

## Interview - Selim Koru

Written by E-International Relations

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Selim Koru is an analyst at the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV) where he focuses on Turkey's policies in the Middle East and Asia. He is also a 2018 Black Sea Writing Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI). His writing has appeared in a variety of publications including Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, War on the Rocks, and The National Interest. Selim holds a BA in History from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and an MA in International Politics and Economics from the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS).

### **Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?**

There are two broad strands of literature that I follow. Both look at what has been called populism or nationalism from distinctive perspectives. The first is old-school geopolitics, meaning people who approach world politics from the perspective of geography and history. There is talk of "revisionism" here, and how to adjust to the changing world order. I'm interested in people like Jakub Grygiel or Eliot Cohen, or really anyone at the Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI). Revisionist countries now also have writing along these lines, so I follow some people in Turkey and some others who write in English. The second strand of literature is made up of a loose conglomeration of writers with more philosophical approach. I'm still new to this, but I'm thinking of people like the Indian writer Pankaj Mishra, or the late Iranian philosopher Daryush Shayegan. This writing focuses on how societies outside of the core of modernity are adjusting to it. The left in Turkey has been writing about this for some time, albeit from a more sterile angle (much of it coming from Iletisim Publishing). A lot of classic Turkish literature focuses on this, and I'd argue that it is at the core of every election today.

### **How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?**

It has changed over time and continues to change. I come from a family that has been pretty active in Turkey's Islamist movement but have, for various reasons, received a mostly Western education. This was in the late 1990s and early 2000s when Islamism was emerging as a dominant political force in Turkey. Looking back, I can see that an early and very disorganized reading of Existentialism was the first time I tried to make sense of things on my own. I then studied history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (and one year at Boğaziçi University in Istanbul). I remember that as a time of post-modern deconstruction – I was trained to take apart some of the nationalism and religion that I had grown up in. I didn't necessarily abandon those things or replace them with others, but sort of separated them into their constituent parts and looked at them dispassionately. I wasn't particularly opinionated at the time but was excited by liberal causes in Turkey, such as the dismembering of the military-dominated political structure.

I took on a more organized way of looking at the world at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). This is where I was introduced to Political Realism. I took a class on Thucydides and went on to read some of the classics of IR. This seemed useful for looking at the Middle East, and where Turkey was heading. The foreign policy training you get in a school like SAIS is a lot more conservative than what you might get in Turkey. Turkish foreign policy has been running on a very liberal set of assumptions up until recently, and that is reflected in academia. Currently, of course, you have a revisionist strain that tries to swing very forcefully to the other side and I

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have reflected on this in some of the articles I have published.

### **How has the recent mobilization of Kurdish nationalism affected Turkey's domestic and foreign policy?**

I think by a mobilization of Kurdish nationalism, you mean the push in Northern Iraq and Syria, which crystallized around the siege of Kobani in 2014. That's really what brought the issue to the forefront of everybody's agenda. In Turkey, this has meant that the HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party), which is based on a tradition of Kurdish left-nationalists, rose to unprecedented success, breaching the 10 percent electoral threshold in the July 2015 elections. Because of the electoral calculus in parliament today, this presented a threat to the AKP's (Justice and Development Party) continued rule. That's why you see President Erdoğan focusing on his party's campaigning in the southeastern regions so much.

The Kurds are spread across four countries: Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. But Turkey's position is somewhat different from the others. Turkey's Kurdish population is the biggest, richest, most diffused throughout the country, and probably the most deeply woven into the country's fabric. For better or for worse, Turkey has been the Kurds' central gateway to globalization. It's also home to the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party). There used to be many different strands of Kurdish politics across these countries, but the PKK, true to its Marxist-Leninist form, has eliminated nearly all of its rivals. The Barzani clan appears to be the sole alternative in the sphere of Kurdish politics. It used to be the case that when one of these four countries cracked down on Kurdish groups, others would give them more space. So Syria harboured Abdullah Ocalan, the leader of the PKK, because it thought it could play him off against Turkey (now the PKK occupies northern Syria). When Turkey was engaging the PKK in the peace process, the others were uneasy because they feared that PKK offshoots in their countries would be strengthened. Now the peace process is over, Turkey is back to seeing the PKK as an existential threat, and its neighbours are back to buttressing it to gain leverage on Turkey.

### **The AKP government is the first since the 1980s to initiate negotiations with the Kurds instead of military action, however; recently President Erdoğan has compared the Kurdish Workers' Party to ISIS. Why the change in approach? What is the potential for a resolution of the peace process?**

For much of Republican history, Turkey's ruling class was fending off two forces it saw as existential threats: Kurdish Nationalism and Islamism. In the early 2000s, Islamism broke through and started to change the system from within. Those initial years were a fragile time for the AKP, but it was also the time when it was most focused. I think the AKP and its major thinkers didn't consider things beyond overcoming the military tutelage. To them, that was the big thing that was wrong in Turkey, and once it was overcome, everything else would sort of fall into place. That's how they looked at the Kurdish question, too. Kemalism had brought in a very rigid kind of nationalism that suppressed Kurdish identity. Once it was gone, Kurds and Turks would coalesce around Turkey's "natural" political identity, which was dominated by Islamic values. The conflict would then be over and the PKK would lose all meaning. That was the thinking behind the peace process as well – a belief that the AKP could transcend nationalism. Hence Erdoğan's now-infamous phrase, "in this process, let none come to us with Kurdishness. And let none come to us with Turkishness. We are a government that has put all kinds of Nationalism under its feet."

