

# Erdogan's Ambition for the Caliphate and the Failure of Turkish Democracy

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan appears to have won another five-year term in elections on Sunday. But what does that mean for the future of Turkish democracy?, asks Aydogan Vatandas.

**By Aydogan Vatandas**



When the Justice and Development (AK) Party took office in 2002, many intellectuals in Turkey and abroad were convinced that the party's commitment to democratization was promising. The first term of the AK Party rule, which is considered as a golden era, broadly extended from 2002 to 2007. This era was characterized by high, inclusive economic growth, coupled with significant democratic reforms, ranging from a radical reordering of civil-military relations to the recognition of minority rights, including language and cultural rights for Kurdish citizens.

This initial high performance created a certain level of trust in the AK Party rule among Turkish intellectuals, including the Gülen Movement, that in time the AK Party would eliminate all the undemocratic aspects of the Turkish governmental system. Between 2009 and 2011, the AK Party government successfully managed to create a legal framework that precluded Turkish military involvement in politics, which would prevent military interventions of the kind Turkey had suffered from in the past. The end result, however, was not a consolidated democracy as expected, but a highly personalized autocracy embodied in the figure of Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

What went wrong with the AK Party and its leadership during the democratization of Turkey remains an important question. Was the performance of the party between 2002 and 2007 mere window dressing, with Erdogan and his close, oligarchic circle waiting for a convenient time to apply their secret, true agenda? Were they never democratic at all? Or was Erdogan obsessed with the idea that he had a messianic mission like being the 'Caliph' of the Muslim world?

## **Resilience of Kemalist Institutions**

It is argued that the failure of the AK Party rule to develop a consolidated democracy is deeply rooted in the traditional tutelage of secular Kemalist institutions (continuing from Kemal Ataturk, founder of modern Turkey) over the Turkish political system. Accordingly, regardless of their willingness or unwillingness to further democratize the country, the leadership of the AK Party was thwarted by the resistance of the Kemalist institutions to change.

A proponent of this theory is Ihsan Dagi, a liberal who gave support to the AK Party-led reforms in its golden era. Dagi notes that many people expected the defeat of the Kemalist state establishment by a broad coalition of liberals, democrats and conservatives under the political leadership of the AK Party which would lead to the creation of a democratic regime with a liberal constitution. But today he observes that, "Kemalism is dead, but its state-centric, Jacobin and illiberal spirit has been reincarnated in the AKP."

### **Strong State, Weak Society**

It is argued that Turkey followed the path of secular modernization by prioritizing the creation of a strong homogenized nation led by the ruling political elite.

This argument holds that the Turkish system of governance has been formulated upon the framework of a strong state and a weak society, which poses a major obstacle to the creation of a consolidated democracy. The governors and the governed had a one-dimensional relationship that oppressed the governed. As a result of this historical practice, Turkish society has never been able to establish an autonomous sphere free from state control.

Since the assertive secular modernization never prioritized the empowerment of civil rights or civil society, the Turkish political system has always remained illiberal and undemocratic even after the advent of a multi-party system in 1946, according to this argument.

### **Erdogan Fallacy**

Many academics have suggested that what Turkey gets from AK Party rule is exactly what it should have expected. Accordingly, it was a fundamental mistake to expect that the AK Party would promote Turkish democracy.

Behlül Özkan, a political scientist at Marmara University, argues that the AK Party is a far-right party according to political science literature. He says:

"Assuming that the AKP would take Turkey forward was no different than thinking that Le Pen in France would advance democracy. When placed in the right-left spectrum, the AKP believes that it has a sacred mission and will remain in power forever. None of these are compatible with democracy. This extremism would emerge as racism in Europe, while it would become sectarianism in Turkey and would not consider other parties as representatives of the nation. The AKP is a model not for the Middle East but for the far right in Europe on how to instrumentalize democracy."

The main reason that liberal intellectuals failed to see Erdogan's real ambitions was the very belief that the elimination of the military tutelage and other secular institutions such as the judiciary would be sufficient to secure a democracy. It was not. It was correct that these institutions failed to create a functional democracy in the past, but it was wrong to believe that weakening these institutions would lead to the emergence of a democracy.

It has to be stressed that it was not only the Turkish liberals and religious democrats that were prey to the Erdogan fallacy. Even some leading international think-tank organizations failed to forecast the future of Turkish democracy.

