

A stylized world map composed of a grid of dots in various shades of gray, with several dots highlighted in red. The map is centered behind the title.

# The Turkish-U.S. Relationship

Current Tensions and Future Prospects

**GÖNÜL TOL**  
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- The Turkey-U.S. relationship is going through one of the most turbulent periods in history.
- Diverging interests in regional policy, Turkey's failed coup, and the country's authoritarian drift are major factors behind the current crisis.
- Traditionally, Turkey's ruling center right parties and the military have promoted closer ties to the U.S. and normalized relations in the past. Today, these forces are not acting.
- Gone are the days of the »model partnership« and parties seem to have resigned to transactional relations.



The Turkey-U.S. relationship was off to a good start when President Barack Obama delivered his historic speech at the Turkish Parliament in 2009 and launched his campaign to reconcile the United States with the Muslim world from the Turkish capital. The conflict in Syria, however, dealt a blow to what President Obama called the »model partnership« (CNN 2009). Ankara was frustrated over Washington's unwillingness to pursue a more forceful strategy in Syria to topple the Assad regime. Washington, for its part, thought that its NATO ally was not doing its part in the fight against the Islamic State (ISIS).

Unmet expectations led to a U.S. decision that remained a flash point in bilateral relations in the years to come. In 2014, the Obama administration decided to airdrop weapons to the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) battling ISIS in northern Syria, a group considered to be a terrorist organization by Turkey. The relationship has been on a downward spiral since then.

## Syrian Conflict Deals a Blow to Turkey-U.S. Ties

The Syrian conflict has posed the biggest challenge to Turkey's relationship with the United States. The tension over differing priorities in Syria came to a head when the U.S. administration decided to arm the YPG fighting against ISIS in the northern Syrian town of Kobani. For Turkey, the most dangerous implication of the conflict in Syria has been the resurgence of the PKK. After Turkey joined the anti-Assad camp, the Assad regime gave the Kurds a free hand allowing them to operate unencumbered and undertake a pseudo-governmental role in Kurdish regions of Syria (Tol 2014). The U.S. move to arm the YPG occurred in this context and was seen as a slap in the face.

In 2015, Ankara shifted its focus from regime change to counter-terrorism amidst domestic and regional developments. In the summer of 2015, ISIS struck a cultural center in a Turkish town near the Syrian border, killing at least 30 people and wounding more than 100. It was the radical group's first mass killing of civilians in Turkey and the worst spillover in deadly violence from Syria's civil war. Several days later, a two-year cease-fire between Turkey and the P.K.K. collapsed. Simultaneously, the YPG captured border towns and began to link its disconnected cantons (Tol 2017).

In an effort to respond to what it saw as an existential threat, Turkey launched a military incursion into Syria in 2016. Turkey's intervention was as much about stopping U.S.-backed Kurdish militia seizing territory as it was about eliminating the Islamic State. Turkey's military operation led to clashes between Turkey and Turkey-backed forces and the Kurds, raising concerns in Washington at a time when the U.S. was getting ready to recapture the ISIS stronghold Raqqa.

Turkey's second military incursion into Syria strained its already precarious relationship with the United States further. After the U.S. announced that it would create a Kurdish force of 30,000 to secure Syria's border with Turkey and Iraq in areas held by the Kurds, Turkey launched a military operation into the northwestern Kurdish enclave of Afrin early 2018 (Perry/Coskun 2018). The United States voiced concern that Turkey's operation jeopardizes the fight against ISIS as the YPG started withdrawing forces from the fight to help the Kurdish forces in Afrin against Turkey. The tension reached new heights when President Erdogan warned that Turkey would also drive the YPG militia from Manbij, east of Afrin, where around two thousand U.S. military personnel are stationed. Ankara has called on Washington to pull back from the town. Despite Turkey's warnings, the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) Chief General Joseph Votel said the United States has no plans to withdraw troops stationed near the town, creating the potential for an unprecedented armed conflict between two NATO allies.

