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We can help Turkey pull back from the political brink

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Geopolitically, what happens in Turkey matters. Democratically, Turkey is regressing.

Turkey is a country of 75 million increasingly well-educated, digitally savvy and prosperous people, whose economy is one of the fastest growing in the G20. Strategically, what Turkey does on crucial contemporary issues – Syria, Palestine, Iran, Ukraine and Russia– matters more to U.S. foreign policy, and to Canada's, than the policies of almost any other partner. Further, Turkey's ability to link Europe to Middle Eastern and West Asian oil and gas will eventually reduce Russian leverage on Central and Eastern Europe, leverage that is dramatically strengthened by the Russia-China mega-deal. Controlling the entrance to the Black Sea, Turkey is also a NATO check on Russian irredentist impulses. Further, Turkey is an interpreter of Islam to the West and vice versa and, generally, a beacon of hope and a model for others in an otherwise bleak regional landscape.

Or rather it has been. Turkey is beginning to circle round a self-made vortex of authoritarian leadership, press control, human-rights abuses, creeping fundamentalism, and high-level corruption. The consequences of descent into the maelstrom would be far-reaching.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has won successive majorities by satisfying the conservative hinterland; by highly effectively driving economic reforms, some initiated by his predecessors; by providing service-oriented administration, especially on water supply, transportation and health care, that even the opposition concedes is admirable; and by complying with some reforms required by the European Union for potential Turkish membership.

Still, satisfaction with Mr. Erdogan appears to be retreating; his party attracted significantly fewer votes in last month's municipal elections than in the last parliamentary elections. Mr. Erdogan's own authoritarian instincts and his apparent mercantile impulses might yet combine to unseat him. But his base remains fiercely loyal and apparently doesn't mind if some money sticks to a few fingers as long as it is seeing progress.

Pugnacious and seemingly perpetually angry, Mr. Erdogan has an enemies list that would impress Richard Nixon. Earlier this month, his insensitive comments turned a mine-disaster memorial into a partisan political scrap, outraging the mourners and their many sympathizers across the country. An aide was photographed kicking a demonstrator held down by security forces, a picture likely to emblemize Mr. Erdogan's leadership style. These incidents came in the wake of last year's Gezi Park demonstrations which Erdogan blamed on "looters" and "terrorists" while the police brutalized

demonstrators and used the judicial system to arrest the doctors who tended to the wounded and businesses that had given them refuge.

Mr. Erdogan is locked in a political struggle with the wealthy Islamist movement led by the imam Fetullah Gulen, who lives in self-imposed exile in Pennsylvania. After uniting in the effort to defeat the secularist political opposition and reduce the political power of the army, Mr. Erdogan and Mr. Gulen fell out and attacked each other. Mr. Erdogan closed schools the movement controlled, and allegedly the Gulenists released a series of tape recordings exposing Mr. Erdogan's authoritarianism, personal peccadillos and corruption. Mr. Erdogan reacted by closing down YouTube and Twitter, and firing or transferring hundreds of prosecutors and police investigators, accused of being infiltrated by the Gulen movement, in order to paralyze any investigations against himself. Some of the same prosecutors had earlier conducted tendentious mass trials of hundreds of alleged conspirators against the Erdogan government, including high-ranking military officers, businessmen, journalists, politicians, human-rights activists, university rectors and academics.

The news about press freedom, perhaps the most reliable barometer of the quality of democracy, is also not good, with the respected Freedom House downgrading Turkey's media environment from Partly Free to Not Free. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, Turkey is imprisoning more journalists than any other country, including China, Iran and Russia. Turkish Radio and Television, the state broadcaster, is a mouthpiece of the government, and private media ownership is largely in the hands of a few major private holding companies whose non-journalistic business interests in government contracts render them susceptible to political pressure.

In this climate Haberturk TV, with an office only 200 yards from Gezi Park, ignored the tumult there to show three medical experts discussing schizophrenia – an apt metaphor for the state of journalism in Turkey. Little escapes Mr. Erdogan's unapproving eye. A tape recording has emerged recently which appears to show him personally directing a media boss to change a "crawler" across the bottom of the TV picture.

For all that, Turkey is unlikely to descend into civil war, mainly because the attachment of the populace to democracy is too strong, the opposition to Mr. Erdogan is too divided and the military is apparently too chastened to intervene. But conflict and instability are not unthinkable, especially if Mr. Erdogan succeeds in stacking the electoral deck for himself.

The scales are belatedly dropping from the eyes of Turkey's friends and allies. What should they do? The Americans should show greater respect for the law of unintended consequences and greater appreciation of the limits of their own capacity. Anxious to be on the right side of history in the Middle East for once, the United States had encouraged the rise of Mr. Erdogan (and of Gulen) but, not for the first time, lost control of their apprentice. They should meddle less and partner more. The Europeans regarded Turkey under the control of the nationalists as too militarist to join the European Union, but as the military retreated from politics under European pressure the Europeans then judged Turkey as too Islamist to join the EU – a Catch-22. Both sides should set aside the EU membership issue and concentrate in the interim on strategic partnership on, for example, oil and gas transmission.

Canada has little purchase on these issues but it is important that we keep our own channels open and functioning, the better to manifest our dismay at the departures from democratic norms and offer our encouragement to those who want these norms respected. Our NATO and G20 connections position us to engage modestly but usefully with Ankara on Ukraine, Syria and Iran, where the Turks have unique insights. We can relieve the Turks of a small share of the Syrian refugee burden (they are currently sheltering a million people), press on with negotiating freer trade and investment, and promote educational exchanges. In short, we can lay political track now for the day it is needed. Ultimately, it is up to the Turkish people to pull their democracy back from the brink, but we can extend them a hand.