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Contents

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Editor's Note
4

COMMENTARIES

Truth Is a Human Right: Türkiye's Stance on the Fight against Disinformation
FAHRETTİN ALTUN
13

Strategic Communication and Policies of Türkiye
YENAL GÖKSUN
29

Insights into Türkiye's Technology Development Journey
SERDAL TEMEL
47

Türkiye's Middle Corridor and China's BRI: Identification and Assessment
NURETTİN AKÇAY and GUO CHANGGANG
63

F-35 Crisis between the U.S. and Türkiye: Is This the End of American
Nuclear Assurance for Türkiye?
ŞAFAK OĞUZ
75

ARTICLES

Governmental System Discussions Ahead of the 2023 Elections: Why the
Nation Alliance's Proposal for Semi-Presidentialism Is not a Viable Option
CEM DURAN UZUN
93

Key Issues in Turkish Politics before the 2023 Elections
HAMİT EMRAH BERİŞ
125

Reclaiming the *Ummah* from the Margins: The Case of Türkiye's HÜDA-PAR
RAVZA ALTUNTAŞ ÇAKIR
147

Syrian Women in the Turkish Labor Market: Understanding Their Labor Supply Behavior
HATİCE KARAHAN and ÖZNUR GÜLEN ERTOSUN
171

Israel's COVID-19 Diplomacy in Sub-Saharan Africa and Central Europe
ELDAR HASANOĞLU and OĞUZHAN ÇAĞLIYAN
187

Religion, Armed Conflict, and the Quest for "Secular": Mapping Martyrdom in Kashmir
RESUL YALÇIN and UMAIR GUL
205

Endless EU Facilitated-Mediated Dialogue Between Kosovo and Serbia
BASHKIM RRAHMANI and MAJLINDA BELEGU
223

REVIEW ARTICLE

Hamas: Isolated, Contained, but not Co-opted?
BILAL SALAYMEH
247

BOOK REVIEWS

Turkey between the United States and Russia:
Surfing on the Edge
**NUR ÇETİNOĞLU HARUNOĞLU, AYŞEGÜL SEVER,
and EMRE ERŞEN**
Reviewed by Feyza Nur Canalp
255

EU-Turkey Relations: A New Direction for
EU Foreign Policy?
ELENA BARACANI
Reviewed by Beyza Ceren Aslan
257

Imperial Resilience: The Great War's End,
Ottoman Longevity, and Incidental Nations
HASAN KAYALI
Reviewed by Mustafa İlter
259

Promised Lands: The British and the Ottoman
Middle East
JONATHAN PARRY
Reviewed by Sırma Feyza Şağban
262

Fraternal Enemies: Israel and the Gulf Monarchies
CLIVE JONES and YOEL GUZANSKY
Reviewed by Ayşe Avcı
265

The Middle East from Empire to Sealed Identities
LORENZO KAMEL
Reviewed by Fikriye Karaman
267

How ISIS Fights?: Military Tactics in Iraq, Syria,
Libya, and Egypt
OMAR ASHOUR
Reviewed by Cenkay Uyan
270

Everyday Boundaries, Borders, and Post-Conflict
Societies
RENATA SUMMA
Reviewed by Deepika Dahiya
272

Russia's 2022 War against Ukraine and the Foreign
Policy Reaction of the EU: Context, Diplomacy,
and Law
LUIGI LONARDO
Reviewed by Hacı Mehmet Boyraz
274

The Rise of Blockchains: Disrupting Economies
and Transforming Societies
NIR KSHETRI
Reviewed by Bilal Bağış
276

EDITOR'S NOTE

MUHİTTİN ATAMAN

On May 14, 2023, Türkiye will hold both the presidential and the parliamentary elections, in which the Turkish people will choose the president and all 600 members of the Turkish Parliament. This will be the second elections since the transition to the presidential system in 2017. After the first elections, held in June 2018, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was elected as the first president of the new governmental system, and AK Party received more than 42 percent of the total votes, winning almost half of the seats in parliament. As in the first elections, two major political blocs will compete, namely, the People's Alliance (*Cumhur İttifakı*) and the Nation Alliance (*Millet İttifakı*).

The People's Alliance bloc consists of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AK Party) led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP) led by Devlet Bahçeli, the Great Unity Party (*Büyük Birlik Partisi*, BBP) led by Mustafa Destici, the New Welfare Party (*Yeniden Refah Partisi*, YRP) led by Fatih Erbakan and the Free Cause Party (*Hür Dava Partisi*, HÜDA-PAR) led by Zekeriya Yapıcıoğlu.

The second political bloc, the Nation Alliance also known as the Table of Six (*Altılı Masa*), is made up of six-plus-one political parties. The alliance, which was initially formed in May 2018 by four political parties, now consists of six

parties, while one party supports the bloc from outside. The Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) led by Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu and the Good Party (*İyi Parti*, İP) led by Meral Akşener are the two main allies. They were/are officially supported by four smaller political parties. The Democrat Party (*Demokrat Parti*, DP) led by Gültekin Uysal represents the center right, while the Felicity Party (*Saadet Partisi*, SP) led by Temel Karamollaoğlu is the continuation of Necmettin Erbakan's Islamic political tradition.

