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## ISSUE BRIEF

# Turkey: Managing Tensions and Options to Engage

NOVEMBER 2017 AARON STEIN

The United States has struggled to manage relations with Turkey, a NATO ally, while concurrently waging war against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). The US military's strategy of partnering with local forces to defeat ISIS—in this case, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), an insurgent group active in southeastern Turkey for nearly four decades—has thrown its relationship with its NATO ally off balance. The US partnership with the Syrian Kurds may be necessary to territorially defeat ISIS, but it also undermines US-Turkish bilateral relations. The ruling Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP), led by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has vacillated between two extremes: effusive praise for the Trump administration, while blaming the United States for supporting the failed July 15, 2016 coup attempt. The Turkish government's actions suggest that the country has no set policy toward the United States and misunderstands the US policy process.

During the Cold War, the US-Turkish alliance hinged on the military-to-military relationship. It also rested on a deeply held Turkish assumption: Ankara's interests were best served through its inclusion in Western institutions, thus Turkey had an incentive to prove its worth as a Western ally. The AKP has flipped this paradigm on its head. The government now argues that Ankara has interests independent of the West and that those interests should be acknowledged so that Turkey can then make a determination about whether it will act in accordance with its traditional Western allies, or independently.<sup>1</sup> This change in Turkish foreign policy challenges elements of the US-Turkish bilateral relationship.

The most visible manifestations of the downturn in relations are evident in the anti-American rhetoric Turkish leaders often employ and by the recent US decision to suspend all non-immigrant visa services at US diplomatic facilities in Turkey. Ankara took reciprocal action, barring US citizens from being able to purchase a visa to enter Turkey on flights that originate in the United States. The Turkish government detained two Turkish nationals who work at the US Embassy in Ankara and the Consulate in Adana, and detained and questioned the wife and child of a third employee.

The Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East studies political and economic dynamics in the Middle East and recommends US, European, and regional policies to encourage effective governance, political legitimacy, and stability.

<sup>1</sup> Gulnur Aybet, "Turkey and the West: Functional ally to strategic partner," *Daily Sabah*, September 22, 2017, <https://www.dailysabah.com/columns/aybet-gulnur/2017/09/22/turkey-and-the-west-functional-ally-to-strategic-partner>.

The change in US-Turkey policy did not appear as a bolt from the blue, but instead stems from diverging interests over policy in the Middle East and disagreement over domestic governance issues such as rule of law. The two allies continue to maintain frequent and high-level dialogue, but national interests and disputes over Iraq (dating back to 2003) and the current war in Syria have undermined government-to-government relations: so much so, that bureaucratic actors in Ankara and Washington have difficulty making the case for why the alliance matters.

The United States and Turkey have ample incentive to restore normal visa services. However, beyond this narrow issue, the key points of tension that have contributed to the breakdown of trust show no sign of abating. The challenge for the United States is to craft a realistic Turkey policy, given the current state of tensions over regional policy and the entrenchment of authoritarianism and illiberalism in Turkey. This issue brief explores the current state of US-Turkish relations, examining tensions over Syria and the US partnership with the PYD; US-Turkey military-to-military ties; key challenges for the Turkish military; and political-military tensions with different NATO and European Union members. This brief also explores the root causes of US-Turkish tensions and provides some policy options to help manage relations.

### The Air War in Syria and the Fraying of Military Ties: Mutual Suspicions

Turkey has historically been a difficult ally for the United States, often hesitating to allow the United States to conduct strike operations from its territory into the Middle East.<sup>2</sup> The tensions stemming from this perceived Turkish intransigence in granting the United States access to air bases in support of combat operations have eroded US military support for Turkey, particularly from US Central Command (CENTCOM). These tensions predate the US involvement in the Syrian civil conflict, but were reinforced during the long and difficult negotiations over US access to Turkish air bases to strike the Islamic State.<sup>3</sup> The US decision in 2015 to give support to the PYD in Syria exacerbated

Turkish suspicions of US intentions in the Middle East and reinforced concerns that US and Turkish interests in the region are incompatible.

The Kurdish (PKK/PYD) issue is certain to remain a serious impediment to the strengthening of US-Turkish relations. The United States and the coalition to defeat ISIS have been focused solely on the defeat of the Islamic State, which has led to a close partnership with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—an umbrella group of militias whose main component is the PYD's affiliated militia, the People's Protection Units (YPG—a PKK offshoot).<sup>4</sup> Turkey is in a peculiar position vis-à-vis the United States and the SDF. Ankara argues that the SDF's strength could further incentivize the PKK to use violence to achieve its political goals. However, Turkey gives direct support to the air campaign backing the SDF's advances in Syria. At the same time, the Turkish government routinely threatens to strike SDF positions, but this would risk rupturing ties with Washington, Turkey's most important ally.

