

Weekend Review



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ERDOGAN AND TURKEY: THE END OF DEMOCRACY?

Last weekend's nightclub attack in Istanbul has only added to the sense of insecurity that has been growing since the country's failed coup of last year. As President Erdogan turns from Europe to Russia for support, many fear an even steeper slide into authoritarianism



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The year was just an hour old when a man dressed in black approached the door of the nightclub, raised an automatic rifle and shot a security guard in the chest at point-blank range.

Reina, a well-known club in Istanbul's Ortakoy neighbourhood, and a magnet for local celebrities and well-heeled foreigners, was jammed that night. More than 600 people filled its bars, dance floor and waterside terrace, ushering in the new year on the banks of the Bosphorus, at the point where Europe and Asia meet.

Among the partygoers was Leanne

Nasser, an 18-year-old Arab-Israeli from the town of Tira, who was visiting Istanbul with three friends. It was the young woman's first trip abroad; she had begged her father to let her travel, even though he was worried for her safety. Also there was 21-year-old Fikri Tosun, from Montluçon, in central France, who had flown to Istanbul with two friends for New Year's Eve.

Survivors would later recall that the gunman – there may have been more than one assailant, some reports suggested – did not shoot randomly. Rather he moved from table to table, picking off individual partygoers before moving on. Chaos ensued. In the space of 10 minutes about 180 bullets were fired, according to the Turkish daily *Hürriyet*. Hearing the sound of gunfire, people dived under tables, climbed over corpses and sought out hiding places in the toilets or the kitchen. Some jumped into the Bosphorus.

"At first we thought some men were fighting with each other," a Lebanese woman named Hadeel told the news agency Reuters. "Then we heard the sound of the gunfire and ducked under the tables. We heard the guy screaming *Allahu akbar* – God is Greater. "We heard his footsteps crushing the broken glass. We got out through the kitchen. There was blood

everywhere, and bodies."

Back home in France it was about 11pm when Ergin Tosun got a Snapchat message from his brother Fikri in Istanbul. "Brother, I love you . . . I'm going to die," it said. Fikri was shot in the leg and shoulder but survived.

Leanne Nasser was not so lucky. On New Year's Day her father flew to Istanbul to identify her body.

Thirty-nine people were killed in the Reina attack, including at least 15 foreigners, and dozens more were wounded. Islamic State claimed responsibility, saying that one of its "soldiers" – whom Turkish authorities say they have identified but not yet caught – had carried out the attack.

After a violent, tumultuous year, carnage on this scale has taken on a grim familiarity in Turkey's major cities. Just last month the Russian ambassador was assassinated by an off-duty policeman in Ankara and 44 people were killed when a car bomb and a suicide vest detonated in quick succession outside the Besiktas stadium, in the heart of Istanbul. The first explosion was so powerful that body parts had to be retrieved from its roof. A group widely considered to be linked to the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, said that it had carried out the attack.

The same disorienting pattern has held in the first days of the new year. On Thursday a bomb went off outside a courthouse in the city of Izmir, an attack the authorities said may have been carried out by the PKK.

A sense of insecurity, which has worsened with each new attack since the current wave began, in mid-2015, is now all pervasive. Hotels and tourist sites in Istanbul have reported a collapse in visitor numbers. Police maintain a heavy presence on public transport and on the streets, and foreign embassies regularly warn of an elevated risk of violent attacks. Vibrant, cosmopolitan Istanbul is subdued, on edge.

"I meet up with friends in the evening, and they say, 'No, let's not go there, let's not go there,'" says one Istanbul-based worker at a nongovernmental organisation, who asks not to be identified. "People are rearranging their schedules out of concern that Islamic State, in particular, is targeting western-minded people and their regular hangout spaces."

Political and social upheaval
The terrorist threat has risen at a time of upheaval in Turkish politics and society. In the past 18 months alone President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, cofounder and figurehead of the ruling Islamist Justice and Development Party, or AKP, has vaulted from a position of weakness – the loss of his parliamentary majority in June 2015 – to one of apparently unassailable strength.

