



UNDERSTANDING ELECTORAL SYSTEMS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND BEYOND

This Country Profile, Timeline, and Case Study on Turkey – created by [Tamar Friedman](#), a Junior Fox Fellow in FPRI's Program on the Middle East – are part of a larger interactive [infographic](#) about electoral systems in the Middle East. Other countries highlighted as part of this project include: Israel, Lebanon, and Jordan.

Country Profile: Turkey



85 Districts

- Turkey is divided into 85 multi-member electoral districts mostly corresponding to the 81 Provinces of Turkey, but certain provinces with larger populations are divided into multiple electoral districts.

Unicameral

- The Turkish legislature has one legislative chamber, called the Grand National Assembly (TGNA), which is made up of 550 seats.

Proportional Representation: Closed-List PR

- In Turkey, voters select either a party or an individual candidate on the ballot. Before the election, each party creates and publicizes a ranked list of its members.
- The number of seats a party wins in the parliament is meant to correlate (proportionally) with the percentage of the total vote that party received with adjustments made based on the number of parties that make it into the parliament. If a party ends up with ninety seats, the first ninety people on the party's ranked list will fill those seats.

- Candidates may also run independently as individuals instead of with a political party.

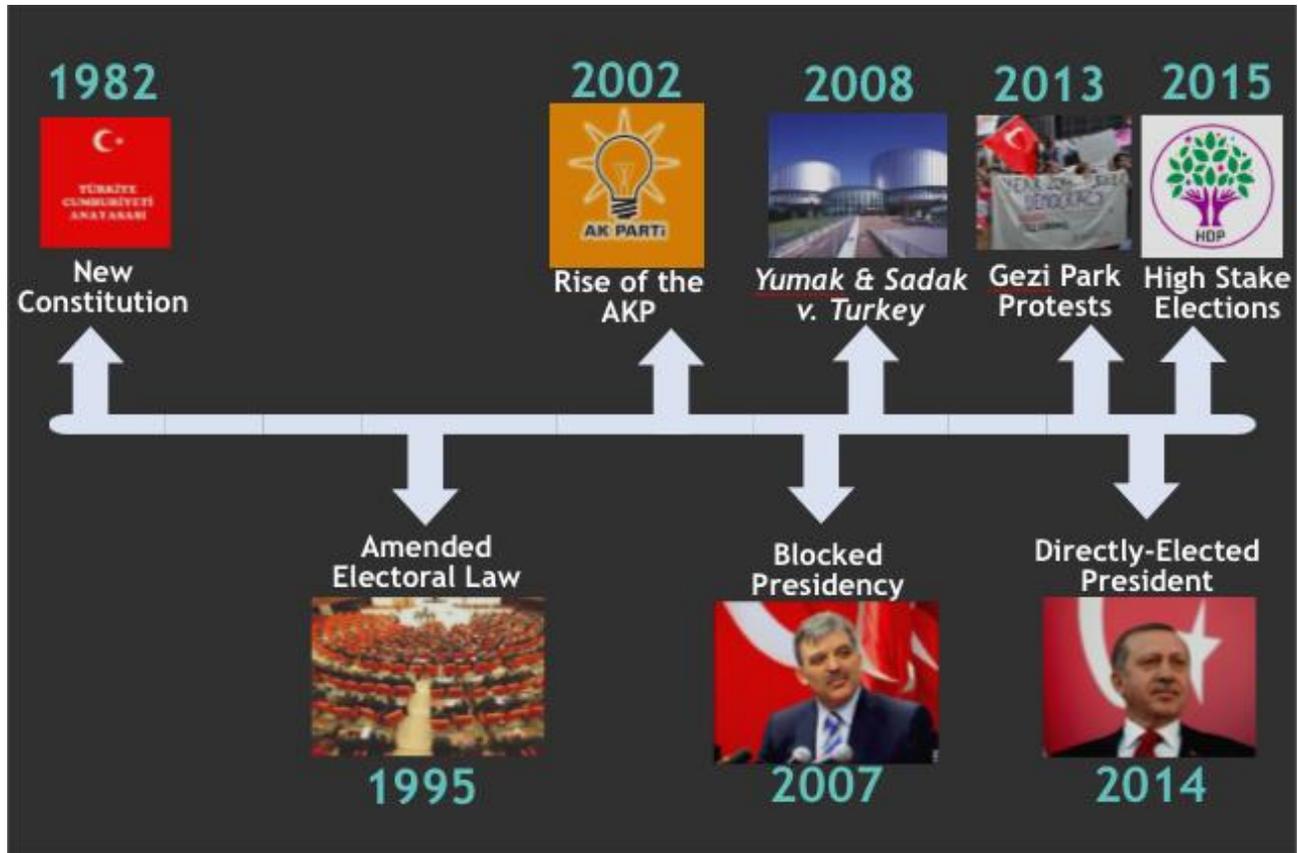
Executive Branch

- As of the 2007 referendum, the president of Turkey is elected directly by the public from among members of the TGNA using a majoritarian two-round system. The constitution defines the president as the head of state, but assigns to the presidency a largely symbolic role with limited powers. The president is not allowed to be affiliated with any political party.
- The prime minister of Turkey is vested by the constitution to wield most executive power. The prime minister is nominated by the president to put together a ruling coalition in the legislature and assumes the position after succeeding in this task.
- The president serves for a term of five years and may serve a maximum of two terms.

Electoral Threshold

- Of all countries that use thresholds, Turkey has the highest electoral threshold in the world at 10%. This means that a political party needs a minimum of 10% of the total national vote to win seats in the Grand National Assembly.

Timeline



- **1982 New Constitution:** Instituted after the 1980 military coup during which the previous constitution was suspended, the new constitution changed Turkey's legislative body from a bicameral body to a unicameral body. The constitution established a 10% electoral threshold political parties must surpass to fill seats in the parliament.
- **1995 Amended Electoral Law:** This electoral law decreased the voting age in Turkey from 21 to 18. It also increased the number of seats in the Grand National Assembly from 450 to 550 seats.