The Turkish government initially sought to use the promise of access to Incirlik Air Force base to gain leverage over the United States and win support for two Turkish goals: The enforcement of a no-fly-zone over northern Aleppo and increased support for the Arab-majority opposition in Syria, which Turkey preferred to the SDF.

The air base is only 70 miles from the Syrian border and its location decreases the flight times to and from Syria. The negotiations to open the base were fraught and took almost a year to conclude. Turkey's initial refusal to allow the United States access reinforced the perception that Ankara was not a trustworthy ally and, for some, that its positions were akin to providing protection to the Islamic State. The Turkish government, however, lacked any other leverage over the United States and sought to use access to Incirlik to its advantage, primarily in an attempt to win US support for Ankara's policy positions.

The disagreement over Incirlik increased the financial cost for US combat operations, but did not seriously hinder the unfolding air campaign. In June 2015, US aircraft flying from a myriad of bases in the Middle East backed a Kurdish offensive to take control of

2 Jim Zanotti, "Turkey-U.S. Defense Cooperation: Prospects and Challenges," Congressional Research Service, April 8, 2011, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R41761.pdf>.

3 Colin Kahl, "The United States and Turkey are on a Collision Course," *Foreign Policy*, May 12, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/12/the-united-states-and-turkey-are-on-a-collision-course-in-syria-trump/>.

4 See: Aaron Stein, "Partner Operations in Syria: Lessons Learned and the Way Forward," The Atlantic Council, July 10, 2017, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/reports/partner-operations-in-syria>.





US Air Force A-10 Thunderbolt II fighter jets (foreground) are pictured at Incirlik Air Base in the southern city of Adana, Turkey, on December 11, 2015. *Photo credit:* Umit Bektas/Reuters.

Tel Abyad, an important border town.<sup>5</sup> The fall of Tel Abyad came amid a rising ISIS threat to Turkey and a dawning Turkish realization that the US partnership with the YPG would continue.

For Ankara, the fall of Tel Abyad to the YPG placed policy makers in a quandary: The United States and its Kurdish partners had closed a significant portion of the Syrian-Turkish border without significant assistance from Ankara. Turkey, therefore, risked being sidelined in an unfolding battle on its border. And yet the potential victors—the YPG—were deemed to be a serious security threat. Still, Ankara relented and opened the air base for strike missions to US and other counter-ISIS coalition members. The Turkish government agreed to open the base in July 2015, which allowed the US military to conduct strike missions in support of the YPG from Turkish territory. In return, Ankara and

the United States pledged to work together to train an Arab majority force to fight ISIS west of the Euphrates, but the effort was not successful.

The opening of Incirlik to the coalition did not, however, ease Turkish-US tensions over the war in Syria, and thus has done little to ameliorate the antagonisms that have dominated the relationship in recent years.

The erosion of military-to-military ties comes amid broader bilateral tensions that stem from changes in Turkish domestic politics, particularly after the failed July 2016 coup attempt. Following the coup, the Turkish government has carried out a wide-scale purge of suspected followers of the Gulen movement and political opponents. The scope of the purges has raised considerable concerns in the United States about rule of law and the entrenchment of authoritarian rule in Turkey. These concerns were exacerbated in April 2017, after a referendum to change Turkey's political configuration from a parliamentary system to a centralized presidential model received 51.4 percent of the vote. The Venice Commission, a constitutional

5 "Kurdish forces seize border town of Tal Abyad, cutting off key Isis supply line," *Guardian*, June 16, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/16/kurdish-fighters-cut-key-supply-line-to-islamic-state-capital-raqqqa>.

advisory body of the Council of Europe, noted that the draft, “lack[ed] the necessary checks and balances required to safeguard against becoming an authoritarian one.”<sup>6</sup>

The two sides now face a significant trust deficit that hinders cooperation in Syria and, more broadly, helps to fuel anti-Westernism in Turkish political discourse. The rise of anti-Westernism in Turkey further undermines trust in Western capitals, which, in turn, makes cooperation and compromise exceedingly more difficult. European and American pressure feeds the AKP’s anti-Western narrative, an outcome that incentivizes negative and hostile rhetoric.

### The Post-July 2016 Environment: Turkish Domestic Politics and the Armed Forces

The incentives for the Turkish government to embrace anti-Westernism have grown since the failed coup attempt in July 2016. Out of insecurity and the need for a scapegoat, Erdogan and the AKP apparently made the political decision to insinuate US involvement in, or sympathy for, the failed coup attempt.