For instance, Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee produced for Rand Corporation in 2008 four possible scenarios. In order from most to least likely, they were: 1) AKP pursues a moderate, EU-oriented path; 2) AKP pursues a more aggressive Islamist agenda; 3) judicial closing of the AKP; and 4) military intervention.

For the authors, a regression of Turkish democracy was not likely, even under the second scenario, in which "the reelected AKP government pursues a more aggressive Islamist agenda. With full control of the executive and legislative branches of government, the AKP is able to appoint administrators, judges, and university rectors and even to influence personnel decisions in the military."

### **New Powers**

The authors concluded that this scenario is less likely because it would lead to greater political polarization and would probably provoke an intervention by the military. Most Turks support a secular state and oppose a state based on the shari'a. In addition, EU membership is a key element of the AKP's foreign policy.

Political theorist Andrew Arato suggests that the liberal intellectuals understandably failed to see the logic of Erdogan's actions, because of their own conflict with the military tutelage. They saw the Constitutional Court as merely an instrument of that tutelage, despite the fact that the Court had its battles with the military-bureaucratic structures as far back as the 1970s. The Court took several decisions supporting AK Party positions (e.g. in 2007, the quorum decision was soon balanced by one permitting a referendum on the presidency) and refused to dissolve the party in 2008, admittedly in a very close vote. They failed to understand that in the Turkish system, especially with the existence of a hegemonic party, the court and the judiciary were important counter-weights.

Clifford Anderson in a doctoral thesis at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School emphasized that Erdogan's main goal was to establish an executive power over the

judiciary in a move that would violate the separation of powers. He further elaborated that the AK Party had subjugated the state without oversight from other parties or branches of government. He added that executive decrees and legislation indicate this regime's authoritarian proclivities, which have precluded progress towards EU membership, despite the party's initial efforts to the contrary.

According to Arato, while the leaders of the AK Party, along with many liberal intellectuals, continued to see the Constitutional Court as an enemy, the 2010 referendum represented an attempt to conquer one branch in the separation of powers, namely the judiciary. Arato contends that some of the more attractive provisions of the package served as window dressing for a monolithic project that actually aimed at creating a type of hyper-presidentialism. It sought to remove all impediments to this new system, especially the judiciary which had established its jurisdiction over constitutional amendments.

Ultimately, Erdogan won a referendum in 2017 that gave him far-reaching presidential powers, which he will now wield after Sunday's election. The Turkish presidency had previously been a symbolic position, though Erdogan had unconstitutionally used it to exercise real power.

### **Erdogan's Dangerous Charisma**

Besides all the systemic obstacles to a consolidated democracy in Turkey, I would strongly suggest that Erdogan's personality traits and leadership style have also played a crucial role in the transformation of the political system in Turkey. Aylin Görener and Meltem Ucal, using the Leadership Trait Analysis designed by Margaret Hermann as a research tool, examined Erdogan's rhetoric to analyze his leadership style. Their research concluded that Erdogan's convictions "are so tightly held and preferences fixed, and that he tends to see only what he wants to see, [which] renders him incapable of deciphering the nuances of diplomacy and successfully navigating the tricky waters of international affairs."

The research also reveals that, "his dichotomizing tendency predisposes him to view politics as a struggle between right and wrong, just and unjust, villains and victims." The research points out that Erdogan's pattern of scores indicated that, "he has an "evangelist" orientation to politics which is the leadership style that results from a combination of the tendency to challenge constraints in the environment, closedness to information and having a relationship focus."

Turkish academics Irfan Arik and Cevit Yavuz state that Erdogan has the qualities of a charismatic leader. However, this is not necessarily good news for Turkish democracy. Historical data shows that authoritarian tendencies

coupled with a charismatic personality most likely give way to dictatorial rule. Lewis, for example, shows how charismatic leaders frequently aggravate their followers' frustrations and prejudices through the use of "polarized aggression."

Academics António Costa Pinto, Roger Eatwell, and Stein Ugelvik Larsen contend that every fascist dictator has to possess some individual abilities that made them 'extraordinary': "They need followers to 'understand' or 'appreciate' and connect their qualities and there must be a situation or an event that which required these unusual abilities, or which could 'call' for the reconstruction of the regime in such a way as to allow the application of new solutions to problems."

### **The 2023 Target and the Caliphate**

In several articles and speeches of Erdogan and former Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, both leaders seem convinced that AKP's initiatives would make Turkey a global actor by the year 2023, the one-hundredth anniversary of the establishment of the Turkish Republic. Having considered the AKP's opposition to the founding symbols of the Republic, the goal and the vision of 2023 is related to the re-production of the new identity of the state and the nation.