- **2002 Rise of the AKP:** In November of 2002 the moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP), led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan¹, came to power. The party was founded in 2001. In 2002, due to Turkey's high electoral threshold, the AKP won 363 out of the 550 seats (roughly 2/3) despite the fact that the party only won about 34% of the national vote. About 45% of the national vote went to various parties each of which received less than 10% of the total vote and therefore were ineligible to enter the Grand National Assembly.
- **2007 Blocked Presidency:** Through 2007, the president was elected by a two-thirds majority of the Grand National Assembly. However in 2007, Erdogan's favored presidential candidate Abdullah Gul,

¹ Erdogan only assumed the Prime Minister position in 2003, as a ban prevented him from running for office in 2002 because of a prior conviction in 1998. The ban was lifted through a constitutional amendment passed in December of 2002. See Manuel Alvarez-Rivera, "Election Resources on the Internet: Elections to the Turkish Grand National Assembly," *Election Resources*, Last updated June 24, 2015 <<http://www.electionresources.org/tr/>>.

whom the opposition denounced for having Islamist leanings, was elected by the Grand National Assembly only for the vote to be deemed unconstitutional by Turkey's Constitutional Court. Annuling the elections led to political controversy and ultimately to the 2007 referendum that proposed direct election of the president by Turkish voters. The referendum was passed with a "yes" vote by almost 70% of the electorate.

- **[2008 *Yumak and Sadak v. Turkey*](#)**: This case came before the European Court of Human Rights to contest whether or not Turkey's 10% threshold violated Turkish citizens' right to a free election. The Court ruled that the 10% threshold did not violate this right.
- **[2013 Gezi Park Protests](#)**: In June of 2013, anti-government protests took place in Gezi Park in Istanbul in opposition to an urban development plan created for the park. These demonstrations, influenced also by Arab Spring protests, then spread across the country as protestors denounced the government's crackdown on the freedom of expression and freedom of the press as well as the implementation of policies that threatened secularism in the country. Much of the anger in the protests was directed at then Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan.
- **[2014 Directly Elected President](#)**: In August of 2014, Recep Tayyip Erdogan became the first directly-elected president. He transitioned directly from the role of prime minister to the office of the presidency. Erdogan won 51.79% of the national vote in the first round of voting and, having already received a majority, did not have to enter a second round of voting.²
- **[2015 "Turning Point" Elections](#)**: On June 7, 2015, Turkey held general parliamentary elections in what has been deemed a very critical election. President Erdogan hoped to pass a constitutional amendment turning Turkey from a parliamentary into a presidential system should the AKP win enough votes to push the measure through the Grand National Assembly. This was also the first election in which Kurdish candidates ran as a party—the (HDP)—instead of as individual candidates. The HDP surpassed the 10% electoral threshold, blocking Erdogan and the AKP from instituting a presidential system.