This decision appears related to broader political efforts to blame outsiders for internal Turkish political problems that have festered during the AKP’s time in power. However, in the wake of the coup attempt, the Turkish government continues to rely on the United States for intelligence and targeting assistance with the PKK.<sup>7</sup> This stark contrast between rhetorical hostility and military dependence demonstrates Turkey’s inability to craft a clear-cut foreign policy toward the United States.

These dynamics have implications for the US-Turkish relationship. Turkish domestic politics now incentivize anti-Western discourse, even though the

Turkish military and intelligence service, MIT, are still interested in cooperation with Western counterparts. It is also indicative of longer-term trends in Turkish domestic politics and within the Turkish military. Latent anti-Americanism in Turkish society and amongst bureaucratic elites is not a new phenomenon. Turkish politicians from the left and right have all blamed the “American boogey man” since the end of World War II. However, the changes in Turkish domestic politics after the failed coup and following US support for the Syrian Kurds make the AKP’s embrace of anti-Americanism unique, and is suggestive of a sustained negative trend in US-Turkish relations.

### The Domestic Political Environment: Turkish Illiberalism

On July 15, 2016, a cadre of Turkish military officers tried to decapitate the Turkish government. The coup plot failed.<sup>8</sup> The Turkish government has blamed Fethullah Gulen, an exiled imam in Pennsylvania, for planning the coup. The Gulen movement is a semi-secretive religious brotherhood whose aim is to capture the Turkish government through the infiltration of state institutions with funding from businesses in Turkey and abroad. For a little more than a decade, the AKP and the Gulen movement were close political allies, a fact that allowed the movement’s members to establish a large-scale presence in the Turkish government.<sup>9</sup> These two political allies split over a myriad of power-sharing disputes in late 2012. The AKP sought to cripple the Gulen movement through the closing of after-school tutoring centers that the movement previously controlled to raise revenue. In retaliation, the Gulen movement leaked hours of recordings online that implicated senior AKP officials and President Erdogan’s family in corruption. In response, Erdogan began to carry out a systematic purge of Gulenists in the bureaucracy. This process accelerated after the July 2016 coup attempt and continues to this day.

Almost immediately after the coup plot was thwarted, Ankara decided to blame the United States. This decision has, at times, prompted AKP members, or journalists in AKP-controlled media, to suggest that the United States played a role in the failed coup attempt

6 Venice Commission, “Turkey - Opinion on the amendments to the Constitution adopted by the Grand National Assembly on 21 January 2017 and to be submitted to a National Referendum on 16 April 2017, adopted by the Venice Commission at its 110th Plenary Session,” March 10-11, 2017, [http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2017\)005-e](http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2017)005-e).

7 Gordon Lubold, Julian E. Barnes, and Margaret Coker, “U.S. to Expand Intelligence Cooperation With Turkey,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 10, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-to-expand-intelligence-cooperation-with-turkey-1494436533>; Craig Whitlock, “U.S. military drone surveillance is expanding to hot spots beyond declared combat zones,” *Washington Post*, July 20, 2013, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-military-drone-surveillance-is-expanding-to-hot-spots-beyond-declared-combat-zones/2013/07/20/Oa57fbda-ef1c-11e2-8163-2c7021381a75\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.e5ceb395c13f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-military-drone-surveillance-is-expanding-to-hot-spots-beyond-declared-combat-zones/2013/07/20/Oa57fbda-ef1c-11e2-8163-2c7021381a75_story.html?utm_term=.e5ceb395c13f).

8 “Timeline - Turkey’s attempted coup,” Reuters, July 15, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/turkey-security-timeline-idUSL8N1A158X>.

9 See: Joshua Hendrick, *Gulen: The Ambiguous Politics of Market Islam in Turkey and the World* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).





or that Gulen is a US intelligence asset. The AKP has made similar allegations about European countries.<sup>10</sup> The efforts are part of a broader political strategy to deflect blame for the AKP's role in empowering the Gulen movement and creating the conditions for members of the movement to then work with cadres in the armed forces to overthrow the government.

