

Contemporary Turkey in conflict: How ethnic, political and religious conflicts will define Turkey's future

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*Since 2015, Turkey has experienced a wave of terrorist attacks, political unrest, and a failed coup attempt. Drawing on research in a new book, **Tahir Abbas** writes on the radical changes that have occurred in Turkey during the 21st century and the conflicts that are now shaping the country's future.*



Thinking about the nation of Turkey conjures up all sorts of curious and exotic imaginations of the 'other'. In the mind's eyes of those who visit the country and among those who would wish to analyse various aspects of its sociological, political and cultural dynamics, in straddling East and West, Islam and Christianity, Europe and Asia, there is no other place like it on earth.

Yet for all that is written and said about this remarkable nation, there are often enormous gaps in knowledge and thinking. This is largely because scholars operating inside of the country live under constant fear of persecution for their social science research interests, even if the clearly stated aims are entirely benevolent, where new knowledge is a route into new ways of thinking and new ways of being. However, the issues of identity, politics and religion remain acutely interesting in Turkey, and for all sorts of reasons.

For example, the definition of what it is to be a Turk is a political categorisation, where the concept of being a Turkish Muslim, until recently, was devoid of religious content. This is rarely found elsewhere in the world, as the category of Muslim becomes ever more poignant in the light of local and global challenges. Moreover, what is understood by minority or majority is also somewhat of a complicated issue in the Turkish context.

Under the rules of governance upheld by the Ottoman Empire, different religious and ethnic groups were granted the

capacity to govern their religious affairs as long as they were loyal to the Sultan. In the transformation of the Empire into a secular republic in the early 1920s, minorities were defined by religion, such that Jews and Christians would receive certain protections under the new Turkish Republic in light of their religious identities. However, Kurdish groups, representing at least one-fifth of the population, were denied recognition of their cultural, linguistic and ethnic heritage. They were Muslim by religious classification, and therefore not counted as a minority.

As majority Turkish society became ever more devoted to a centre-periphery notion, tensions arose between two different approaches to understanding nationhood. The centre was seen as urban, elite and powerful. The periphery was seen as tangential to the aims of the centre, from which disconnect was greatest, and where the space, defined by the centre, between *modernity* and *backwardness* was seen to be the largest. As other minorities, including the Roma, have continued to suffer at the hands of an exclusivist Turkification project, a Turkish-Kurdish separation remains an ongoing challenge for the future of Turkey.

Power, politics and populism

Since the AKP came to power in 2002, there has not only been a continuation of the authoritarian rule principle adopted by Kemalists, this authoritarianism has grown significantly since the end of the 2000s. But under the stewardship of what is now President Tayyip Erdogan, the country is currently embroiled in various internal and external conflicts that are seemingly without end. Turkey has been at the centre of unprecedented drama in recent periods.

In the last 15 months alone, there have been over 30 suicide and terrorist attacks all over the country, largely targeting either Istanbul tourist sites or government installations and police officers in other major cities. The death toll has been immense and the destabilisation the population continues to create alarm inside and outside of the country.

Istanbul, the city where until July 2016 I lived and worked for nearly six years, was subject to one terrorist incident after another. In June 2016, Islamic State terrorists carried out shootings and bombings at Istanbul airport killing 45 people. In July 2016, a [failed coup](#) led to over 350 deaths and thousands injured – the bloodiest coup or failed coup in Turkish history. With no clear understanding of who was behind the coup or the motivations that led them to undertake it, the Gülen movement has suffered the consequences of a President enraged and emboldened.

The most recent trigger for this top-down discontent was the election outcome of June 2015, which did not lead to the overwhelming majority the AKP had hoped. There was a belief among some that a coalition could have been achieved, but discussions were stalled and it was prevented from occurring. A snap election held in [November 2015](#) witnessed the AKP returning to power with an even greater majority than in 2011.

During the period between June and November 2015, Islamic State, the PKK and the TAK (a more militant offshoot of the PKK) attacked tourist sites and the infrastructures of the state, all with a venom unbeknown in recent history. The attacks that Islamic State has inspired among vulnerable people in Europe and elsewhere are also reflective of the fact that it is on its way out. Islamic State still holds Mosul and Raqqa, but its days are numbered.

Although Turkey suffered a massive financial crisis at the end of the twentieth century, within a decade or so it rose back up the global ladder to become part of the G20. An incredible success story, whichever way one looks at it, which is why Turkey was seen as ‘the miracle’ that balanced Islam, democracy and capitalism at a time of tremendous global uncertainty.

It is also a period of a lack of clarity in relation to politics and society as the world continues to divide between the haves and have-nots. It is a time when diversity is seen as a risk to society, not an asset. Mention of equality of opportunity *as well as* equality of outcome is rarely discussed in public discourses. But as Turkey distances itself from the EU in the light of Turkoscepticism, the Eurozone’s internal issues as well as Turkish disinterest, the AKP is increasingly looking eastwards for economic opportunities in Central Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and all the way to

South Asia and Southeast Asia.

Contemporary Turkey in conflict

I moved to Istanbul in September 2010. At the time, Istanbul was the European capital of culture. Every aspect of the economy, society and politics suggested that Turkey was a nation very much on the up and at a time when the Eurozone was recovering from the 2008 global financial meltdown and the wider Middle East still struggled to cope with democratisation, tribalism, militarism, cronyism, corruption, under-development and chronic unemployment. It was less than a year before what became known as the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa, and the Occupy movements in the capitals of advanced Western European and North American economies.

As a sociologist, promoted to a full personal chair within a year of my arrival, I felt the freedom to pursue my natural curiosities, which invariably lend themselves to the study of minorities and questions of social conflict, and in spite of the challenges that exist for social scientists exploring the most sensitive of issues. This meant unearthing all the unpalatable aspects of Turkish history, society and politics, which eventually became the backbone of a [new book](#) which explores various issues of ethnic, social and political conflict in Turkey in the twenty-first century.

Fatih University, where I worked, was the flagship Turkish university of the Gülen movement – an English-medium private institute of higher learning and research with a relatively good standing inside of the country. As the political pressure began to pile on the University from 2013 onwards, the question was not if but when the AKP hammer would fall. As the failed coup unfolded, the President was adamant that the Gülenists were behind this event. It gave Erdogan the impetus for a massive purge of hundreds of thousands of people thought to be affiliated or associated with the Gülen movement.

Had I stayed in Turkey any longer I would have faced unemployment or possible imprisonment due to my research on sensitive matters in Turkey, such as the PKK or the Gezi Park issues. In order to take up my current position in London, I left Turkey in the first week of July, around ten days before the failed coup. A few weeks after the failed coup, unsurprisingly, my university was shut down. All the academic staff were let go as all the students were distributed into the state sector. Although I submitted the text for my book in March 2016, the publishers were gracious enough to allow me to insert a postscript, which I submitted in August, a few weeks after the failed coup.

The author's new book, [Contemporary Turkey in Conflict: Ethnicity, Islam and Politics](#) is now available from Edinburgh University Press

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image: Erdogan's supporters take part in a demonstration after the attempted coup, 2016. Credits: [Mstyslav Chernov](#).

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