

Remarks by Mark R. Parris
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The invitation to this session posed four questions that members of the panel are supposed to address:

- How will Turkey emerge from the current crisis?
- Will the July 22 vote represent an affirmation of secularism or a turn to Islamism?
- How will this affect the Kurdish-Turkish relationship?
- How will these internal factors affect U.S. – Turkish relations bilaterally and regionally?

Let me take each in turn.

I.

First: How will Turkey emerge from the current crisis?

I think chances are it will emerge better than when it entered it, but it is by no means a sure thing.

There are basically three and a half ways the July 22 election can come out.

The first, a nationalist coalition of the CHP and MHP replacing AKP in government now seems pretty unlikely, according to recent polling. I will therefore not spend dwell on it.

The variable in the others is whether a third party, almost certainly the MHP, will join the AKP and CHP in Parliament, along with a significant number of independents. Here the math of Turkey's proportional representation system is pretty simple:

- If MHP makes it, there is no way I can see that AKP will end up with the 2/3 majority they would need to either elect the next President or fundamentally change the Constitution on their own. But AKP will in any case have a strong plurality. That will either give them a working majority in Parliament; or they will be close enough that they will be able to pick up enough independent deputies to form the next government. Thus the “half” I referred to a moment ago.
- If MHP fails to clear the threshold, it is almost impossible for AKP NOT to have a 2/3 majority, which means they could – legally -- pretty well do as they please in terms of the Presidency, the Constitution, or both.

The first of these two more realistic outcomes has been described by some as the “sweet spot” outcome. It would leave in place what would be in fact or essence a single-party government with all that implies for coherence and ability to make decisions. It would leave at the head of that government a party – AKP – generally perceived at home and abroad as business-friendly and globalist in its outlook. But it would almost certainly mean a consensus President -- that is a non-AKP President -- since AKP would need the support of opposition parties to convene Parliament for the purpose of electing one.

With the checks and balances of the Presidency in non-AKP hands, those inside and outside Turkey concerned about a “secret agenda” would presumably breathe easier. Importantly, there would be no reason for Turkey’s military to back up their words of April 27. International and domestic markets would no doubt highly approve. I’ve seen suggestions that the IMKB would jump 12 %.

The second scenario is more ... interesting. A week ago, I would have said that an outcome in which the AKP has more than 376 seats in Parliament would by definition mean that Turkey was staring down the barrel of a serious crisis. The reason is very simple. If AKP decided to re-nominate Abdullah Gul for the Presidency, we would be right back where we were in late April. But AKP would have the votes to defeat any attempt -- in Parliament -- to stop the show. The big question then, obviously, is what Turkey’s military would do. This would be truly uncharted Constitutional ground. The stakes would be high for all concerned. The impact on the markets and Turkish lira would not be pretty.

My reading of the current dynamics of this election is that some variant of the “sweet spot” outcome is a lot more likely than the more interesting one I’ve just described. But it would be silly to rule out a crisis at this point.

Still, if you take at face value statements in the past week by Prime Minister Erdogan, even an outcome in which AKP does end up with a super-majority in Parliament may not immediately plunge Turkey into crisis. He strongly implied Sunday that AKP would support a consensus candidate for the Presidency. He also suggested that AKP would not try to deadlock the Parliament that will be elected July 22 in order to have the next President elected by popular ballot.

The problem, of course, is that most secular Turks probably don’t believe him. And his subsequent statements suggest AKP will push for one of its own to be President if they are in a position to elect him. Clearly, a lot will depend on whether Mr. Erdogan and his colleagues have drawn any lessons from the events of last April, and if so what they may be.

II.

That gets us to the second question: Will the vote mean Turkey will tilt back toward secularism or toward a more overtly Islamic agenda?

As I've just suggested, a lot depends on whether a third party gets into Parliament July 22. IF the AKP takes us right back to where we were in late April, everyone will be making it up as they go along.

But IF AKP does not end up in opposition, and IF AKP does what it probably should have done in the first place and supports a genuine consensus candidate for President regardless of how many seats it ends up with in Parliament, it seems to me the stage may be set for a rather abrupt depolarization of Turkish politics in the period ahead.

Think about, for example, what it will mean if the next Turkish President is a genuine consensus candidate – which he will have to be under what I consider to be the most likely scenario. It means, essentially, that he will fall in terms of personality and political philosophy somewhere between Ahmet Necdet Sezer and Abdullah Gul.

- That will mean, on the one hand, that the prospect of an AKP “secret agenda,” if you believe in it, will be blocked as firmly as ever.
- But it will also mean that the gridlock in reform legislation produced by Sezer's extensive use of the veto power – some it, let's recall legislation strongly endorsed by the IMF, US and EU --, will attenuate.

It ought, in short, to lower the stakes in the Kemalist vs. Islamist debate that has been going on in Turkey for years, but has intensified during this double election year.