The two additional political parties, the Future Party (*Gelecek Partisi*, GP) led by Ahmet Davutoğlu and the Democracy and Progress Party (*Demokrasi ve Atılım Partisi*, DEVA Party) led by Ali Babacan are breakaway groups from the ruling AK Party. They have recently joined the Nation Alliance in an attempt to overthrow the ruling party, which has been in power for the last two decades.

In addition to these six political parties, the Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP) led by Pervin Buldan and Mithat Sancar, also supports the Nation Alliance. However, it did not become an official partner of the Nation Alliance, since some partners of the alliance, most notably the İP, generally representing the secular Turkish nationalists, oppose the alliance with HDP due to its close connections with PKK. Therefore, although HDP has declared its support for the candidacy of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, it has not joined the alliance.

It has become obvious that two political alliances will dominate the election process, therefore there are effectively only two main presidential candidates. While the People's Alliance has nominated Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the Nation Alliance has nominated Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu for the presidential post. Concurrently, there are two additional candidates, Muharrem İnce and Sinan Oğan, supported by other small political parties that will no doubt influence the election results, however they are not expected to get more than a small percentage of the vote.

The two opposing and conflicting political blocs represent an almost absolute mutual exclusive perspective about the future of Türkiye and the politics of the country, reflecting the increasing polarization of Turkish politics. These two alliances have two opposite and conflictual perspectives of Türkiye.

The People's Alliance emerged as a consequence of a domestic stance against the attacks Türkiye faced after the bloody coup attempt by FETÖ on July 15, 2016, which led to many major changes in the country. The alliance aims to maintain the current government, to consolidate the current presidential system, to continue the country's transformation program, to protect the country against both internal and external threats, to increase its deterrent military

power, to strengthen its economic development, and to globalize its diplomatic power.

The Nation Alliance, on the other hand, was formed as a reaction to the People's Alliance, since no one political party was/is able to challenge the power of AK Party and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The alliance is determined to reverse the course of politics in the country and to reverse many of the changes made by the AK Party governments. It claims that if it wins the elections, it will initiate a process of restoration, revive the old political system, change the regime, revive the old, and turn to the status quo ante.

However, the Nation Alliance is quite a vulnerable and fractured opposition bloc. It seems that while the Nation Alliance agrees on what it does not want, specifically the rule of the AK Party, the bloc does not know what it wants instead. There is no real consensus among the fragmented opposition parties about the future of the country. Not only do different political parties expect different developments, even different wings within certain political parties make different suggestions. For example, some officials of the biggest partner of the Nation Alliance, the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), has declared that they will apologize (*helalleşmek*) to certain mistreated groups such as the women who were excluded from education and work because they chose to wear Islamic clothing. On the other hand, some other representatives and supporters emphasize that they will take revenge (*hesaplaşmak*) against other groups close to AK Party.

Another important event that reflects the division within and the brittleness of the Nation Alliance is related to the announcement of their presidential candidate. Not only did it take more than ten meetings and several months for them to decide, but at the end of the process, the leader of İP, Akşener, left the block as she (and her party) did not approve the candidacy of Kılıçdaroğlu. Nevertheless, she came back to the table just one day later accepting Kılıçdaroğlu's candidacy but adding two new names, Ekrem İmamoğlu and Mansur Yavaş, CHP mayors of İstanbul and Ankara respectively, to the existing five vice-presidents. Indeed, for a long time, Akşener had been campaigning that one of these two men be selected for the presidential candidacy.

The upcoming elections, which are held on the centennial anniversary of the Turkish Republic, put Türkiye at an important crossroads. It seems that two conflictual perspectives, the bloc that supports the consolidation of the presidential system and the bloc that supports a regime change, will collide. While the People's Alliance emphasize autonomy in foreign policy and seeks to achieve regional leadership, the Nation Alliance promote an inward-looking political system and withdrawal from regional issues. Whatever the position of

the bloc, one thing is for sure: The Turkish people want a strong leadership in foreign policy during this crucial global transition period.

The turnout in Turkish elections is relatively high, generally over 80 percent, which is one of the highest in the world. Considering the politicization in the people's daily lives, political polarization and the harsh political dialogue, it seems that the turnout in the upcoming elections will be even higher. Furthermore, the earthquake disaster of February 6 has further exacerbated and aroused the political fault lines. However, at the end of this high level of democratic competition and turnout in elections, Turkish democracy will be the winner, and it will be consolidated.

Taking into consideration these developments and the importance of the elections -not only for Türkiye but for the regional and global affairs as well- this issue of *Insight Turkey* tackles some of the most important and determinative topics influencing the results.

