because future Presidents are now able to remain as members, and ultimate leaders, of their parties whose MPs (usually forming majority in the Parliament) would block possible impeachment processes.

Advocates of the constitutional amendments believe that these changes will help to strengthen internal stability in Turkey by replacing a two-headed government with a single head. However, time will tell if the new system indeed helps to achieve greater stability than the previous one which has been in place since 1946.

One of the major issues debated was the prospect of reinitiating the peace process and ending the current internal war which has had knock-on effects on Turkey's foreign policies with its neighbouring countries, particularly Syria and Iraq. The peace process might not be completely dead, as the previous Foreign Minister Feridun Hadi Sinirlioglu said at the MERI Forum of October 2015, but it is frozen, possibly until the next

election which is thought to be in 2019. Restarting the peace process will rely on a partnership built on trust, and require sincere efforts from all sides. Currently, Turkey and the PKK are engaged in a costly and protracted war, and their policies and political approaches are not easily reconcilable. That said it was believed that a solution is more likely to emerge under the new presidential system rather than a parliamentary system where consensus over contentious issues is difficult to achieve.

The discussion moved to how the referendum might affect Turkey's policy vis-à-vis Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan. Firstly, it was argued that Turkey has every interest in establishing and maintaining stable and prosperous relations with its neighbours. In this context, Turkey tried to initiate high-level strategic cooperation with Iraq back in 2008, but it did not develop accordingly for various reasons. Most of the participants agreed that the referendum is not expected to change Turkey's traditional policies vis-à-vis Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan at least until the Presidential elections of 2019. Turkey will continue to support the territorial integrity of Iraq, while retaining its strong ties with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). It was noted that the KRG-Turkey relations are not sufficiently institutionalised and not inclusive of all parties. Therefore, it was suggested that the two sides should invest politically in other political parties, including those in the opposition.

With regard to Turkey's view on the Iraqi Kurds' intention to carry out their own referendum, it was argued that the AKP cannot easily support a referendum for Kurdish independence given the current public perceptions inside Turkey.

Participants also discussed Turkish policy across the Middle East and how this may have been affected by the vote. The fight against the PKK was acknowledged to have a great influence on Turkish policy in the region. Turkey's priority in Iraq at the moment is the fight against both the PKK and Islamic State, and expects the same from its allies internationally. In this context, Turkey has expressed its concern over the US' decision to arm the PYD directly and consider it a factor which may have an impact on the US-Turkey relations.

Turkey's relationship with Iran was characterised as complex and dynamic. It is in the interest of both parties to maintain neighbourly relations, particularly given their shared border. However, Turkey's and Iran's diverging interests with regard to several issues have led to conflict through proxies in Syria among others. Turkey is concerned about Iran's growing influence in Iraq and believes this could be destabilising. Nevertheless, the two countries maintain open dialogue to prevent these differing interests becoming manifested in direct conflict.

Turkey's engagement with countries across the Gulf was also examined. The strong relationship between Kuwait and Turkey was emphasised, for example reflected in terms of numbers of international flights between the two and the amount of Kuwaiti-owned property in Turkey among others. Therefore, Turkey's economic prosperity and continued engagement in the Gulf is of particular interest to these countries.

Critics have argued that Turkey's role in the region moving forward will involve the current ruling party pursuing a form of neo-Ottomanism, using shared culture and historical legitimacy to influence the region through soft power. It was also argued that the perception is that Turkey is conducting its trade policies in the Middle East based on a seemingly neo-Ottoman agenda. However, this assertion was readily dismissed on the basis that pursuing one's national interest through a proactive foreign policy, short of seeking border change, should not be equated with neo-Ottomanism.

As for the implications of the referendum internationally, there was disagreement over the extent to which Turkey would disengage from Europe following the referendum. One argument was that the referendum result and other shifts in policy signified Turkey's emergence from an identity crisis which had been plaguing it for many years between the West and the East. It was asserted that Turkey had chosen to align itself with the East through, for example, reconciling with Russia and strengthening its relationship with Iran. On the other hand, Turkey still has a significant interest in engagement with Western countries. It is clear that the

result of the referendum will make it significantly more difficult, if not impossible, for Turkey to join the EU in the medium term. Nevertheless, Turkey's desire to join the EU remains, and through emphasising their shared interest it was suggested that they can reach a common understanding about their relationship. Therefore, despite the likelihood of Turkey entering the EU having been reduced by the referendum result, it was underlined that this did not negate the potential of Turkey engaging with the EU and EU member states. Of course, this would be dependent on respective legal frameworks and political reciprocation. It was also highlighted that Europe was not without its difficulties, with the rise of the far right, xenophobia and Islamophobia.

In conclusion, it was agreed that the impact of the referendum could only be speculative at this stage. Whether the constitutional changes would lead to positive or negative effects – using the new leverage for peace making or for further centralisation of power; and a sense of confidence or insecurity – remains to be seen. The full effects of the change will not be apparent until the November 2019 elections in Turkey, which will be the first time the new system is put into practice. That said, Turkish interest alone cannot not guide policy in Turkey or shape events in the Middle East, therefore Turkey will inevitably have to respond to the new realities and complexities of the region.

The participants at this roundtable included:

- Mehmet Akif Inam, Turkish Consul General
- Fuad Hussein, Chief of Staff to the Kurdistan KRG Presidency
- Ricardo Rodriguez, Head of UNAMI Regional Representation Office in Erbil
- Haitham Abu Alfoul, Consul General of The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan
- Clarisse Pászatory, Head of Office of the EU Liaison Office in Erbil
- Dominique Mas, Consul General of the Republic of France
- Park Young-Kyu, Consul General of the Republic of Korea
- Cor Stouten, Deputy Consul General of the Kingdom of the Netherlands
- Yousif Al-Kilabi, Representative of the Consulate General of the State of Kuwait
- Sardar Aziz, Academic – Goran Movement
- Anwar Anaid, University of Kurdistan-Hawler
- Mahmood Nashat, Advisor to Kurdistan Parliament on Turkmen Affairs
- Hoshyar Sewali, Head of Kurdistan Democratic Party Foreign Relations
- Kamaran Palani, Academic, Salahaddin University
- Athanasios Manis Research Fellow of MERI
- Dlawer Ala'Aldeen, President of MERI (Chair)