



Turkey Fact Sheet

“Turkey has its supporters in this country, on Capitol Hill, but it is largely due to the past track record not the current activity...There is the Turkey we have long relied upon up until the rise of the AKP (the Islamist party that has ruled Turkey since 2003) and now there is a different kind of Turkey. Unfortunately, one we think is going down the wrong path and needs to be engaged and reformed.”

(Jonathan Schanzer, 11/06/14)



Government

Turkey is officially a democratic Republic with a unicameral parliamentary body named the Grand National Assembly of Turkey. The parliament has 550 seats, and its members are directly elected in multi-seat constituencies by proportional representation to serve 4-year terms. The official head of government is the president, who serves a five-year term, and whom is eligible for a second term. However, historically, the prime minister, who is appointed by the president from among members of parliament, has held real power. The Turkish Republic has never been known for the smooth functioning of its democracy, and has suffered from a number of military coups in the past.

In 2002, a new [Islamist-based](#) Justice and Development Party (AKP) won an election victory, and the party continued to win subsequent elections until finally losing in June 7, 2015. However, after the June election, when no party was able to organize a government, another election was subsequently held on November 4,

2015, with the AKP grabbing back a narrow majority. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the leader of the AKP, was appointed the Prime Minister in 2002, and served until 2014. In 2014, after changes were made to the constitution to directly elect the President, and to boost the powers of the President, Mr. Erdogan became President, and was replaced as Prime Minister by Ahmet Davutoglu.

The November AKP electoral victory was probably stolen, according to author David Goldman: “Erdogan [effectively](#) stole the national elections...It was pointed out that the results were announced two hours after the polls were closed even though Turkey is entirely a paper ballot system and it typically takes 24 hours to count the votes. Evidently, it wasn’t necessary to count the votes on November 1st because the result was known in advance. The AKP party came out with 49% vote total at an absolute majority at parliament at the expense of the Kurdish party and other opposition parties. An apparent triumph for Erdogan, but it was a triumph achieved in two ways. One was by outright, ballot box stuffing. In Michael Rubin’s estimate, the margin of votes that were simply stolen by Erdogan was about 5%, including phony ballots, dead people voting and so forth. More important, though, than the ballot box stuffing was the totalitarian campaign of intimidation against opponents of the regime. Many Kurdish towns were effectively under siege, [and] dozens of journalists, bloggers, [and] opposition figures were detained. On October 10th, we had the worst terrorism incident in Turkish history in the last 500 years since the Armenian massacres. The dual bombings at a pro-Kurdish rally in Ankara on the 10th which was widely blamed on the government in some fashion or another. The combination of outright theft and intimidation of voters is what gave Erdogan the majority.”

Ethnic & Religious Divisions

Turkey has 81 million people. The ethnic group breakdown is roughly Turkish 70-75%, Kurdish 20%, other minorities 5-10%. Religious divisions are 99.8% Muslim, with between 25-30% Alevi Muslims, 3% Shia Muslim, and the rest Sunni Muslims. There are continuing tensions between the Turkish majority and the Kurdish minority, and, to a lesser extent, between Sunni Muslims and Alevi.

The Kurdish Insurgency

The Kurdish population has long been discriminated and oppressed by the Turkish government. The Kurds [do not](#) have any national rights, autonomy, or even primary schools where they can be educated in the Kurdish language. Turkey’s founding state authorities claimed that when the Turkish republic was established, there were no Kurds – just “mountain Turks,” and that Kurdish is not a “real” language. This denial was accompanied by massacres, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, unlawful arrests and torture.

The Kurds in Turkey currently have a much [greater](#) demographic growth rate than the Turks, which has [prompted](#) some paranoia in President Erdogan and other officials in the Turkish government.

Since 1984, the [Kurdistan Workers’ Party \(PKK\)](#) of Turkey, originally a Marxist guerrilla movement – but now a much more moderate, leftist and non-religious movement – has fought a decades-long war against the Turkish state which has resulted in the deaths of more than 40,000 people. In the 1990s, the PKK rolled back on its demands for an independent Kurdish state, calling instead for more autonomy for the Kurds. The PKK has been listed as [a terrorist organization](#) by the State Department since 1997. In 1999, the PKK’s leader, Abdullah Ocalan, was arrested and jailed for treason by Turkey. President Erdogan signed a ceasefire with the PKK in March of 2013, but in the midst of his tough Nov. 2015 election campaign, [he eventually abrogated it](#). As of late 2015, the Turkish military and police [continue](#) to push a tough campaign to target and terrorize the Kurds.

Economic Problems

“Erdogan [has run](#) a debt bubble in Turkey in order to hand out an enormous amount of goodies to people and that has been a major part of his political success,” according to Goldman. From 2010 to the present,

Turkey has increased its foreign debt from about \$250 billion to \$400 billion. Its running a current account deficit of about 8% GDP per year. Turkey's GDP is about \$1 trillion USD. This requires the import of net \$80 billion worth of goods, causing Turkey to increase its debt each year by that amount.

The Turkish short fall is made up by funding from the oil rich Sunni Arab Gulf States. These states fund Turkey [because](#) it is a Sunni power which has the largest, and one of the most powerful, Sunni army in the region. The Gulf States rely on Turkey as a bull-work against Shia Iran.

In late 2015, Turkey also began to [suffer](#) from a “confidence gap” which “stems from both external factors and domestic issues, including political uncertainty and [rekindled clashes](#) between government forces and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The protracted electoral atmosphere — first for the June 7 polls and now ahead of the Nov. 1 snap elections — has deferred economic reforms, leaving financial markets in uncertainty with investors unable to see ahead. The Kurdish-majority [eastern and southeastern provinces](#) have further lost their appeal to investors amid bloody unrest marked by intensified PKK attacks,” according to a piece in *Al-Monitor*.