Disinformation has been one of the most noticeable ramifications we are experiencing of the digital revolution. At the same time, Türkiye, situated in a geopolitical hotspot, is one of the countries that is both a target and a hub of disinformation campaigns in the region. Within this context, Fahrettin Altun, the Presidency Communications Director has penned a commentary addressing misinformation and disinformation with a special focus on Türkiye and the initiatives undertaken by Communication Directorate. Within the same line of thought, Yenal Göksun provides an overview of Türkiye's strategic communication policy and evolution of the Turkish communication model and the current strategic communication initiatives undertaken by the Directorate of Communications. According to Göksun, Türkiye's evolving development and foreign policy agenda, which has developed rapidly in the last 20 years, has pushed it to undertake more ambitious efforts in the field of communication and public diplomacy, and as a result, innovations have been made in strategic communication policies.

Turning to one of the most discussed issues in recent years in Türkiye's politics, Cem Duran Uzun focuses on the country's presidential system and the different government systems proposed by various parties before the 2023 elections. He specifically focuses on the differences between the U.S. presidential system and Türkiye's administrative system, which overhauled its political system in 2017 and replaced the parliamentary system with a Turkish-style presidential system. Following up, Hamit Emrah Beriş evaluates the key issues in Turkish politics before the 2023 elections. Beriş argues that the 2023 elections are one of the most important in Türkiye's history and four main topics determined the fate of the elections: refugees, the economy, rising nationalism, and the Kurdish question. The author focuses on serious differences of opinion between the

ruling and opposition blocs on the solution to these problems. According to Beriş, the 2023 elections will show whether the approaches of the ruling or opposition wing are in line with the expectations of Turkish society.

In our next research article, Ravza Altuntaş Çakır aims to investigate the relationship between ethnic Muslim minority identity and transnational Muslim solidarity, with emphasis on HÜDA-PAR, the most organized political Islamic organization and the second largest political party in Southeast Türkiye. In her paper, Çakır examines how the concept of *ummah* motivates the party's domestic/ideological, national and transnational political discourses and initiatives, and also deals with the uncertainties that a mostly abstract and idealist *ummahist* approach to modern politics brings in the face of Kurdish nationalism, regional realpolitik, and democratic pluralism. As mentioned previously, refugees are another important issue for the forthcoming elections. In that respect, the article by Hatice Karahan and Öznur Gülen Ertosun examines the various dynamics that Syrian women under temporary protection face in the labor market in Türkiye.

Technology has become a driving force in the global affairs and Türkiye has been taking all the necessary steps to take advantage of new developments. Within this line of thought, Serdal Temel in his commentary argues that Türkiye, an emerging economy, has been attempting to improve its socioeconomic strength through the promotion of research and development (R&D), innovation, and technological development activities. The author underlines that since the 2000s, the government has implemented support programs focused on developing the innovation capacity of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and universities, and emphasizes that these programs are diversified as support for ecosystem improvements as well as support for patenting, commercialization and entrepreneurship.

In another article, Nurettin Akçay and Guo Changgang, discuss China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Türkiye's Middle Corridor (MC) projects, which have a common goal of connecting Europe and Asia, as well as facilitating commercial, economic, political and socio-cultural interactions between the two continents. In this commentary, which aims to examine the history, objectives and stages of Türkiye's MC, Akçay and Changgang harmonizes the BRI with the MC and examines the inherent risks and challenges of integration as well as opportunities for the region. Our final commentary by Şafak Oğuz, analyzes the possible consequences of the F-35 fighter crisis between the U.S. and Türkiye, particularly in terms of its effect on the tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) deployed in Türkiye as part of NATO's nuclear sharing program.

Three off-topic research articles enrich the scope of our special issue. Eldar Hasanoğlu and Oğuzhan Çağlıyan investigate, with the onset of the COVID-19

crisis, how the Israeli diplomacy initiative took on greater importance in maintaining its presence and reputation internationally. In their article, the authors analyze Israel's approach to COVID-19 diplomacy, which involved providing medical teams, PPE, and surplus vaccines to approximately 20 countries, and examine the political and strategic calculations behind Israel's decision to extend assistance to specific countries. Focusing on the religious conflicts in Kashmir, Resul Yalçın and Umair Gul seek to try to contextualize the search for the "secular" while examining the construction of Muslim identity, the institution of martyrdom, and its social basis in Kashmir. They define Kashmir as a festering political problem receiving little global attention. Lastly, Bashkim Rrahmani and Majlinda Belegu focus on the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue. They discuss the important issues linked with the dialogue that is being facilitated and negotiated by the EU, including essential activities, challenges, obstacles, antagonisms, the approach the EU facilitators/mediators undertake, as well as the reaction and the expected results that the parties involved in the process have regarding reaching a final solution to the dispute.

As Türkiye is on the eve on one of the most important elections in its history, this issue of *Insight Turkey* addresses some of the issues that have been dominating the political agenda lately. Through this issue, we hope to provide our readers with a thorough analysis and the necessary foundations for a better understanding of some of the main issues that will influence the outcome of the May 14 elections. ■

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