A botched coup last July, followed by the arrest, sacking or suspension of 100,000

people, including soldiers and police officers, has further solidified Erdogan's hold on power and accelerated Turkey's slide into authoritarianism. A state of emergency, declared in the days after the coup attempt and extended again this week, has given the authorities sweeping powers to restrict individual rights, including freedom of expression. A hundred and forty journalists are in detention, opposition newspapers have been closed down and online censorship is rife.

"It's like Brexit and Trump," says Prof Umut Özkirimli, a specialist in Turkish politics now based at the centre for Middle Eastern studies at Lund University, in Sweden. "It's the same thing we see all over the place. Conservative right-wing nationalists. Turkey always had these fault lines, but Erdogan very successfully played on them. Now the Pandora's box is open, and it's very difficult to close it."

WhatsApp diaspora
Özkirimli describes himself as part of Turkey's WhatsApp diaspora: the students, academics, businesspeople and others who have gone into exile and, having publicly criticised the regime, fear what could await

them if they return. "I can't go back," he says. "I don't have any case against me, but there is a state of emergency. They can grab you at the airport and put you in prison without giving any explanation, detain you from seeing your lawyer for 10 days and keep you in prison for a month without telling you what you are accused of."

In the months since the attempted coup, which the government says was led by followers of an exiled cleric named Fethullah Gülen, Erdogan's face has sprung up everywhere: on billboards, on public buildings, in shops and cafes.

He has loomed over the political landscape for much longer. As mayor of Istanbul from 1994 to 1998 the former semi-professional soccer player built a reputation as a dynamic fixer, tackling chronic infrastructural problems stemming from the city's rapid growth, including water shortages, poor rubbish collection and traffic chaos.

His supporters, many of whom felt shunned by the Istanbul and Ankara elite, revere Erdogan as a strong, pragmatic and pious leader who has restored Turkey to its rightful place as a major power.

Last July, in the days after the failed coup, residents of Kasimpasa, the work-

Political upheaval: a supporter of President Erdogan at a rally in Ankara; below: a policeman guards the nightclub attacked on New Year's Day, and Vladimir Putin with Erdogan in Istanbul.
PHOTOGRAPHS: CHRIS MCGRATH/GETTY, YASIN AKGUL/AFP/GETTY AND MIKHAIL SVETLOV/GETTY

ing-class Istanbul district where Erdogan was born and raised, beamed with pride at the resilience of a local son. "He's one of the people. He belongs to us. That's why people here love him," Özgür Akkaya, who runs a grocery shop in the area, says.

Erdogan's 11 years as prime minister, from 2003 to 2014 – a period of rapid growth, with a construction boom that transformed the skyline of Istanbul and other cities – burnished his reputation as an effective leader and administrator. In the past two decades central Anatolia, a religious belt that, with the urban working-class vote, makes up the AKP's core support, grew wealthier and more developed.

Living standards rose and exports and tourism surged across the country, and Turkey emerged as a regional powerhouse.

Meanwhile, under the influence of the AKP, Islam took a more prominent place in public life, and the secularist tradition that traced its lineage to Kemal Atatürk, the nationalist who founded the modern Turkish republic from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, went into retreat.

Period of openness
Many Turkish liberals and minorities recall the 2000s as a period of openness, at least compared with today. Greater debate of the Kurdish question took place, and the authorities appeared to tolerate a certain amount of discussion of the Armenian genocide, a designation the Turkish government rejects.

The views of some of Turkey's international allies evolved along similar lines. According to an April 2016 article in the *Atlantic*, based on lengthy interviews with Barack Obama and his foreign-affairs advisers, the US president initially saw Erdogan as a moderate Muslim leader "who would bridge the divide between East and West but . . . now considers him a failure and an authoritarian, one who refuses to use his enormous army to bring stability to Syria".

The limits of official tolerance for dissent were put to the test in 2013, when youth-led resistance to a plan to raze Gezi Park, in central Istanbul, and replace it with a shopping centre morphed into a wider protest by millions over economic precarity, inequality and the increasingly draconian rule of Erdogan's party.

The authorities appeared to be rattled by the movement, at times standing back and at other times sending in riot police with

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