These broader political trends of scapegoating and anti-Westernization have helped sustain the AKP's domestic popularity and turn out the vote for the April 2017 constitutional referendum. Through a series of internal changes to the AKP, the party has largely come to reflect Erdogan's personal staffing choices, including pronounced roles for his family members. The consolidation of Erdogan's political power, transforming Turkey from a parliamentary democracy to a highly centralized presidential republic, has turned every election into a referendum on his leadership, whether he is on the ballot (as was the case in the August 2014 presidential election) or just the AKP—as during the April referendum and national elections for the parliament. In each case, the AKP has managed to maintain its dominant position in Turkish politics, although in the case of the referendum and the 2014 presidential election, the pro-Erdogan vote just barely managed to surpass fifty percent.<sup>11</sup> In

10 Ece Toksabay, "Germany supports group behind Turkish coup attempt: Erdogan spokesman," Reuters, March 19, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-germany-erdogan/germany-supports-group-behind-turkish-coup-attempt-erdogan-spokesman-idUSKBN16Q08P>.

11 "Cumhurbaşkanlığı Secim Sonuçları," *secimhaberler.com*, accessed on August 8, 2015, <https://secim.haberler.com/cumhurbaskanligi-secimi/>.

parliament, the AKP lost its majority in June 2015,<sup>12</sup> but after inconclusive coalition negotiations, the AKP managed to reclaim its lost seats and regain its majority in November.<sup>13</sup> The period between June and November 2015 coincided with the breakdown of the Turkish government's peace talks with the PKK, and the continuance of the insurgency in late July 2015.<sup>14</sup> The AKP capitalized on the resumption of violence to coopt voters from the far-right nationalist party, the MHP, and eventually succeeded in forming a political alliance with the party's leader, Devlet Bahçeli. The alliance between certain MHP voters and the AKP was critical for Erdogan's effort to win parliamentary support to change Turkey's constitution, and remains an important political alliance as the party campaigns for the November 2019 elections. This alliance is underpinned by strong anti-Kurdish sentiment, one aspect of which now rests on anti-Americanism, owing to the US-SDF partnership in Syria.

Erdogan has used anti-Westernism to sustain his political position, latching on to anti-Kurdish sentiment (often rhetorically disguised as a failure of the West to support Turkey's war on terror) and promoting the possibility that Turkey can manage relationships with powerful countries that are American adversaries. The resumption of PKK attacks in Turkey in July 2015 have helped to sustain this new narrative, as has US policy in Syria, which is dependent on the YPG to take territory from ISIS. The result is increased Western-Turkish tensions, fueled by domestic political calculations, and genuine feelings of betrayal over US support for a PKK offshoot in Syria.

12 The AKP won 40.87 percent of the vote in the June 2015 election, which totaled 258 seats in the parliament. This total is 18 seats shy of a majority. See: "Secim Haziran 2015," *Sabah*, accessed on August 8, 2015, <http://www.sabah.com.tr/secim/7-haziran-2015-genel-secimleri/>.

13 In the November re-run, the AKP received 49.49 percent of the vote, totaling 317 seats. "Secim Haziran 2015," *Sabah*, accessed on August 8, 2015, <http://www.sabah.com.tr/secim/1-kasim-2015-genel-secimleri/>.

14 Aaron Stein, "Kurdish Militants and Turkey's New Urban Insurgency, War on the Rocks, March 23, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/kurdish-militants-and-turkeys-new-urban-insurgency/>; "The Human Conflict of the PKK Conflict in Turkey: The Case of Sur," International Crisis Group, Briefing No. 80, March 17, 2016, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/human-cost-pkk-conflict-turkey-case-sur>.



Policemen stand on a military vehicle after troops involved in the coup surrendered on the Bosphorus Bridge in Istanbul, Turkey July 16, 2016. *Photo credit: Reuters/Murad Sezer.*

## Eurasianists vs Atlanticists: The Future of the New Turkish Army

The Turkish military has also faced serious challenges following the failed coup. On July 16, 2016, the military began to purge officers for participation in the coup. These purges have continued, and reportedly are intended to eliminate the Gulenist presence in the armed forces.

The purges hit Turkey's flag officers the hardest. On July 27, 2016, 149 of Turkey's 325 flag officers were dismissed for Gulenist ties or for failing to actively resist the putsch on the night of the coup.<sup>15</sup>

The post-July 15 purge of the armed forces bookended a tumultuous decade for the Turkish military. In the previous decade, the AKP and the Gulen movement oversaw three interrelated trials, launched before the

<sup>15</sup> "Turkish generals resign as government prepares to overhaul armed forces," *Agence France Presse*, July 28, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/28/turkey-purges-military-leaders-in-wake-of-failed-coup>.

failed July coup attempt that alleged that there were a series of coup plots aimed at toppling the government.

These trials are critical for understanding the events that led to the failed coup. They help to elucidate a related debate about the ideological outlook of the Turkish military's current flag officers, promoted after the recent round of military purges.