Since the process of state building refers to the development of a political entity with rulers, institutions and citizens, the AKP's 2023 vision is an important indicator to see how an 'imagined future projection' is being used to mobilize the nation and to recreate the Grand Turkey that lost its grandeur a hundred years ago. This should be considered not only a journey to an imagined future, but also a journey to the past where the grandiose Turkish collective identity was lost. Examining this vision, it is quite clear that its intention is to reconstruct a Grand Turkey, while promising nothing about a strong society, civil rights or a consolidated democracy.

The leader-follower relationship is not 'a one-way relation' and both agents define each other. In other words, leaders cannot operate without followers. As for Erdogan's followers, it is evident that many of them see him as a 'caliph.'

According to political scientist Maria Hsia Chang, malignant narcissism begins with a collective trauma, such as a national defeat, an economic crisis, or subjugation by another?often more powerful?group. This defeat leads the nation to question itself and its history, "resulting in a pervasive sense of insecurity and an uncertain and weak collective identity."

Chang argues that narcissistic nationalism "functions as 'a leap into collective fantasy' that enables threatened or anxious individuals to avoid the burden of

thinking for themselves.” For example, the humiliating results of the Treaty of Sevres, the abolition of the Caliphate and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire left a broken and wounded Turkish nation in its wake. This painful history is recalled and used by the AKP leadership as both a rhetorical factor and a tool as compensation device over the last decade.

For instance, Turkish writer Abdurahman Dilipak, who is close to Erdogan, said that the caliphate will return again with Erdogan’s reelection victory in 2018. During his participation in a 2017 conference in Canada, Dilipak said that “if Erdogan wins the presidency next year, he will become the Caliph and that the [Islamic] caliphate will have commissioners working from the rooms of the presidential palace that has 1,000 rooms.”

He added that the caliphate has moved to the Turkish parliament, stressing that after re-election, Erdogan will appoint advisers from all Muslim regions of the caliphate from various Islamic countries. These will commission the Islamic Union to have representatives of the areas of the caliphate in the thousand rooms.

And it is not only Dilipak; Suat Onal, a member of the Governing Council of the Ruling Justice and Development Party, has already mentioned on his Facebook account that “Erdogan will become the Caliph in 2023 and Allah will shed his light upon him.”

**The ‘Shadow of God’**



Similarly, in 2013, Atilgan Bayar, a former advisor to the pro-government news station *A Haber*, wrote that he recognized Erdoğan as the caliph of the Muslim world and expressed his allegiance to him. In one of her recent tweets, Beyhan Demirci, a writer and follower of Erdoğan, also wrote that Erdoğan is the caliph and the shadow of God on Earth. Some of his followers have gone even further and said things like, "Since Erdoğan is the caliph, he has the right to use money earned through corruption for his political goals."

In her dissertation entitled *Loss of the caliphate: The trauma and aftermath of 1258 and 1924*, Assistant Professor Mona F. Hassan of Duke University notes that many Muslim rulers have aspired to augment their prestige with the supreme title of caliph. As I wrote previously in my book [Hungry For Power](#),

"In addition to the claims of the deposed Ottoman caliph, Abdülmecid and the apparent ambitions of Sharif Husayn of Makkah, the names of King Fu'ad of Egypt, Amir Amanullah Khan of Afghanistan, Imam Yahya of Yemen, the Sultan ibn Sa'ud of Najd, the Sultan Yusuf bin Hasan of Morocco, the Nizam of Hyderabad, the Shaykh Ahmad al-Sanusi of Libya, the Amir Muhammad bin 'Abd al-Karim al-Khattabi of the Moroccan Rif, and even that of Mustafa Kemal were all claimed to have ambitions for the position of caliph."

It is also worth mentioning that Erdoğan stated in February 2018 that, "The Republic of Turkey is a continuation of the Ottoman Empire." He continued, stating that, "The Republic of Turkey, just like our previous states that are a continuation of one another, is also a continuation of the Ottomans." Erdoğan explained that, "Of course, the borders have changed. Forms of government have changed... But the essence is the same, soul is the same, even many institutions are the same."

Kadir Misiroglu, who has worked with Erdogan since the 1980s, remains staunchly anti-secularist. He has claimed that Turkey's incursions into Syria and Iraq will empower Erdogan to resurrect the Ottoman Empire and declare himself caliph.