Turkey Case Study: High Threshold, High Stakes

Electoral systems certainly affect who gets elected, yet they also have a significant impact on the way political actors "play the game" and the strategic decisions individuals and political parties make as they approach an upcoming election. Both groups who benefit from the existing electoral system and those who suffer from it take the effects of electoral systems into account when making strategic political calculations. And some electoral systems encourage riskier political gambles than others. This phenomenon can be exhibited by exploring the Turkish political system.

In Turkey, which has a closed-list proportional representation electoral system in its legislature, the high electoral threshold has led to many strategic political calculations. Voters in Turkey have the option to select either a party or an individual candidate in multi-member districts.

The country's electoral threshold is the highest threshold in the world at 10%, meaning that a party must win a minimum of 10% of the total vote in order to earn seats in the parliament. For reference, most countries with electoral thresholds are in the 4%-5% range.³ The natural consequence of this high threshold is to exclude smaller-sized parties and therefore favor large parties. Also, district seats are allocated to parties based on the [D'Hondt method](#), a mathematical system for turning

² "Republic of Turkey Presidential Election 10 August 2014: OSCE/ODIHR Limited Election Observation Mission Final Report," *Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe—Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights*, November 18, 2014, <<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/turkey/126851?download=true/>>.

³ Chris Terry, "Crossing the Threshold," *Electoral Reform Society*, June 11, 2015 <<http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/blog/crossing-threshold-turkish-election>>.

percentages of votes into seats that again favors the largest parties. Therefore, while Turkey has about 97 political parties⁴, only a handful of parties obtained seats in Turkey's 24th parliament (2011-2015).

Many critics both inside and outside of Turkey have claimed that it is an unfair system that leaves many groups out of the legislature. In fact, the Turkish electoral threshold was challenged in the European Court of Human Rights in 2008 with the *Yumak and Sadak v. Turkey* case that disputed the results of the 2002 parliamentary elections. However, the European Court upheld the 10% threshold, saying it was not a violation of free elections because there is no limit to the number of individual candidates who can be elected to the Turkish legislature and they must only win more than 10% of the vote in their province.⁵

Nonetheless, since its adoption in 1982, the 10% threshold has been a controversial provision, particularly as it affects minority groups. The threshold was part of the new constitution of 1982 that was adopted via popular referendum. The constitution changed the bicameral legislative body established in the 1960's to a unicameral body, the Grand National Assembly. It also stipulated that any new political party be approved before entering politics and that political parties pass a 10% threshold to earn seats in the parliament.⁶ The high threshold was primarily intended to decrease fragmentation in the legislature, but, over time, also effectively prevented a Kurdish party from gaining seats in the Grand National Assembly.

The Kurds are an ethnic group that are geographically concentrated in a region that encompasses parts of Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran. Kurdish separatists from all of these countries have nationalistic aspirations to create an independent Kurdistan, some turning to militancy to achieve this goal. This creates tension between Kurdish populations and the state—whether Turkey, Iraq, or Syria. In Turkey, about 10%-25% of the total population are Kurds which are mostly concentrated in the southeastern part of the country.⁷ Both Turkey and the U.S. consider the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) a terrorist group due to the violent attacks they have carried out in Turkey. The PKK's central leader, Abdullah Ocalan, has been in jail in Turkey since 1999, though he continues to lead the PKK from his confinement. The 10% electoral threshold passed in 1982 was intended to keep Kurdish groups, including the PKK, out of the legislature.⁸

Until 2015 the threshold did in fact accomplish this goal. It also led to some surprising election outcomes, including in the election that brought Erdogan and the Islamist AKP to power in the first place. Because of the 10% threshold, the number of seats a party wins is not simply based on the percentage of votes that party wins, but also very much relies on the percentage of votes the other competing parties win. For example, in the 2002 election, the first since the AKP's formation in 2001, the party received 34% of the total vote. In a simple proportional representation system, this should have earned the AKP roughly a third of the seats in the parliament (about 183 seats out of 550). However, 45% of the votes in the 2002 election were cast for parties that ended up winning under 10% of the vote and were therefore completely disqualified from obtaining seats. Nearly half the votes in the country were essentially wasted on parties that would have no presence in the legislature. The True Path Party (DYP) and Nationalist Action Party (MHP) received no seats despite each receiving about 9% of the vote,⁹ so the remaining seats were reallocated to the parties that did pass the threshold and the AKP ended up with a whopping 363 out of the 550 seats, about two-thirds of the seats.

