



## Turkey's new Cabinet: intellectuals and 'men of state' as Erdoğan's operatives

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### Summary

- “Erdoğanism” has emerged as the dominant trend in Turkey’s political evolution.
- Intellectuals as men of state predominate among Erdoğan’s high-ranking civil servants.
- The shaping and management of narratives are the key factors behind Erdoğan’s success.
- The new Cabinet will guide Turkey towards the fulfillment of the “Century of Türkiye” through a combination of soft and hard power.

*President Erdoğan has managed to form a government that fully guarantees the continuation and enhancement of the "Century of Türkiye" narrative, with a combination of "operative intellectuals", like Hakan Fidan in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ibrahim Kalın in the National Intelligence Organization (MIT), and "operational state administrators", like Ali Yerlikaya in the Ministry of Interior and Yaşar Güler in the Ministry of Defense.*

AFTER A LONG PRE-ELECTION PERIOD dominated by heated confrontations and deep polarization, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been re-elected. His new government presents two main characteristics: first, a renewed and vigorously personalized power; second, a new statist profile.

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The pro-government media immediately branded the new Cabinet "the A- Team of the Century of Türkiye".

While Mehmet Simsek, the Treasury and Finance Minister, is in the "A-Team", he comes across as something of an outsider in this wider narrative and could prove to be a "functioning expendable" whose fate is far more dependent on political than purely financial factors.

### "Erdoğanism" and men of the state

Murat Yetkin suggested the term "Erdoğanism" (Erdoğançılık) in a recent article<sup>2</sup>. In it, he explained how the "phenomenon" of Erdoğanism is now independent of the AKP, and that this new ideologico-political "phenomenon" is shaping the political environment in Turkey today.

Yetkin wrote that:

"Erdoğan received 49.5% of the vote and the AKP 35.6% in the first round of elections on May 14. In the elections of June 24, 2018, he was elected president with 52.5% of the vote, while the AK Party received 42.5%. The widening gap in the support for Erdoğan and his party was evident on May 14, but we need to analyze the results of May 28 to see the issue more clearly in terms of Erdoğanism rather than Erdoğan and the AK Party".

And he goes on to argue that:

"In a way, Erdoğanism means not hesitating to use the means at hand with maximum efficiency, at the risk of violating constitutional and legal limits when necessary. The use of power has two dimensions. One is to win elections and the other to maintain his power".

Within this logic of what Yetkin describes as "Erdoğanism's ruthless use of force", the choice of Hakan Fidan, Ibrahim Kalın, Ali Yerlikaya and Yaşar Güler can be understood in terms of the further enhancement and institutionalization of the President's personalized power.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://yetkinreport.com/2023/06/29/Erdoğançılık-olgusu-artık-adi-konulmalı/>

Hakan Fidan and Ibrahim Kalin have been in Erdoğan's inner circle for more than a decade. They embody what the pro-government commentator Burhanettin Duran<sup>3</sup> has called the "Erdoğan school" of governance:

"This is the new Cabinet of the Erdoğan school. It is the team that will work at a high tempo to implement President Erdoğan's holistic management of domestic politics, the economy, foreign policy and security over the next five years (...) this alone shows how strong the so-called Erdoğan school is in our political life".

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Through the appointments to his new Cabinet, Erdoğan is actually institutionalizing his "holistic management" and power while he is clearly orienting Turkey towards a "strategic autonomy" embodied by Hakan Fidan and Ibrahim Kalin.

Soli Ozel<sup>4</sup> notes that Hakan Fidan:

"[...] spent 13 years at the head of the Turkish intelligence service and played a significant role in the shaping and implementation of foreign policy, especially towards Syria".

On Ibrahim Kalin, he notes that:

"The appointment as head of the MIT of Presidential Spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin, who had a de facto voice in the formulation and implementation of Turkish foreign policy (...) suggests a foreign policy in which intelligence and diplomacy will be in close cooperation".

Together with Hakan and Kalin, who represent the "Erdoğan school" in holistic management and foreign policy, President Erdoğan merged the government, meaning his rule, still further with the state through his appointment of Ali Yerlikaya and Yasar Güler.

By ousting the highly polarizing Suleyman Soylu, who was not a man of the state, (*devlet adamı*), but rather an ambitious politician with his own agenda, and replacing him with the governor (vali) of Istanbul and seasoned civil servant Ali Yerlikaya, Erdoğan sent out a double message: First, that he will not tolerate any political figures in his government, and even less so figures with their own agenda and potentially shifting allegiances (Soylu's main supporter was Devlet Bahçeli). And second, that he will rely more and more on men of the state with a clear allegiance to the state as managed and shaped by Erdoğan himself.

While the real reasons behind the removal of Hulusi Akar from the Ministry of Defense and his replacement by the Chief of the General Staff, General Yaşar Güler, remain somewhat unclear, the pattern of endorsing men of the state is again very strong. In this case, it is also consistent, since one general replaced another.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ahaber.com.tr/yazarlar/burhanettin-duran/2023/06/06/Erdoğan-okulunun-yeni-kabinesi>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ahaber.com.tr/yazarlar/burhanettin-duran/2023/06/06/Erdoğan-okulunun-yeni-kabinesi>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/expressions/turkish-foreign-policy-under-new-management>

## Operative intellectuals

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Fidan, Kalin and Altun are the main public figures who are shaping and managing the narrative of Erdoğan and Turkey, which has proven so effective domestically that Süleyman Demirel's famous saying, "There is no power that an empty pot cannot overthrow" ("Boş tencerenin yıkamayacağı iktidar yoktur") would no longer appear to hold.