The obsession with the caliphate is not limited to political Islamists. For example, the number of recruits to ISIS increased enormously after its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed himself caliph. "Regardless of ideology, individuals from around the world who felt repressed by their own governments, most of which were unable to guaranty their personal safety or sustainable infrastructure, rushed to join his army. The bottom line is that the concept of a caliphate is not a hard sell, whether in an authoritative state, in underdeveloped Muslim countries or in developed countries where Muslims are more often than not stigmatized," according to a June 2017 article by Cynthia Lardner, "Erdogan: Self-Proclaimed Caliphate?"

A caliphate is a state ruled by an Islamic steward known as a caliph –a person considered a successor to the Islamic Prophet, Muhammad (Muhammad bin Abdullah), the Prophet of the entire Muslim community. The word caliph actually refers to the ruler of the global community of Muslims, or *ummah*. During the centuries following the death of Prophet Muhammad in 632 CE, the rulers of the Muslim world were called caliph, which means "successor" in Arabic. In 1924, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of the new Turkish Republic, abolished the caliphate.

The caliph has long been viewed by many Muslims as the legitimate representative of God on earth, heir to a chain of uninterrupted succession reaching back to Prophet Muhammad.



Professor Zeki Saritoprak emphasizes that ISIS and some political Islamists use eschatological themes and 'caliphate' extensively in their ideology, especially certain narratives found in the *hadiths*, the collection of reports of sayings and teachings of the Prophet:



“Nowhere in the Qur’an or *hadith* does it say that the duty of Muslims is to establish a caliphate, and in fact, the idea of an Islamic state did not exist prior to middle of the 19th century. I think that they are so obsessed with a state because they have forgotten how to apply the rules to themselves, and so they have a desire to impose the rules on others. ISIS is thus a version of political Islam, which as a governing philosophy holds that Islam can be imposed on a population from the top down. This actually goes against Quranic principles, which focus on the individual as a universe in and of her or himself,” Saritoprak said.

He continued,

“One thing that followers of political Islam are generally not aware of is that time is an interpreter of the Quran. Some Quranic verses should be interpreted under the conditions of our time and not under the conditions of the Middle Ages. Therefore, I do not think that a caliphate or an Islamic state is necessary for Islam to flourish in the 21st century. It seems the future of Islam is in cooperation with the West and with Christianity. There is no imperative in the Quran to destroy the West or Christians. Quite the opposite; Islam should be built upon Western civilization, not seek to destroy it. Those who see problems in the West should take solace in the words of Said Nursi, who said that eventually the negative aspects of the West will dissipate and there can be a coming together of Western and Islamic civilizations.”

According to Ali Vyacheslav Polosin, Deputy Director of the Fund for Support of Islamic Culture, Science and Education, “Erdogan used the image of the caliphate and traditional Islamic values to gain popularity in the Middle East, expecting to gain it all over the world.” He explained that, “After Erdogan became president he started positioning himself in image ads not only as the president of the Turkish Republic, but as a reader of the Quran, as though he radiates some *nur*, light. It is more an image of a caliph, a ruler of true believers, than the president of a republic, especially considering that Turkey has very great experience in this aspect. So the claims are not that groundless.”

Methodologically speaking, establishing an Islamic state may sound very attractive to many Muslims, but in reality it may not solve the problems of human beings. If you provide the best rules and put them in the hands of corrupt people, those rules will be used for corruption as well. The attraction of the caliphate blinds many Muslims to the reality of their situation and morality.

Erdogan did not declare himself as the new caliph of the Muslim world. But his

actions may be a harbinger of what may come.

It is important to keep in mind that establishment of the Turkish state always played a crucial role in shaping the society as a constituting agent. While the constituting role of the state was performed in the past with a secular world view, today this constituting role seems to have passed to the AKP leadership and particularly to Erdogan himself, suggesting that the mission of the state is now to bring up a religious generation. This indicates that the “social engineering” aspect of a “constituting state” is not ruled out as Erdogan clearly said: “the new constitution will be in harmony with the values of our nation.”

While Ataturk saw himself as the savior of the nation? a kind of demigod? the secular state establishment acted accordingly. Erdogan and his bureaucracy seem convinced that they also have the ability to construct their own state, society and even myths. Erdogan’s authoritarian charisma and narcissistic personality provide evidence that he would be willing to rule Turkey as the ‘undisputable sole leader,’ but not as a democratic leader. Readily available data demonstrates that authoritarian charismatic leaders with narcissistic personalities tend to be dictators.