I think there were many reasons for the peace process to break down. When the process started, the PKK was in the middle of shifting its fight from the military field to civil society and electoral politics. By the time it left, the Syrian Civil War was raging, and it was doing very well militarily. The PKK had become a major regional actor and a promising partner of the United States. Maybe it was no longer a time to settle, but to expand, so it was probably looking for a way out of the peace process. On the government's side, there were electoral concerns. In the June 7, 2015 elections, the AKP failed to gain a governing majority in Parliament for the first time since it was founded. The HDP, which comes from the same political tradition as the PKK, crossed the 10 percent electoral threshold for the first time and was represented in the now-hung Parliament. The AKP is mortally set against coalitions, so it charted a path for fresh elections, and part of its strategy during that time was to end the peace process. There was also a sense that the political tide was turning in favor of the Kurdish movement, and that they were moving into a higher position where they could push political parameters in their favor. That must have been profoundly unsettling for Erdoğan.

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At the root of the peace process' failure, however, was the government's faulty understanding of itself and the PKK's motivations. You wouldn't know it by looking at the Erdoğan government today, but the Islamist tradition in Turkey has a long history of belittling nationalism. It thought its own political vision was so strong that it could somehow dissolve the PKK's *raison d'être*. When it couldn't, the political divide turned into a military one overnight. Now it was the state against the insurgency, and this meant fighting the PKK for entire cities that had effectively been ceded to it during the peace process.

People often ask whether the peace process could resume anytime soon. I think it's important to understand that the peace process was a function of the AKP's worldview coming out of the struggle against the Kemalist elite. Things have changed now. The Erdoğan government today has adopted a Manichean view of the world, and it's very difficult to engage in rapprochement with that mindset. Its narrative is set against it. At the same time, I do not think the PKK, which effectively has its own territory in Syria, would be interested in a resumption of the process. It would mean subsuming their national identity on one side of the border while building it up on the other. I'm less familiar with them, but I doubt it would be a desirable dynamic for them at this point.

### **Turkey's relations with NATO and the EU have been increasingly tense since the coup attempt in 2016. Do you think Turkey is moving away from its Western allies?**

Yes. NATO and the EU were formed at a time the West had a particular kind of magnetism for countries like Turkey. Today, the EU has lost much of its magnetism, and Turkey has undergone internal changes that have reduced its attraction. So due to a confluence of factors, a significant part of Turkey's population is making a value judgment against being a part of the Western community of nations. I think that if the Erdoğan government could leave NATO and abandon the EU accession process, it would, but there are economic and security reasons it is not able to do these things yet.

There is a debate over whether the Erdoğan-voting half of the population really wants to leave the West, or whether the president is steering them that way for personal reasons. Of course, in the end, it doesn't really matter. The president and his voters constantly revise each other and reflect each other's values. They are responsible for each other. The last couple of decades of Turkish politics have really been about a certain kind of anger Turkey feels towards the West. I think if that anger runs out before Turkey has had a chance to leave these alliances, it might stay in them. If it doesn't, it'll leave them and have to fend for itself.

### **The Turkish attack on Arfin, Syria was initiated with Russian support. Were you surprised, given the traditionally the history of relations between Moscow and Kurdish organizations in the region?**

No. It's true that the PKK has ties with Moscow reaching back into the Cold War when Turkey was firmly in the Western camp. I'd hesitate to call those relations "friendly." The Russians are looking for leverage over Turkey. One of the ways they do this is by maintaining ties with the PKK. This gives them more bargaining power against Turkey. Many countries do this, and Russia is one of them. This is why having an unstable domestic situation is so damaging to Turkey.

### **Is the threat from Islamic State diminishing? What effect could this have on the conflict in Syria?**

IS isn't really controlling any territory anymore, but the threat from that political strand persists. In some ways, it might even be more dangerous for Turkey for it to be diffused. It has to be said that relative to its size and majority Sunni population, Turkey has probably been a disappointment for IS. It's a majority-Sunni country of 80 million people, but even at the height of IS' power, very few Turkish citizens hopped the border to join it. There were a lot more Tunisians and Libyans for example, despite those countries being much further away. We've done a study at TEPAV on some of the reasons for Turkey's resilience. Early on, the AKP didn't really think of IS as a significant security threat, especially not in comparison to some of the other things it was dealing with. The realisation came a bit later on, and I think it really helped that IS put out very graphic videos saying precisely why they hated Turkey – not just the old secular order, but the AKP government and all that it represented. The security apparatus has since been chasing IS cells pretty hard. But just because these organisations are now underground doesn't mean that they no

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longer have any pull. There is all sorts of fallout from the Syrian Civil War that could expose Turkey to these groups in years to come.

### **What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?**

I'm not sure. I'm still developing myself. It helps to remember that writing is a constant process of revising oneself. Also, I've never really had a mentor, but very good friends are a huge help.

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*This interview was conducted by Alex Tanchev. Alex is an Associate Features Editor at E-IR.*