In foreign policy, the same narrative has proven sufficiently efficient to sustain Ankara's path towards strategic autonomy and to make Turkey an emerging third pole in a broader geography extending from Africa to Pakistan and from Central Asia to the Balkans.

The role both Fidan and Kalin have played in this endeavor is undisputable.

Having spent his 20s and 30s in the military, including a stint with the intelligence unit of the NATO Rapid Reaction Corps in Germany, and earning a Ph.D. in the Turkish, British and US intelligence services in parallel from prestigious Bilkent University in Ankara, Fidan left the army when the AKP came to power.

*Under Fidan, the MIT expanded its activities and was heavily involved in Turkey's policy on Syria, the Kurdish issue, and the fight against the Gulen network. Fidan and the MIT's involvement in shaping and managing foreign policy was so significant, the pro-government commentator Abdulkadir Selvi dubbed him the "shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs".*

Being close to Abdullah Gül and later to Ahmet Davutoğlu, Fidan became the head of the Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) in 2003; by the time he left in 2007, the TIKA had vastly expanded its activities and strengthened its presence in sub-Saharan Africa and the Balkans.

Under Fidan, TIKA became the international face of a humanitarian and highly efficient Turkey.

Asked in September 2013 about Turkish aid to Somalia, the Mayor of Mogadishu replied<sup>5</sup>:

"If I request computers from the UN, they will take months and require a number of assessments. They will spend \$50,000 to give me \$7,000 of equipment. If I request computers from Turkey, they will show up next week."

After TIKA, Fidan worked with Davutoglu in the Office of the Prime Minister, in which post he gained access to and experience in delicate issues. Then, in 2010, he became the head of the MIT.

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<sup>5</sup> [https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/journals/it/v16i1/f\\_0030935\\_25053.pdf](https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/journals/it/v16i1/f_0030935_25053.pdf)

government commentator Abdulkadir Selvi dubbed him the “shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs”<sup>6</sup>.

Fidan “is cerebral and has just the right balance of toughness and diplomatic finesse”<sup>7</sup>; he also has a great conceptual capacity that makes him a perfect fit for the narrative-action orientation of Erdoğan’s Turkey.

Fidan’s appointment to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is therefore a clear sign that Turkey intends to pursue and intensify its proactive foreign policy, its quest for strategic autonomy, and its efforts to expand its influence and soft power. It also indicates that both the Ministry and the diplomatic corps will be engaged still more intensely in spreading and implementing the “Century of Türkiye” narrative.

Ibrahim Kalın has been closely working with Erdoğan since 2002 and is one of the few public figures wjp have remained close to Erdoğan throughout the last two decades.

An academic and an intellectual, Kalın studied at the University of Istanbul and then at George Washington University, becoming a specialist in intellectual relations and interactions between West and East and an expert in the great Persian Muslim philosopher Mula Sadra.

Having worked closely with Erdoğan, he has developed an impressive apacity for dealing with Western leaders and representatives and has acquired extensive experience in international politics as well as cultural interactions and narratives.

He was one of the founders of the pro-government think tank SETA, which has been instrumental in providing Ankara’s narratives with their academic and intellectual backbone.

Appointing Kalın to the MIT clearly signifies that Erdoğan wants one of his most trusted operative intellectuals to lead the Organization through the “Century of Türkiye”, but also to give the MIT a more active role to play within this narrative.

## Operational state administrators

Yerlikaya at the Ministry of the Interior and Güler at the Ministry of Defense are both outcomes of the hybridization of state and government under “Erdoğanism”.

Whereas, traditionally, the Turkish state was an entity independent of the nation’s governments and served for decades as the backbone of the nation, “Erdoğanism” is changing this dynamic and replacing it with a cult of personality centred on Erdoğan himself, who is portrayed as the protector and savior of the nation.

Within this framework, the state becomes an accessory to his power, and the new Cabinet is the most obvious manifestation of this change.

Yerlikaya started his carrier in the public administration in the early 90s, and has served as governor in various provinces around Turkey, including the South-East.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/abdulkadir-selvi/kabine-degisikligini-nasil-okumali-42278713>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/expressions/turkish-foreign-policy-under-new-management>

*Backed by his new Cabinet, President Erdoğan will lead Turkey towards the fulfillment of the "Century of Türkiye" through a combination of soft and hard power, and by mobilizing ever greater intellectual, material and human resources to achieve this goal.*

Never involved in politics, he has kept a rather low profile in Istanbul, where the tensions between the government and Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu have been growing.

Yerlikaya represents the return of the state in opposition to Soylu who was an ambiguous figure from the realm of politics. However, this return of the state remains under the control of Erdoğan.

The continuation of the state within "Erdoğanism" is also expressed by the presence of Yasar Güler in the Cabinet. A seasoned military commander, he played a key role in Turkey's military activities in Syria and gained Erdoğan's trust during the coup attempt of July 15, 2016.

Appointing Güler to the Ministry of Defense shows that Erdoğan has full control over the military and that Turkey will continue to use hard power whenever it is in its interest to do so.

## Conclusion

Backed by his new Cabinet, President Erdoğan will lead Turkey towards the fulfillment of the "Century of Türkiye" through a combination of soft and hard power, and by mobilizing ever greater intellectual, material and human resources to achieve this goal.

In the meantime, the new Cabinet will also lead Turkey towards the local elections of March 2024, when the Opposition will make its last-ditch effort to survive by trying to keep control of Istanbul and Ankara, and to introduce a new constitutional agenda.

With Fidan and Kalın as leading "operative intellectuals", Turkey will project more power and mobilize all the means at its disposal to fulfill its ambitions by prioritizing the further elaboration of its narrative and its practical implementation on the ground.

As leading "operational state administrators", Yerlikaya and Güler will institutionalize "Erdoğanism" through the hybridization of the state and government.