I would strongly argue that Erdogan’s 2023 target and his ambition to resurrect the caliphate was not formulated only to idealize his rule, but also to serve as the ‘call’ for this reconstruction of the regime.

### **An Exchange of Elite Power**

Despite elimination of the military tutelage from the political system during the AK Party era, Turkey has had several historical and structural shortcomings that have prevented it from becoming a democratic state. Erdogan’s efforts to exclude the Turkish military from the political system did not aim to consolidate democracy, but rather to create an autocratic system according to his wishes.

What Turkey has therefore been experiencing for years has been the ‘*charismatisation/Erdoganization*’ of Turkish political institutions through the idealization of the 2023 target and an imagined future of the caliphate which damaged not only democratic institutions, but also led to radical shifts in Turkish domestic and foreign policy. Due to the systemic obstacles to democracy, whatever emerges in Turkey in the near future, will not be a consolidated democracy, but rather an exchange of power between elites.

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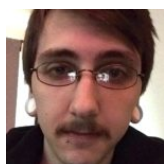
## At War With Ourselves: The Domestic Consequences of Foreign Policies

There is a direct connection between gun violence and suicide rates in the United States and America's aggressive foreign policy, argues Will Porter.

### How America's Gun Violence Epidemic May Have Roots in Overseas War Zones

By Will Porter

*Special to Consortium News*



In recent months a string of school shootings in the United States has rekindled the debate over gun violence, its causes and what can be done to stop it. But amid endless talk of school shootings and AR-15s, a large piece of the puzzle has been left conspicuously absent from the debate.

Contrary to the notion that mass murderers are at the heart of America's gun violence problem, data from recent years reveals that the majority of gun deaths are self-inflicted.

In 2015, suicides accounted for over 60 percent of gun deaths in the U.S., while homicides made up around 36 percent of that year's total. Guns are consistently the most common method by which people take their own lives.

While the causes of America's suicide-driven gun epidemic are complex and myriad, it's clear that one group contributes to the statistics above all others: military veterans.

#### **Beyond the Physical**

According to a 2016 study conducted by the Department of Veterans Affairs, on average some 20 veterans commit suicide every single day, making them among the most prone to take their own lives compared to people working in other professions. Though they comprise under 9 percent of the American population, veterans accounted for 18 percent of suicides in the U.S. in 2014.

When veterans return home from chaotic war zones, resuming normal civilian life

can present major difficulties. The stresses of wartime create a long-term, sustained “fight-or-flight” response, not only producing physical symptoms such as sweating, shaking or a racing heart rate, but inflicting a mental and moral toll as well.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) accounts for some of the physiological effects of trauma, the “fight-or-flight” response, but the distinct mental, moral and spiritual anguish experienced by many veterans and other victims of trauma has been termed “moral injury.”

A better understanding of that concept and the self-harm it motivates could go a long way toward explaining, and ultimately solving, America’s suicide epidemic.

“Moral injury looks beyond the physical and asks who we are as people,” Peter Van Buren, a former State Department Foreign Service officer, said in an interview. “It says that we know right from wrong, and that when we violate right and wrong, we injure ourselves. We leave a scar on ourselves, the same as if we poked ourselves with a knife.”

While not a veteran himself, during his tenure with the Foreign Service Van Buren served for one year alongside American soldiers at a forward operating base in Iraq. His experiences there would stick with him for life.

“Over the course of the year I was there, the units I was embedded with lost three men, and all of them were lost to suicide, not to enemy action,” Van Buren said. “This left an extraordinary impression on me, and triggered in me some of the things that I write about.”

After retiring from the Foreign Service, Van Buren began research for his novel “Hooper’s War,” a fictional account set in WWII Japan. The book centers on American veteran, Nate Hooper, and explores the psychological costs paid by those who survive a war. Van Buren said if he set the book in the past, he thought he could better explore the subject matter without the baggage of current-day politics.

In his research, Van Buren interviewed Japanese civilians who were children at the time of the conflict and found surprising parallels with the soldiers he served with in Iraq. Post-war guilt, he found, does not only afflict the combatants who fight and carry out grisly acts of violence, but civilians caught in the crossfire as well.

For many, merely living through a conflict when others did not is cause for significant distress, a condition known as “survivor’s guilt.”

“In talking with them I heard so many echoes of what I’d heard from the soldiers

in Iraq, and so many echoes of what I felt myself, this profound sense of guilt," Van Buren said.

### **'We Killed Them'**

Whether it was something a soldier did, saw or failed to prevent, feelings of guilt can leave a permanent mark on veterans after they come home.