The two best-known trials, Ergenekon<sup>16</sup> and Balyoz,<sup>17</sup> alleged a military centric conspiracy aimed at using

<sup>16</sup> Gareth Jenkins, "The Ergenekon Verdicts: Chronicle of an Injustice Foretold," *Turkey Analyst*, August 14, 2013, <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/50-the-ergenekon-verdicts-chronicle-of-an-injustice-foretold.html>; Gareth Jenkins, "Between Fact and Fantasy: Turkey's Ergenekon Investigation," Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Silk Road Studies Program, August 2009, [https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2009\\_08\\_SRP\\_Jenkins\\_Turkey-Ergenekon.pdf](https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2009_08_SRP_Jenkins_Turkey-Ergenekon.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> Gareth Jenkins, "The Balyoz Retrial and the Changing Politics of Turkish Justice," *Turkey Analyst*, June 25, 2014, <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/331-the-balyoz-retrial-and-the-changing-politics-of-turkish-justice.html>.

a series of false flag attacks to incite violence. In response to the chaos, the military would step in to reassert order. The third trial focused on an alleged spy ring based in Izmir, and centered in the naval command. In each case, the evidence was based on forged documents and the suspects were acquitted after lengthy trials. The evidence for the trials hinged on fabricated evidence that purported to show officers engaged in treason.

During Ergenekon and Balyoz, the accused officers were suspended, making way for a new round of promotions to take their place. In many cases, the officers promoted between 2010 and 2014 were then purged again in 2016, following the failed coup attempt. The cycle of purges and promotions suggests that there was a broader effort to coup-proof the military, which often results in weakening institutions and politicizing the armed forces.<sup>18</sup> The result has been near continuous-change at the top of Turkey's armed forces over the past ten years or so.

In the first Balyoz-related cycle of arrests in early 2010, the Eurasianist cadre of flag officers were most impacted. These officers are, in general, more hostile toward the United States and NATO, and view Turkey's long-term alliance structure as rooted in Central Asia, Russia, and China. The Eurasianist wing of the Turkish armed forces is conspiracy-minded and argues that the United States uses sub-state actors (like the PKK) and the Gulenist movement to undermine the Turkish state.<sup>19</sup> This view of the world is broadly congruent with Turkish Islamists, who also believe that the United States and Western institutionalism are conspiring to topple the Turkish government. Yet, the two factions disagree on religion and fundamental questions about Turkish identity and secularism, and thus the foundations of this political/military alliance are weak.

In the wake of the July 2016 coup attempt, the purges impacted so-called Atlanticists: officers who value NATO and Turkey's relationship with the United States. Moreover, in the wake of the July 27 purge, the Turkish military reached back out to officers purged during the Balyoz and Ergenekon trials to return to active duty. The assumption, therefore, is that the latest round of

purges has empowered the Eurasianists again. These officers, in turn, have found common cause with President Erdogan now that he has turned all elements of the state against the Gulenists and, in the southeast and in parts of northern Syria, is using military force against the PKK and its affiliates.

### Trends in Turkey: Implications for the US-Turkey Relationship

The political trends in Turkey incentivize the AKP to demonize the West, because that helps President Erdogan align the disparate elements of his new political coalition, which is now intermingled with a faction of ultra-nationalist and Eurasian elements.

The AKP's electoral base has changed considerably since the mid-2000s, when the party could legitimately claim to have won support from Turkish liberals. In the past half-decade, the party has managed to maintain its dominant position amongst the voters, but its base has shrunk, which leaves little margin for error. This is particularly relevant for the current campaign cycle. To hold his coalition together, Erdogan needs an external enemy linked to both his own struggle with the Gulenists and the ongoing PKK insurgency. US policy in Syria and partnership with Kurdish forces, therefore, are perfect political foils for his current campaign for the November 2019 elections to parliament and for the revamped presidency.

To be sure, the PKK threat cuts across political allegiances, and US support for the Syrian Kurds is nearly universally loathed by Turkey's fractured polity. However, buried within that antipathy is a nuanced political debate, wherein the opposition blames the AKP for using the PKK insurgency for political gain and for mismanaging the relationship with Washington. Thus, while there is general disdain for US actions in Syria, the broader anti-AKP opposition assigns some of the blame to the AKP for undermining Turkey's reputation in the West, thus creating a political climate in which Turkish national interests would become routinely disregarded by both allies and the international community.