Former U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's visit to Turkey in February seemed to have calmed tensions down but the firing of Tillerson has complicated efforts to resolve the crisis with Turkey. The outgoing secretary has led efforts to ease tensions and is known for favoring coopting Turkey over confronting. Mike Pompeo, President Donald Trump's new secretary of state, on the other hand, has a hardline approach on foreign policy and is not a big fan of Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. In a tweet posted the day after the failed coup in Turkey in 2016, then Congressman Pompeo labeled President Erdogan's Turkey a totalitarian Islamist dictatorship. Ankara is concerned that Pompeo, with his military background, might support the Pentagon's policy of closer engagement with the YPG. The U.S. Central Command, which oversees coalition operations in Syria and Iraq, has worked very closely with the YPG and is

unwilling to sever ties with a group that it thinks is the most effective fighting force. Pompeo wants the United States to play a more assertive role in Syria. If he chooses to take the CENTCOM's advice to keep working closely with the YPG to achieve that goal, Turkey-U.S. relations will remain strained.

## The Failed Coup Complicates Relations Further

The U.S. partnership with the YPG is only one of many problems haunting bilateral ties. In the summer of 2016, a faction of the Turkish military launched a coup attempt aimed at toppling President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government. The ruling party blamed Fethullah Gulen, an Islamic preacher who has been living in self-exile in the U.S. since the 1990s, and his supporters within the military for the failed coup. A few hours after surviving the coup attempt, President Erdogan demanded the U.S. hand over Gulen. The extradition request has fomented a crisis in bilateral relations.

In principle, according to a 1979 extradition treaty, the United States must extradite someone who is behind acts of murder, conspiracy and the attempted murder of the head of state (Bob 2016). But the treaty includes a political exception which means the U.S. can refuse the extradition request if the evidence of the crime is tainted by political motivations. After Turkey's request, the U.S. officials said that Turkey has to provide hard evidence linking Gulen to the failed putsch. Once the U.S. Departments of State and Justice determine that evidence of the offense is prosecutable in the United States, it then moves to the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Pennsylvania. If the court turns down the extradition request, Gulen would be set free and allowed to remain in the United States. If the judge approves it, Gulen's attorney could attempt to block his immediate deportation by appealing the decision in the U.S. federal court system. The extradition would ultimately be decided by the secretary of state but subject to any appeals of the executive order.

So far Turkey has failed to submit the evidence that would satisfy U.S. courts. There are other hurdles. The tortured images of captured coup plotters and concerns over the rule of law in Turkey will put the secretary in a tough spot. Given the fact that Gulen and the ruling party used

to be close allies and President Erdogan used the failed coup to silence all his opponents, the extradition request could be seen as politically motivated.

In February, a joint mechanism was established between Turkey and the U.S. for the resolution of bilateral problems including Gulen's extradition (Erkus 2018) but few expect any breakthrough.

## Turkey's Hostage Diplomacy

Turkey's failed coup unleashed other problems for bilateral relations. The government purged tens of thousands of people including military officials, police officers, judges and others for allegedly playing a part in the failed coup. Among them were a dozen Americans, including an American pastor and local employees of the U.S. mission in Turkey. Last year, after Turkey arrested a U.S. consulate worker in Istanbul over suspected links to Gulen, the U.S. decided to suspend visa services bringing the relations to an all-time low. Turkey responded in kind.

Turkey has launched a campaign of hostage diplomacy and used the detainees as bargaining chips in its effort to force the U.S. to extradite Gulen. Particularly troublesome for the Trump administration is the case of Andrew Brunson, a Christian missionary who has lived in Turkey for more than two decades. Brunson was arrested by Turkish authorities in 2016 and charged with espionage and engaging in activities on behalf of Gulen and the PKK. If convicted, he faces up to 35 years in prison.

Both President Trump and Vice President Mike Pence made personal appeals to President Erdogan to secure his release. President Trump has refrained from criticizing Turkey publically until recently. After Pastor Brunson's court hearing, President Trump sharply rebuked Turkey for the ongoing trial, tweeting that he is »being persecuted in Turkey for no reason.«

Members of the U.S. Congress have proposed to retaliate with sanctions, some proposing blocking planned deliveries of F-35 combat aircrafts to Turkey. In an open letter to President Erdogan last month, a bipartisan group of 66 U.S. senators called the indictment »an absurd collection of anonymous accusations, flights of fantasy and random character assassination« (Gauthier-Villars 2018).

Despite the mounting pressure from the U.S., a Turkish court recently ruled to keep Brunson in jail and adjourned the case to July 18.