As many commentators have noted—"what goes around, comes around." Though the high stakes of the 10% threshold disproportionately benefited the AKP in the 2002 election, it did not benefit them nearly as much in the June 2015 parliamentary election and contributed to the loss of many AKP seats in the Grand National Assembly.

The 2015 Election: Strategic Political Calculations

The nature of the Turkish electoral system and the 10% threshold, as well as pre-election polling variations, make predicting the outcome of an election in Turkey difficult in general. However, predicting the outcome of the June 2015 parliamentary elections was rendered even more difficult because of the strategic decision of the Kurdish candidates to run as part of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP).

⁴ Sibel Hurtas, "Turkey's election system becomes graveyard for political parties," *Al-Monitor*, May 14, 2015, <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/turkey-graveyard-of-political-parties.html>>.

⁵ "Case of Yumak and Sadak v. Turkey," *European Court of Human Rights*, July 8, 2008 <[http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-87363#{"itemid":\["001-87363"\]}](http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-87363#{)>.

⁶ Alvarez-Rivera, "Election Resources on the Internet: Elections to the Turkish Grand National Assembly."

⁷ Chris Terry, "Crossing the threshold-the Turkish election."

⁸ "Turkey's election system the 'most unfair' in the world," *Deutsche Welle*, June 4, 2015 <<http://www.dw.com/en/turkeys-election-system-the-most-unfair-in-the-world/a-18496416>>.

⁹ Selim Can Sazak, "The Aftermath of Turkey's Elections: The Curse of d'Hondt" *The Century Foundation*, June 9, 2015 <<http://www.tcf.org/blog/detail/the-aftermath-of-turkeys-elections-the-curse-of-dhondt>>.

In the past, Kurdish candidates have claimed seats in the Grand National Assembly by running as independent candidates in Kurdish districts. They were prevented from running as a national party out of fear of not reaching the threshold and therefore not receiving any seats in the parliament. Yet in 2015 the Kurds decided to take the gamble of running as a party and tried to surpass the threshold.

This was indeed a very risky calculation because, by running as independent candidates and then caucusing together in the parliament, the independently elected Kurdish candidates have maintained a small presence—21 in 2007 and 29 in 2011—in the Grand National Assembly.¹⁰ To run as a national party, the Kurds risked losing all the seats they formally filled because their leaders were not running as independents. On the other hand, should they surpass the 10% threshold, the Kurds could more than double their presence in the Grand National Assembly in addition to scoring a symbolic victory showing that a Kurdish party could garner national support as an opposition party to the AKP.

Kurdish leaders made this decision because of growing support for the HDP party (that made surpassing the threshold a possibility), but also out of fear of Erdogan's political aspirations to change the Turkish electoral system from a parliamentary to a presidential system, which would further limit political access to the Kurds.

After the military coup and new constitution of the 1980's, Turkey was ruled by a strong president.¹¹ However, in the 1990's and early 2000's, Turkey's prime minister assumed nearly all executive power with ceremonial responsibilities allocated to the president. This parliamentary-focused government was in effect until 2007, when controversy over Erdogan and the AKP's preferred presidential candidate led to notable changes in the nature of the presidency.

In 2007, Prime Minister Erdogan supported the presidential candidate Abdullah Gul, a co-founder of the AKP. Gul was unpopular among secular Turks because of his strong ties to Islamism. Though Abdullah Gul was voted into the presidency by the Grand National Assembly (which was responsible to elect the president at the time), the election was later annulled by Turkey's Constitutional Court. Through the ensuing controversy and political chaos, Erdogan and the AKP passed a referendum through the Grand National Assembly for the Turkish people to select the president through a direct election. The referendum was passed and, in the first direct presidential election in 2014, Erdogan moved directly from his role as prime minister into the presidency where he has continued to increase the authority and executive power of the presidency.

Although the constitution dictates that the president must not engage in partisanship and is not allowed to be a member of any particular party, Erdogan has not adhered to these restrictions whatsoever in practice. He retained his connection with the AKP and was replaced as prime minister by former foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu (of the AKP).