Brian Ellison, a combat veteran who served under the National Guard in Iraq in 2004, said he's still troubled by his wartime experiences.

Stationed at a small, under protected maintenance garage in the town of ad-Diwaniyah in a southeastern province of Iraq, Ellison said his unit was attacked on a daily basis.

"From the day we got there, we would get attacked every night like clockwork—mortars, RPGs," Ellison said. "We had no protection; we had no weapons systems on the base."

On one night in April of 2004, after a successful mission to obtain ammunition for the base's few heavy weapons, Ellison's unit was ready to hit back.

"So we got some rounds for the Mark 19 [a belt-fed automatic grenade launcher] and we basically used it as field artillery, shot it up in the air and lobbed it in," Ellison said. "Finally on the last night we were able to get them to stop shooting, but that was because we killed 5 of them. At the time this was something I was proud of. We were like 'We got them, we got our revenge.'"

"In retrospect, it's like here's this foreign army, and we're in their neighborhood," Ellison said. "They're defending their neighborhood, but they're the bad guys and we're the good guys, and we killed them. I think about stuff like that a lot."

Despite his guilt, Ellison said he was able to sort through the negative feelings by speaking openly and honestly about his experiences and actions. Some veterans have a harder time, however, including one of Ellison's closest friends.

"He ended up going overseas like five times," Ellison said. "Now he's retired and he can't even deal with people. He *can't* deal with people, it's sad. He was this funny guy, everybody's friend, easy to get along with, now he's a recluse. It's really weird to see somebody like that. He had three young kids and a happy personality, now he's broken."

In addition to the problems created in their personal relationships, the morally injured also often turn to self-destructive habits to cope with their despair.

“In the process of trying to shut this sound off in your head—this voice of conscience—many people turn to drugs and alcohol as a way of shutting that voice up, at least temporarily,” Van Buren said. “You hope at some point it shuts up permanently . . . Unfortunately, I think that many people do look for the permanent silence of suicide as a way of escaping these feelings.”

### **A Hero's Welcome?**

By now most are familiar with the practice of celebrating veterans as heroes upon their return from war, but few realize what psychological consequences such apparently benevolent gestures can have.

“I think the healthiest thing a vet can do is to come to terms with reality,” Ellison said. “It’s so easy to get swept up—when we came home off the plane, there was a crowd of people cheering for us. I just remember feeling dirty. I felt like ‘I don’t want you to cheer for us,’ but at the same time it’s comforting. It’s a weird dynamic. Like, I could just put this horror out of my mind and pretend we were heroes.”

“But the terrible part is that, behind that there’s reality,” Ellison said. “Behind that, we know what we were doing; we know that we weren’t fighting for freedom. So when somebody clings onto this ‘we were heroes’ thing, I think that’s bad for them. They have to be struggling with it internally. I really believe that’s one of the biggest things that contributes to people committing suicide. They’re not able to talk about it, not able to bring it to the forefront and come to terms with it.”

### **Unclear Solution**

According to the 2016 VA study, 70 percent of veterans who commit suicide are not regular users of VA services.

The Department of Veteran Affairs was set up in 1930 to handle medical care, benefits and burials for veterans, but some 87 years later, the department is plagued by scandal and mismanagement. Long wait times, common to many government-managed healthcare systems, discourage veterans from seeking the department’s assistance, especially those with urgent psychiatric needs.

An independent review was carried out in 2014 by the VA’s Inspector General, Richard Griffin, which found that at one Arizona VA facility, 1,700 veterans were on wait lists, waiting an average of 115 days before getting an initial appointment.

“People don’t generally seek medical help because the [VA] system is so inefficient and ineffective; everyone feels like it’s a waste of time,” said a

retired senior non-commissioned officer in the Special Operations Forces (SOF) who wished to remain anonymous.

“The system is so bad, even within the SOF world where I work, that I avoid going at all costs,” the retired officer said. “I try to get my guys to civilian hospitals so that they can get quality healthcare instead of military healthcare.”

Beyond institutions, however, both Ellison and Van Buren agreed that speaking openly about their experiences has been a major step on their road back to normalcy. Open dialogue, then, is not only one way for veterans and other victims of trauma to heal, it may ultimately be the key to solving America’s epidemic of gun violence.

The factors contributing to mass murders, school shootings and private crime are, no doubt, important to study, but so long as suicide is left out of the public discourse on guns, genuine solutions may always be just out of reach.

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