For Erdogan, future electoral concerns focus on the possibility of poor electoral performance and not winning outright on the first ballot. If this were to occur, a consensus candidate could then capture the anti-Erdogan vote and beat him in a two-person run-off. To prevent this, he has an incentive to keep the far right fractured and drive up country-wide antipathy toward

18 James T. Quinlivan, "Coup-proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East," *International Security*, vol. 24, no. 2 (Fall, 1999), 131-165;

19 John Butler, "Not FETO, but NATO," *Balkanist*, July 15, 2017, <https://balkanist.net/not-feto-but-nato/>.



the opposition Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) for its links to the PKK.

These political incentives portend continued harsh rhetoric against certain Western countries, and the contraction of the rule of law in Turkey, in turn, makes it less likely that any Western countries would ever extradite the Gulenists whom Ankara is seeking to put on trial for alleged terrorist activity. In the case of the United States, the Department of Justice would have to be assured that Fethullah Gulen would receive a fair trial: a near-impossible scenario in today's Turkey.<sup>20</sup> This cycle, then, gives ammunition for the AKP to attack the West for failing to take Turkish security concerns seriously. The result is a continued cycle of rhetorical attacks, more antipathy, and growing animosity that undermines the political will to cooperate on issues of mutual interest.

### Policy Recommendations

A more transactional US-Turkey relationship is dependent on US and western policy makers acknowledging that the drivers of poor relations with Turkey are not entirely self-inflicted. The US partnership with the SDF is a major irritant to the bilateral relationship. It is, however, only one of a number of factors that contribute to the negative downturn in the bilateral relationship.

Turkish concerns about Kurdish empowerment will not decrease until Ankara restarts peace talks with the PKK. At this point, the domestic political environment in Turkey is not conducive for the resumption of serious talks. President Erdogan has, between 2006–2009 and 2012–2015, directed his government to hold talks with the imprisoned leader of the PKK, Abdullah Ocalan. The AKP froze the talks in March 2015, and then the PKK announced its withdrawal in July. In parallel, during the same time frame, the US-YPG was starting its counter-offensive against ISIS, which continues to this day under the rubric of US-SDF operations east of Raqqa. US and allied aircraft based in Turkey support the SDF, despite Turkey's labelling of the militia as a terrorist organization.

The arrangement reflects the power imbalance in the US-Turkish relationship, wherein Washington is able through sustained pressure to compel Ankara to take action that it admits is against its self-interest. The arrangement is favorable to US interests, but it also gives Turkey leverage over the United States and its coalition partners by threatening to revoke permission to conduct strikes against ISIS from Turkish territory. The United States has an incentive to maintain access to Turkish air bases, but in return for Turkish cooperation on other issues, could seek to explore ways to limit direct Turkish support for the SDF.

- The United States and Turkey could explore spinning off a dedicated military task force, dedicated to using Turkey-based aircraft to strike al-Qaeda-linked groups in Idlib, Syria. The intent would be to repurpose assets now engaged in the war against ISIS, and thus currently flying missions in support of the SDF. To do so, the United States could work through Turkey to reach agreement with Russia, which along with Iran and Turkey serve as guarantors of a so-called “de-escalation zone” in Syria's Idlib, to reach agreement on deconfliction arrangements to facilitate airstrikes. The idea is for a joint US-Turkish military operation to attack al-Qaeda elements in Syria, while also creating a pathway to wind down US support for the SDF from Turkish territory. The United States would still be able to strike targets in support of the SDF from Jordan, and thus continue its war against ISIS in eastern Syria.
- This policy would have a second benefit for US interests. In October, Turkey deployed forces to Idlib, Syria to “monitor” the de-escalation zone established as part of the Astana process, where Turkey acts as a co-guarantor along with Russia and Iran. However, the terms of the deal appear to preclude the Turkish targeting of al-Qaeda in Syria. Instead, Turkey appears to have reached an agreement with al-Qaeda to allow for the safe passage of its forces to designated points in Idlib. The problem for US interests is twofold: First, this process indirectly legitimized al-Qaeda as an actor in Idlib; Second, the terms of the de-escalation agreement precludes US strikes on al-Qaeda in the area. Turkey appears to be trying to, slowly, use antipathy toward al-Qaeda to isolate and then defeat the group. It is unclear if this strategy will be successful. Various external actors—including Turkey—have pursued a variation of this approach

20 Michael Werz and Max Hoffman, “The Process Behind Turkey's Proposed Extradition of Fethullah Gulen,” Center for American Progress, September 7, 2016, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2016/09/07/143587/the-process-behind-turkeys-proposed-extradition-of-fethullah-gulen/>.

for close to half a decade without success. If this latest effort collapses, the United States will retain an interest in going after al-Qaeda in Idlib to deny them safe haven, from which they can plot external attacks. Turkey could assist in this effort, but in doing so would have to grapple with the risk of blowback. Indeed, blowback may be inevitable, given that al-Qaeda continues to have safe haven on Turkey's longest land border. The US should assume that regardless of Turkish efforts to split al-Qaeda in Syria, military efforts will eventually be needed to deal with hardline elements. The US has an interest in letting Ankara try to isolate al-Qaeda elements in the near-term, but should be prepared to take action once it becomes necessary to deal with whatever al-Qaeda threat emerges from Turkey's current actions in Idlib.