During the campaign for the 2015 parliamentary election, Erdogan openly campaigned for his former party (disregarding that the president is banned from doing so). He also made it very clear that he hoped to amend the constitution to create a presidential rather than a parliamentary system in Turkey. In order for the AKP to unilaterally pass such an amendment, they would need to win a majority of 367 of the 550 seats in the parliament. Alternatively, they could send the amendment as a referendum to be voted on by the Turkish people with a majority of only 330 seats.¹² Even without passing an amendment for a presidential system, AKP would require a simple majority of 276 seats to govern Turkey without having to negotiate with other parties to form a coalition.

Therefore, the 2015 elections had extremely high stakes. If the HDP did surpass the 10% threshold they would not only secure a significant presence for themselves in the Grand National Assembly, they would also significantly decrease the number of seats held by the AKP, and therefore the AKP's ability to pass Erdogan's presidential electoral system. However, if the HDP failed to surpass the threshold they would lose the seats they had won in earlier elections as independents, opening up *more* seats to the winning AKP and potentially enabling the AKP to pass an amendment creating a presidential system that would greatly disempower smaller political parties like the burgeoning HDP. Furthermore, if the HDP did not meet the threshold and Kurdish candidates were completely absent from the legislative body, this could encourage disenfranchised Kurds to resort to more violent means of protest against Erdogan's government.

¹⁰ Chris Terry, "Crossing the threshold-the Turkish election."

¹¹ "Background: How Turkey's electoral system works and the laws for the president," *The German Press Agency*, June 2, 2015 <<http://www.dpa-international.com/news/international/backgroundhow-turkeys-electoral-system-works-and-the-laws-for-the-president-a-45465919.html>>.

¹² "New Turkey or New Government? The June 2015 Parliamentary Election," *Bipartisan Policy Center*, June 1, 2015 <<http://bipartisanpolicy.org/library/new-turkey-or-new-government-the-june-2015-parliamentary-election/>>.

The election results showed that the HDP had surpassed the 10% threshold with 13.1% of the vote, ensuring them 80 seats in the Grand National Assembly. The AKP, in contrast, won 258 seats, not even enough for a simple majority to form a unilateral government. The weakened AKP then launched into coalition negotiations but were unable to form a coalition in the 45 days before the deadline. With no coalition formed, President Erdogan has called for new elections in the fall.

Erdogan and Personality Politics

One reason the 2015 election had such high stakes was that, as one commentator put it, politics in Turkey are “highly personality driven.”¹³ It was largely Erdogan’s charisma that helped the AKP rise to prominence in 2002. Erdogan and the AKP (and Islamist party) were able to capture support because Erdogan presented himself as a “reasonable” Islamist option. His moderate Islamism and economic liberalism earned Erdogan a lot of support both in Turkey and internationally. Early in his tenure, the U.S. and its European allies saw Erdogan and the AKP as a model for how a moderate Islamist government could exist and thrive in the Middle East without challenging Western interests in the region.¹⁴

It is Erdogan’s personality that has even made adopting a presidential system in Turkey a possibility. The prominence with which he rose from the prime minister position to the presidency allowed him to greatly expand the role of the latter and his relationship with Davutoglu continues to provide him with influence in the legislature.¹⁵

However, it was also Erdogan, personally, who came under the most vehement attacks during the Gezi protests for encroaching on the freedom of the press and freedom of expression. Many who oppose the presidential system do so in fear that, with expanded presidential powers, Erdogan will turn Turkey into a more authoritarian state.

In essence, the 2015 election was not only a high stakes gamble for the Kurds, it was also a referendum on Erdogan himself and his ability to affect the way the structure of the Turkish electoral system.

Widening Appeal: The Kurds Broaden their Message

Another reason for the high stakes of the election was the Kurdish approach to campaigning. The Kurds realized that to gain enough support to pass the 10% threshold, they would need to run a party that appealed to a wider audience than Kurdish ethnic nationalists. The Kurds were further encouraged by the 2014 Turkish presidential elections in which the HDP candidate, Selahattin Demirtaş, won a larger percentage of the vote than expected (nearly 10%¹⁶) because he appealed also to leftist voters who did not want to vote for Erdogan or the Republican People’s Party (CHP)’s candidate Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu.

