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Turkey after the Elections: Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy

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Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) is on course to secure a third consecutive victory in parliamentary elections this weekend. Polls are predicting that the AKP could secure up to 48 percent of the vote. However, a two-thirds majority of the 550-seat assembly is needed for the prime minister to realize his ambition of changing the constitution without referendum and creating a new executive presidency for himself. The collapse in support for the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) following the release of sexually explicit videos involving its senior politicians makes it unclear whether the MHP will clear the 10 percent threshold required to enter parliament, which means the AKP could pick up additional seats.

The outcome of these elections will have implications for more than that country's political model, however. U.S. foreign policy in the region and Turkey's future in Europe will also be affected as prominent foreign and domestic policy issues await the next Turkish government, including a democracy deficit; the war in Afghanistan; Ankara's role in NATO's future missile defense architecture; Turkey's stalled EU accession bid; deteriorating Turkish-Israeli relations; Turkey's support of Hamas; and the worrying Turkish-Iranian rapprochement.

Election Background. These elections have been conducted in the shadow of violations of media and political freedoms. Dozens of journalists and hundreds of regime opponents have been jailed in connection with an alleged plot to over-

throw the government. The arrest of four journalists who worked for the Web-based Oda TV caused the U.S. ambassador to Turkey, Francis Ricciardone, to criticize the AKP. The State Department said: "We do have ongoing concerns about... trends regarding treatment of journalists within Turkey... And we'll be watching this case rather closely."¹ Reporters Without Borders places Turkey 138th in the *World Press Freedom Index* (from a list of 178 countries)—only just ahead of Ethiopia (139th) and Russia (140th). The AKP's Islamist-based politics is gradually leading Turkey away from Ataturk's legacy of secular democracy toward religious-based authoritarianism, which should be a major concern for the U.S. and Europe.

Foreign Policy and U.S. Interests. With the second-largest military in NATO, Turkey has been a significant actor in many NATO operations and continues to stand alongside the U.S. in Afghanistan. However, Ankara's burgeoning closeness to Tehran and the AKP's hostility toward Israel undermine Turkey's reliability as a regional partner for the U.S. and Europe.

Afghanistan. Ankara was among a handful of NATO members that increased commitments

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in Afghanistan in response to President Barack Obama's request for additional resources in December 2009. Although Turkish troops are heavily concentrated in Kabul, Ankara has put the bulk of its resources into training the Afghan army and police, which the alliance has identified as a top priority. It has also complemented its police and army training teams with two civilian-led Provisional Reconstruction Teams. As a trusted partner in Afghanistan, it is important that Turkey continues to work closely with the U.S.-led coalition and maintain its strong support for the mission.

Missile Defense. NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept identifies comprehensive ballistic missile defense (BMD) as a core competency of the alliance. Turkey insisted that no one country be identified as a threat—which demonstrated that Ankara is too cozy with Tehran. It is unclear what specific role Turkey will play in either a NATO-wide BMD system or as a partner in the U.S.'s European Phased Adaptive Approach (PAA). However, negotiations are likely to be protracted, especially over issues of geographical coverage and command-and-control decisions. Ankara must signal to Washington that it stands behind its NATO commitments and that it is willing to shoulder its share of the burden for NATO's core competencies.

The European Union. The EU formally granted candidate status to Turkey in 1999, and membership negotiations began in 2005. However, progress has been painfully slow. France and Germany especially oppose full Turkish membership in the EU, proposing instead a privileged partnership between Ankara and Brussels—which Erdogan has dismissed as insulting.

There is a pervasive sense in Ankara that the EU is negotiating in bad faith, and Turkish public backing for EU membership fell to just 47 percent in 2010. In a sign of growing confidence, Ankara's chief EU negotiator, Egemen Bağış, warned Brussels that the EU needs Turkey more than Turkey needs Europe.² In fact, the AKP has cherry-picked which EU-mandated liberalizations best reinforce its power base

and undermine Turkey's military and bureaucracy—the pillars of secular republicanism. The EU's contrived negotiating position has provided the AKP with an opportunity to pursue an agenda that better reflects Erdogan's ideological preferences, while at the same time claiming that Turkey is still pursuing a Western-oriented path.

Libya. Prior to the outbreak of violence in Libya, Prime Minister Erdogan was awarded the Al-Gaddafi International Prize for Human Rights. Erdogan refuses to renounce the award, even in light of Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi's horrific human rights abuses. Libya granted Turkey approximately \$23 billion in construction contracts. Turkey has, however, supported the NATO mission in Libya, deploying six warships to enforce the arms embargo. Turkey also negotiated the release of four American journalists who were being held by Libyan authorities. Ankara continues to press for a diplomatic resolution of the Libyan crisis in opposition to the NATO allies. It is imperative that Ankara understands that Qadhafi's removal from office is non-negotiable and that it cannot just press for a cease-fire at any cost.

The Middle East. Under Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's "zero problems with neighbors" policy, Turkey has strengthened its ties with several problematic actors in the Middle East:

- Under Syrian President Bashar el-Assad, whose regime has reportedly killed more than 1,100 opponents since March, Turkey and Syria have established close relations. In 2009, Ankara and Damascus signed a strategic cooperation agreement, conducted joint military exercises, and launched military industrial cooperation. They also introduced visa-free travel.
- Turkey's rapprochement with the Tehran theocracy saw Ankara partner with Brazil and vote against limited U.N. sanctions on Iran in October—sanctions which even Russia and China supported. Iran is becoming Turkey's leading oil supplier, and plans are afoot to triple the trade between the two countries.

1. Delphine Strauss, "Turkey Dispute with US over Media Freedom," *Financial Times*, February 17, 2011.

2. Betül Akkaya Demirbaş, "EU Needs Turkey More Than Turkey Needs It," *Today's Zaman*, January 7, 2011, at <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-231759-eu-needs-turkey-more-than-turkey-needs-it-says-bagis.html> (June 6, 2011).

- Turkey's traditionally strong relationship with Israel has declined dramatically in recent years. The Turkish government-supported IHH Islamist organization is preparing to launch a second flotilla to Gaza despite the fact that the embargo is over, and this will only further inflame relations between the two countries. The AKP government has also continued to support Hamas, which Washington and Brussels classify as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO).

Guidelines for the U.S.–Turkey Relationship.

The U.S. should continue to cooperate with Ankara on issues such as Afghanistan, Libya, Iraq, and missile defense. However, Washington should also express its strong concerns to Ankara over the AKP's growing violations of political freedoms, as well as other contentious issues, including its rapproche-

ment with Iran and its anti-Israeli/pro-Hamas policies. After the elections, Washington should tell Ankara that Turkey cannot consider itself a strategic ally of the U.S. while pursuing policies that undermine American and allied interests.

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