As part of this effort, the United States maintains an interest in pushing Ankara to resume peace talks with the PKK, and for the United States to use its relationship with the PKK through the PYD to encourage it to do the same. The goal should be for the two sides to announce an immediate cease-fire. The main challenges are that the United States lacks any real leverage over Ankara; and it would be politically disadvantageous for President Erdogan to pursue a cease-fire before the scheduled November 2019 election.

- Despite the challenges, the recent history of US-Turkish relations underscore just how far the two sides can push one another without the alliance breaking. The durability of the relationship suggests that the United States can be more forthright in its efforts to encourage Ankara to return to peace talks.
- The United States should also acknowledge that its security assistance to the Turkish government helps to prolong the conflict with the PKK and is not tethered to an achievable political outcome that would end the conflict. The United States already gives assistance to Turkey to strike PKK related targets. This assistance has helped to ameliorate tensions and improve bilateral relations, but absent a clear political strategy from Ankara about how to address the broader drivers of the conflict, US assistance will do little to bring about a resolution. Thus, the United States should consider asking tough questions about Turkish strategy and insist on clear, articulated political goals that increased military lethality would support.

The United States and its European allies should try to “black box” Turkey's NATO membership from its separate and stalled accession process with the European Union. The NATO alliance has dealt with authoritarian members in the past and can do so again.

- Turkish efforts to develop an indigenous defense sector are not incongruent with its NATO obligations. However, Ankara should be encouraged to purchase interoperable weapons systems, unlike the current approach of working with Russia for long-range air defense.<sup>21</sup> The Turkish purchase of Russia's S-400 missile system is inconsistent with Turkish support for NATO's 2010 decision<sup>22</sup> to develop alliance-wide ballistic missile defense and with the Wales communique that outlined a goal of nationally funded interceptors and sensors.<sup>23</sup> Turkey has taken steps toward reaching agreement with a European consortium on missile defense, but has deepened its talks with Russia for a stand-alone system, using non-interoperable technology. The Turkish government's decision is political: Ankara has options to work more closely with European or US suppliers, or it can deepen cooperation with Russia. A Turkish purchase of a Russian air defense will not break the NATO alliance, but if Ankara gives Moscow more favorable terms or makes compromises on technology transfer that it had hitherto refused to give to western manufacturers, then the Turkish government will be signaling to its allies the dismissal of its multilateral commitments. The US government has an incentive to encourage Turkish cooperation with the European company MBDA for the development of future air and missile defense systems for Turkey.
- Separate from NATO, the US government should consider being more vocal in its criticism of Turkish actions, particularly those that involve the arbitrary arrest of US citizens and Turkish nationals that work with American missions in Turkey on dubious

21 Ozgenur Sevinc, “Russia, Turkey to accelerate efforts to finalize S-400 deal,” *Daily Sabah*, August 30, 2017, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2017/08/31/russia-turkey-to-accelerate-efforts-to-finalize-s-400-deal>.

22 “Lisbon Summit Declaration,” North Atlantic Treaty Organization, last updated on July 31, 2012, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_68828.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_68828.htm).

23 “Wales Summit Declaration,” North Atlantic Treaty Organization, last updated on September 26, 2016, [http://www.nato.int/cps/ic/natohq/official\\_texts\\_112964.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/ic/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm).



An F-16 Fighting Falcon of the Turkish Air Force takes off on a sortie from Third Air Force Base in Turkey.  
*Photo credit: Defence Image/Flickr.*

charges. The resolution of the current visa crisis will help to reduce tensions, but will do little to address the factors that contributed to the current crisis. In one such example, the Turkish government holds Andrew Brunson, an American missionary in Izmir, who has been in pretrial detention since October 2016. In a speech, and reportedly in private meetings with the US government, President Erdogan has suggested that Brunson's fate is tied to Turkey's efforts to extradite Fethullah Gulen from the United States.<sup>24</sup> The implication of a trade, however, undermines the extradition request because it implies that Gulen will not receive a fair trial in Turkey. The broader concern is that Ankara views foreign prisoners as bargaining chips to try and win concessions or increase leverage in

bilateral disputes with western countries. This policy is an affront to the US judiciary, which is autonomous and will review Turkey's extradition requests independent of political pressure. Ankara's efforts to try and enlist the US president to put pressure on the Department of Justice are an effort to circumvent the rule of law. The United States should continue to take a strong line against Turkish actions that violate normal diplomatic practice and point out the various human rights abuses that continue to take place in Turkey, while also underscoring that the extradition process is outside the control of elected officials.