## President Erdogan's Bodyguards Attack Protestors in Washington

A much-publicized attack by Turkish presidential bodyguards on protesters in Washington during a visit last year have driven relations to yet another new low. Members of President Erdogan's armed security detail were captured on video brutally attacking pro-Kurdish protesters, including American citizens, outside the Turkish ambassador's residence in Washington while President Erdogan looked on (Fandos 2017). The incident prompted strong reactions from the State Department and members of Congress. A senate committee approved a measure that would block the U.S. government from supporting the sale of weapons to security forces protecting President Erdogan (WSJ Editorial Board 2017). The State Department condemned the attack. In a Twitter post, Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) wrote that »this is the United States of America. We do not do this here. There is no excuse for this kind of thuggish behavior« (Nelson 2017).

To many Americans, the incident brought home »how brutal President Erdogan's government has become«. As Western media covered more and more stories of jailed Americans in Turkey including the 50-year-old missionary Brunson from the town of Black Mountain in North Carolina, »Erdogan« became a household name in the United States. His fiercely anti-American rhetoric and Turkey's descent into authoritarianism made its way into American pop culture. An American political drama series called »Designated Survivor« depicted Turkish president as a dictator who silences his opponents by force if necessary.

President Erdogan was once again at the center of attention in the U.S. when a Turkish-Iranian gold trader pleaded guilty to charges including conspiracy to violate the U.S. sanctions against Iran in a Manhattan court last fall. The case revealed evidence of corruption in Turkish government and banking circles and drew strong criticism from Ankara.

The conviction of a Turkish banker in New York added further strain on the ties. In January, the former deputy general manager at Turkey's state-controlled Halkbank was found guilty of helping Iran evade U.S. sanctions by a federal jury in Manhattan. The verdict could spell trouble for the bank. If the U.S. government finds wrongdoing, it could impose fines or cut off the bank from the U.S. financial system (Farrell/Berthelsen 2018). President Erdogan denounced the charges, claiming the case was based on fabricated evidence.

The U.S. has long turned a blind eye to Turkey's authoritarian drift for the sake of geopolitical interests. But the developments of the last few years have made it impossible for the U.S. to ignore the country's backsliding in democracy. The State Department's annual report on human rights was very harsh, criticizing Turkey for the increasing torture in jails, inhumane prison conditions and stifling of free expression. There is also bipartisan consensus on the Hill not to tolerate President Erdogan's policies anymore and cases like Pastor Brunson increases the pressure on the Trump administration to play hardball with Turkey.

## Turkey-Russia Partnership Rattles the U.S.

Amidst deteriorating relations with its NATO ally, Turkey began cultivating closer ties to Russia. Ankara announced that it had finalized a deal to procure the Russian-made S-400 air defense system. The U.S. officials have warned that Turkey's use of the Russian defense system would compromise NATO's communications and lead to interoperability problems.

At a time when tensions between NATO and Russia are high, Turkey's decision is seen as a snub to the alliance. U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Wess Mitchell recently warned that Turkey could face sanctions if it insists on purchasing the Russian system and its participation in the F-35 program could be adversely impacted (The Region 2018).

Military collaboration between the two NATO allies has already been scaled back. U.S. air force combat operations at the Incirlik base have been run down and a squadron of ground-attack jets was redeployed to Afghanistan, leaving only refueling aircraft at the base (Tisdall 2018).

The tensions in relations and growing Turkey-Russia ties have led to calls to find alternatives to Incirlik airbase (Bipartisan Policy Center 2018).

Ankara is building closer ties to Moscow in Syria as well. The close partnership between the two undermines U.S. interests there. Turkey is part of the so-called Astana trio along with Russia and Iran. Through the Astana process, the three became the main external actors on the ground and in diplomatic efforts to end the war at the expense of the United States. They set up de-escalation zones in Syria, which has effectively consolidated Assad regime's power, a blow to the U.S. policy of toppling the regime. In an effort to curb U.S. influence on the ground, Russia green lighted a Turkish military incursion into Syria, which hurt the U.S. fight against ISIS and weakened the U.S.' only ally on the ground: YPG.

Turkey and Russia are also closing ranks on energy. Russia is building Turkey's first nuclear power plant. Russia's Gazprom has begun construction on the TurkStream gas pipeline under the Black Sea to Turkey to carry Russian gas to Europe (Winter 2017).

Turkey's ever closer ties with Russia have sparked a debate in Washington over Turkey's commitment to the Western alliance. Many believe that Turkey's drift away from the West to Russia (Erdemir/Tahiroglu 2017) undercuts U.S. policies and that it is time for Washington to swap carrots for sticks in its relations with Ankara.