Other factors I think will cause polarization to subside post-July 22 have to do with changes in the AKP and its place in Turkey's political universe. Let me just cite two things I think will make a big difference.

The first is the composition of the AKP delegation in the next Parliament. If you look at the current candidate lists, that delegation will be a much more worldly, centrist pragmatic group than its predecessors. That means that the influence of the more radical elements in the party and in Parliament is likely to be diminished. Bulent Arinc, who may well have precipitated the crisis in April, may not be speaker. It means that Erdogan and his fellow pragmatists in the party will be more in control of the party inside Parliament than they have been during their first term.

The second thing that I think will have change will be AKP's sense of where its future lies. One of the key results of this election may be the definitive collapse of Turkey's traditional center right parties, parties that have represented the center of gravity of Turkish politics for decades. That has always been the logical arena for AKP to expand its own base. It did so in 2002 and it clearly hopes to do so again July 22.

If, as now seems likely, no secular center right party gets over the 10% threshold, a lot of people formerly associated with those parties will be looking for a new home. To collect them, AKP will have to deemphasize its “Islamic” roots even more than they have to date. Hard core secularists will never trust them no matter how many times they deny they are a religious party. But the pragmatists in AKP will understand that there is a fundamental incompatibility between a secret Islamist agenda and a vision of becoming the owners of Turkey’s political vital center.

Finally, with this year’s two pivotal elections history, and again assuming we are talking about a “sweet spot” outcome, there is no evident reason why Turkey’s military should feel the same tug to involve themselves in the country’s political debate they have on occasion yielded to in recent months.

III.

What about the Kurds? Meaning, I guess, what is the likelihood that Turkey will carry out a cross-border operation before or after July 22 against PKK elements in northern Iraq? I wrote something on this that was published in last Friday’s Washington Times, so I will do this quickly.

I personally doubt there will be an incursion unless someone makes a mistake.

But first things first. Does Turkey have a real terrorism problem? Yes. Since the PKK ended the ceasefire a couple years ago, hundreds of Turks have been murdered. Turkey’s frustration that the United States and Iraqi and Kurdish Federal officials have done nothing concrete to close down PKK facilities in northern Iraq is in my view entirely legitimate. Under these circumstances, it is impossible, in my view, to dispute their case that they are entitled to do whatever they have to do to defend their citizens.

But there are some very good reasons having to do with Turkey’s own interest that probably explain why they have not done so. I laid out some of these in my article and I’m happy to get into it in more detail in the Q&A. But it boils down to this: chances of hurting the PKK badly are pretty slim; while the unintended consequences could be pretty monumental.

That being the case, the public debate in Ankara over the past several months on whether or not to cross the border has struck me as almost certainly influenced by electoral politics. Simply put, it has looked to me like much of the emotional talk of opposition leaders at funerals and elsewhere has been calculated to put AKP on the defensive and, perhaps even more important, to get MHP across the electoral threshold. I have already explained why that is important.

I am convinced there are scenarios where Turkey would have no choice but to intervene in northern Iraq. I fear the game of chicken the various political actors have been playing on this issue in recent weeks could paint them into a corner where they may at some point have to order an operation even if they do not want to. But, again, the Prime Minister's comments earlier this week that an operation is not on the agenda before July 22 may have cooled things off a bit.

IV.

How will all this affect U.S. – Turkish relations?

A little historical perspective might be useful here. U.S. – Turkish relations have had a tough six years or so. Most of that has been, directly or indirectly, about Iraq and the manner in which the Bush Administration has gone about that project.

I think that is probably not going to change regardless of what happens in Turkey July 22.

I think the Bush and Erdogan administrations have actually done a pretty good job of putting the state-to-state relationship back together since January 2005. There have been slips like the Hamas visit; there have been differences of perspective on issue like Iran and Syria. But by and large – with the notable exception of the PKK issue – the two sides have shared common objectives and worked reasonably well together.

The debate in Turkey this spring on the PKK, combined with the reality of a lame duck administration in Washington that is desperately seeking to find its way in Iraq, has in my view real potential for difficulties in the period ahead.

If all goes well, Turkey will have sorted out by the end of this summer its Presidential succession and know with some certainty who will be running the country for the next four or five years. Iraq, meanwhile will be reaching a critical stage for our President's surge strategy and our internal debate on the way forward. Issues that Turkey cares deeply about, like the fate of Kirkuk, will be in the mix. The PKK issue will still be in the mix. Issues that arguably ought not be part of the mix, like an Armenian genocide resolution, will likely bob back up to the surface. Issues like Iran and the future of Palestine will highlight differences in analysis and approach.

In short, it is hard to be optimistic that U.S. – Turkish relations will enter a new golden age once Turkey's double election year is behind it. Their management will require hard work and closer attention than has too often been the case in the past. The only cause for hope is the reality that both countries' long-term strategic interests, which at the end of the day DO largely overlap, will tend to lead us to common ground, as they have so reliably in the past.