The intent of the aforementioned policy recommendations is to couch a firmer US approach to Turkey within ongoing efforts to come to a consensus on broader geostrategic issues, like the war in Syria and Iraq and the threat posed by Russia. The domestic political environment in Turkey will make this difficult, but the lessons of the recent past suggest that the United States can be more forceful in its dealings with

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<sup>24</sup> Author Interviews, US Government Officials, Washington, DC and Ankara, March 2017; "Turkey's Erdogan links fate of detained U.S. pastor to wanted cleric Gulen," Reuters, September 28, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-turkey-cleric/turkeys-erdogan-links-fate-of-detained-u-s-pastor-to-wanted-cleric-gulen-idUSKCN1C31IK>.



Turkey, without fear of the alliance totally crumbling. As such, a US-Turkey policy tethered to the current political environment inside the country should start with key questions about what it is that the United States wants from its ally, and then build backward a set of carrots and sticks to try and gain consensus on shared interests. This approach requires a reconsideration of the drivers of the current tensions and challenges assumptions that the reasons for the downturn start and stop in Washington, DC.

### Conclusion: Embrace “Transactionalism”

Currently, the United States has a chicken and egg problem: it would like to improve relations with Turkey, but it has prioritized the war against ISIS, and is thus dependent on a group Ankara views as a security threat. The Turkish government, too, is caught in a political cul-de-sac, particularly with the arrival of the Trump administration. For domestic reasons, President Erdogan continues to criticize the West. Yet, the Turkish president has also sought to cultivate close relations with the new president. Additionally, the Turkish military threatens to attack the SDF, while simultaneously hosting air assets used to support the group’s military advance.

The trend in Turkish politics is toward indefinite authoritarian and illiberal rule. However, the United States has maintained close working relationships with authoritarian allies in the past. The NATO alliance has done the same. The value of the alliance for US security interests is clear: NATO provides stability in Europe and has acted as an effective deterrent against Russian military action directed at alliance members. Turkey has a network of bases that the United States could use in a crisis, either to project power in the region or as key transit points for conflicts out of area. However, in the United States, it is harder to “make the case for Turkey,” particularly now that Erdogan has opted to embrace a conspiracy theory that indirectly blames the United States for the failed coup in July 2016, and politically motivated arrests disrupt the day-to-day functioning of US diplomatic facilities. Moreover, key US actors, like CENTCOM, tend to view Turkey as an irritant, rather than an ally. Because of CENTCOM’s importance, as compared to the other US combatant commands, this viewpoint is significant and damaging to the bilateral relationship.

The policy recommendations in this report are transactional, designed to work toward consensus on a specific set of issues. The trajectory of the relationship suggests a need for the United States to get acquainted with “transactionalism,” wherein the majority of the bilateral talks are simply aimed at managing a troubled but important relationship, rather than waiting for tensions over US actions in Syria to subside. The conclusion, of course, is the need to set aside the idea that the glue holding the alliance together is one of shared values, in favor of a narrow set of shared interests with potential overlapping policy prescriptions. To arrive at consensus with Turkey on shared interests, the US also has to acknowledge that it will take a significant amount of cajoling and meetings to find common ground on policy. This is the new reality in the bilateral relationship, and it should shape how US policy makers think about dealing with Ankara moving forward.

In the longer term, the United States will have to deal with the repercussions of the war against ISIS in Syria and Iraq. The Turkish security establishment is certain to view the United States differently, after the American military partnered with a group that Ankara identifies as its top security threat: the PKK. Yet despite this, Turkey still perceives cooperation with the Trump administration as important, asks the United States for assistance, and remains dependent on NATO for security from the Russian threat.

The two countries have much to discuss about the future of Iraq and Syria. Both Turkey and the United States rely on the same security structure for power projection in the Black and Mediterranean Seas. The US-Turkish relationship has changed considerably in recent years, and now the two sides need to think creatively about ways to maintain the partnership, based on a clear understanding of the changes in both countries and their approaches to regional security and politics.

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