## Moving Forward

There have always been ups and downs in the Turkey-U.S. relations. The 1964 Johnson letter dealt the first blow to bilateral ties and sowed the seeds of anti-Americanism in Turkey. In a stern letter, President Lyndon B. Johnson warned Turkish Prime Minister Ismet Inonu that NATO might not defend Turkey if it intervened in Cyprus and Greece and the Soviets militarily responded to the invasion. Ten years later, another crisis shook the relations. In 1974, the U.S. Congress imposed an embargo on arms shipments to Turkey in response to Turkish intervention in Cyprus. Turkey-U.S. ties suffered another blow when the Turkish parliament rejected a request from the United States to use the country as a launch pad for an attack on Iraq in 2003. A few months later, U.S. troops in northern Iraq detained 11 Turkish

soldiers suspected of plotting to kill a Kurdish governor. The incident became a watershed moment in bilateral ties and still remains fresh in public memory.

In all these instances, it was the ruling center right parties and Turkish military that put relations back on track. The leaders of the 1980 military coup saved the relations that were badly damaged due to the events of 1964 and 1974. They thought that Turkey-U.S. partnership was too important to let it break down. The head of the center right Motherland Party, Turgut Ozal, who took office after the coup, also promoted closer ties to the United States. Despite the tension in 2003, the ruling Justice and Development Party and Ilker Basbug, who became the chief of general staff in 2008, took steps to mend ties. Basbug made it clear that he regarded strong ties to NATO and the U.S. as essential for Turkish national security interests. Under his rule, military-to-military partnership improved (Larrabee 2010). Similarly, there were constituencies in Washington who pushed for normalization with Turkey.

Today, however, none of these constituencies exist. Anti-Americanism has become a common feature uniting right and left, government and opposition in Turkey. President Erdogan has been exploiting, at times fueling, the surge in anti-American sentiment and Turkish military's anti-Americanism has hit the roof due to U.S. cooperation with the PKK's Syrian offshoot. In Washington, there are those promoting normalization with Turkey but calls to get tougher with Turkey are louder.

There are more problems on the horizon. President Trump's decision to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal and reimpose sanctions is likely to drive a further wedge between Ankara and Washington. Having close trade and energy ties and having suffered under the previous sanctions regimes, Turkey has been opposed to unilateral sanctions against Iran. Trump's decision puts Turkey in a very difficult spot and becomes another flash point in Turkey-U.S. relations.

All these problems in the Turkey-U.S. relationship aside, Turkey has become a country that is at odds with U.S. allies in the region, narrowing the room for regional cooperation between Ankara and Washington. Ties between Turkey and Egypt have been frosty since the toppling of the Muslim Brotherhood-based government of President Mohammed Morsi. Turkey-Saudi ties are



tense as well over Turkey's support for the Muslim Brotherhood, Ankara's close ties to Iran and President Erdogan's support for Qatar. For reasons similar to those that strained Turkey-Saudi ties, the United Arab Emirates has been at loggerheads with Turkey. In a closed-door meeting with U.S. officials in January, Jordan's King Abdullah II apparently accused the Turkish government of enabling the infiltration of Islamist terrorists into Europe and encouraging a »radical Islamic solution« to the crises in the Middle East. Turkey-Iraq relations have been uneasy as well. The Trump administration's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital has exacerbated existing tensions between Turkey and Israel (Tol 2018).

In a recent meeting between Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu, the two countries have reached agreement on the withdrawal of U.S.-backed Kurdish fighters from the northern Syrian town of Manbij. According to the agreement, the military forces of the two countries will patrol the area (De Young/Cunningham 2018). The deal seems to have softened the mood in both capitals but it might be short-lived. As long as President Erdogan and his nationalist allies are at the helm, the prospects of returning to the peace process with the Kurds and the rule of law are dim, making normalization with the US harder. An opposition win in the upcoming June presidential and parliamentary elections might slightly improve ties as they seek to rebuild the country's democratic institutions, resolve the country's Kurdish problem and pursue a less aggressive foreign policy.

The issues that are haunting today's relationship between Turkey and the United States left a dent in bilateral ties and led to one of the worst crisis of confidence among the two allies. In the face of diverging interests and in the absence of parties on both sides who will push for normalization, it is very difficult to put the relations back on track, especially if President Erdogan wins in the upcoming elections. Both sides seem aware that there is not much left of the »model partnership« and that relations have largely become transactional.



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