The HDP worked closely with the social-democratic Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) to accumulate more votes during the 2014 election.¹⁷ A young and charismatic candidate himself, Demirtaş helped the Kurds benefit from the inherent personality politics in Turkey by becoming a popular figure on social media and through other aspects of his campaign. Demirtaş advocated for equality among

The hit to Erdogan’s popularity in the wake of the Gezi protests opened the door for Kurdish politicians to appeal to anti-Erdogan voters, whether Kurdish or not. Seizing this opportunity and building on the broadened support they had garnered during the 2014 presidential election, the HDP championed leftist policy issues, including issues relating to gender inequality and ethnic discrimination, in addition to appealing to socially conservative members of the Kurdish base.

The stakes of the 2015 election made voters more comfortable with any ideological concessions Kurdish leaders might have to make in order to gain more voter support, leading to surprising co-operation. For the Kurdish base, the extra support of was welcome to finally get a Kurdish party into the Grand National Assembly. To anti-Erdogan non-Kurdish voters, loyalty to the Kurdish base was an acceptable price to limit Erdogan’s power by introducing the HDP to the legislature and reducing AKP seats.

¹³ Nate Schenkkan, “Turkey’s Elections: What a Difference One Percent Makes,” *Freedom House*, June 3, 2015 <<https://freedomhouse.org/blog/turkey-s-elections-what-difference-one-percent-makes#.Ve3dL53BzGc>>.

¹⁴ “Elections, referendums and electoral sociology around the world—Category Archives: Turkey,” *World Elections* <<https://welections.wordpress.com/category/turkey/>>.

¹⁵ Erdogan is not the only prime minister to then move to the presidency. Turgut Ozal did in 1989 and Suleyman Demirel in 1993. See Manuel Alvarez-Rivera, “Election Resources on the Internet: Elections to the Turkish Grand National Assembly.”

¹⁶ “Republic of Turkey Presidential Election 10 August 2014: OSCE/ODIHR Limited Election Observation Mission Final Report,” 26.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 4.

2015 Election Results

The world watched the results of the June 2015 Turkish election unfold with bated breath. In the end, the Kurds were able to woo voters who, knowing the stakes of the threshold, wanted the HDP to surpass the 10% threshold to stop Erdogan from pushing forth his presidential platform. This may be an important symbolic win for the Kurds as it places a Kurdish political party as part of the conventional Turkish political system, rather than on the fringes. It also gives the Kurds a larger voice in the Grand National Assembly at a time when Kurdish forces fighting IS in the region has led to an international discussion about an independent Kurdistan.

What is ironic is that the AKP received 40.9% of the total vote in the 2015 election and received only 258 seats out of 550, whereas when it won 34% of the vote in 2002 it received 363.¹⁸ But such is the nature of the Turkish electoral system. A simulation created before the election showed that if the HDP had only just surpassed the 10% threshold, the AKP would have a 4-seat majority in the parliament, but if the HDP had received just under 10% of the vote, the AKP would have had a 112-seat majority in the parliament, which shows how much was at stake between reaching and not reaching the electoral threshold.¹⁹

It is a dangerous time for domestic instability and conflict. Regional instability caused by the self-declared Islamic State (IS), has made Turkey's internal stability and foreign policy a matter of major international concern. As coalition negotiations were conducted following the elections, Turkey began attacks on both the Islamic State as well as on Kurdish military groups. All of these external factors highlighted the importance of quickly implementing a stable Turkish government.

Yet the deadline for the AKP to form a governing coalition was set for August 23rd, which came and went with no agreement reached. On August 24, just after the deadline, Erdogan called for early elections to take place in the fall of 2015, which will be the first "snap elections" in the Turkey's history.²⁰ In the meantime, putting together an interim government to last until the new elections is a task that itself could prove difficult and divisive, putting Turkey and the region in a more vulnerable position.

Conclusion

The 10% electoral threshold greatly increased the stakes of the 2015 parliamentary election in Turkey and will continue to affect the way that the current political drama unfolds. In the short-run, political gridlock is inevitable and non-state actors like the Islamic State stand to gain from instability within the state; in the long-run the status of the Kurds could change in Turkey (and perhaps in the region at large). The unpredictability of the Turkish electoral system, largely caused by the high electoral threshold, has greatly contributed to the current political chaos.

¹⁸ Chris Terry, "Crossing the threshold-the Turkish election."

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Emre Peker, "Turkey's President Calls Snap Election," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 24, 2015 <<http://www.wsj.com/articles/turkeys-president-calls-snap-election-1440445939>>.