Turkey's Troubling Trends on Human Rights

Under the AKP, Turkey's human rights record has been increasingly poor. Women's rights have [declined](#) under Erdogan, who has been [quoted](#) as saying that: “You cannot bring women and men into equal positions; that is against nature because their nature is different... it is against her delicate nature.” Turkey's rates of violence against women, already some of the worst in all of Europe, [doubled](#) from 2008 to 2012. Turkey is also wracked by startling rates of child brides -- nearly 7,000 girls were married between the ages of 13 and 17 over the past decade, [according to a survey](#) by a women's rights group.

“Hate crimes against LGBT individuals are [higher](#) in Turkey than in any other member of the Council of Europe ...” according to advocacy groups, and “at least 30 transgender individuals in Turkey were murdered between January 2008 and December 2012, according to Transgender Europe.” Erdogan has [called](#) homosexuality “contrary” to Islam. In 2015, Turkish police [fired](#) pepper spray and rubber pellets at thousands of marchers in the gay pride parade, even though the parade had never before - in 13 years - been violent.

Turkey never had a strong record of protecting speech and press rights, and things [have gotten](#) far worse since Erdogan took power. Article 299 of the [Turkish penal code](#) says that anyone who [insults the president](#) can face up to four years in prison, and the prison term goes up if the crime is committed publicly. Citizens can also face fines and/or lose their jobs for their speech. In 2015, Turkey [ranked](#) 149th on Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the world's largest press advocacy group, list of 180 countries. According to RSF, arrests and intimidation of journalists are rampant. In fact, Turkey [was](#) the world's top jailer of journalists in 2012 and 2013, according to the International Committee to Protect Journalists.

In December of 2015, Turkey [made news](#) after a Turk lost both his government job and was put on trial for his Facebook post comparing President Erdogan to the character of Gollum from *The Lord of the Rings*. If the court finds that Gollum is an evil character, then the meme will be considered “offensive” and the citizen on trial will be found guilty and imprisoned. Even children [have been](#) prosecuted and/or imprisoned for their criticism of Erdogan.

In 2013 hundreds of thousands took to the streets in Turkey [to contest](#) the proposed demolition of the Gezi park to make way for a shopping center, a project pushed personally by Erdogan. “The government's uncompromising stance and a heavy-handed police crackdown on protesters led to the protests quickly spreading all over [Turkey](#), turning an initial environmental movement into a revolt against the increased authoritarianism of the country's leader,” *The Guardian* [reported](#). The Gezi protests [resulted](#) in the death of 8 people, of which at least 4 were a result of police violence, with about 8,000 injured.

President Erdogan and Turkish leaders continue to deny the [Armenian](#) and [other Christian](#) genocides. Erdogan is also an [avowed](#) and vocal anti-Semite who promotes his beliefs at home; according to a 2015 [Anti-Defamation League survey](#), 71% of the Turkish population harbor anti-Semitic attitudes.

Turkey's Support for Armed Radical Islamists

As an Islamist party, the AKP, and Erdogan, have been increasingly friendly towards other Sunni, and even Shia Muslim Islamist groups, including terror groups.

The AKP [used](#) a massive 'gas-for-gold' sanctions-busting scheme to [line](#) the pockets of AKP elites, and it also delivered 'neighboring Iran some \$13 billion in Turkish gold between 2012 and 2013,' hard currency it badly needed at 'the height of the Western sanctions regime.'" When criticized for this scandal, Erdogan [acted](#) in a suspicious manner, casting the corruption investigations as part of an attempted "judicial coup" and dismissing or reassigning thousands of police officers and hundreds of judges and prosecutors - including those leading the investigation - and passing a law increasing government control over the judiciary.

Turkey has [made](#) the fight against the Islamic State (IS) more difficult. Turkey's [porous borders have allowed the Islamic State to reinforce](#) depleted supplies and manpower. "Turkey has also [played](#) a key role in facilitating the life-blood of ISIS' expansion: black market oil sales... Turkey has facilitated over \$1 billion worth of black market ISIS oil sales to date."

Turkey is a [leading](#) financier of Hamas – Erdogan has overseen the transfer of up to \$250 million a year to Hamas in Gaza. Turkey also supports Hamas politically. On May 31, 2010, Erdogan [provoked](#) the Mavi Marmara incident, in which a Turkish flotilla with hundreds of pro-Palestinian activists aboard sailed toward Gaza to break Israel's naval blockade of Hamas, before being stopped by Israeli forces. The Turkish organization behind the flotilla, IHH, [supports Hamas](#) and has close ties to the Turkish government. Senior Hamas [figure Saleh al-Aruri](#) had operated out of Turkey "with the backing of the Turkish government," from 2012 until December 2015. Nonetheless, Erdogan [stated](#) he would not end his moral and financial support for Hamas.

Turkey as a Western Ally

At best, Turkey is a problematic ally of the West. Anti-American sentiment [runs](#) high, with a 2014 [Pew Research Center](#) poll showing only 19% of Turks have a favorable view of the United States, and 73% of Turks dislike NATO. In November 12, 2014, a group of nationalist Turkish youths [attacked](#) three visiting US sailors in Istanbul, trying to force sacks on their heads. Turkey quickly [released](#) the men, who may face charges. Turkey continues to [occupy](#) part of Cyprus and has [threatened](#) fellow NATO member Greece.

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