



## U.S. Policy on Turkey

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**T**URKEY, a NATO member, sits on prime real estate. Whether leveraged as a partner to fight the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq or Syria, end the war in Syria, stymie refugee flows from Syria into Europe, or, last but not least, address Russian influence in Eastern Europe, Ankara is a crucial ally for the United States. If the U.S.-Turkey relationship faces problems, Washington will be hard-pressed to implement its policies in Turkey's neighborhood. Turkey is one of the most important countries for the United States overall, and of central importance for U.S. policy in southern Europe and the Middle East. But Washington's mishandling of the Syrian civil war, along with its tilt toward the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) in the fight against IS in eastern Syria, risks forcing Turkey ever more into the Russian camp out of pure self-defense. In this regard, the new administration should understand the motives and objectives of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the most powerful Turkish leader since Mustafa Kemal Ataturk established the Turkish republic in 1923.

Since 2002, Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) has tried to make Turkey a standalone Middle East power, so far without success. Moreover, Turkish foreign policy looks now, ironically, as it did under former Turkish president Suleyman Demirel in 1995: uncertain relations with Russia, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, with its only reliable allies the United States and thus NATO; (recently normalized) ties with Israel; and a relationship with the European Union characterized by one step forward, one step back. An opening therefore exists for the next president to improve ties with Erdogan and enlist Ankara more securely in regional initiatives, if only in a transactional and inevitably frequently contentious way.

Why does the United States need a new policy on Turkey? The risks posed by a failed relationship with Turkey are immense, ranging from a setback for U.S. efforts to fight IS to a weakening of NATO's ability to stem refugee flows into Europe, a development that would destabilize America's allies. Furthermore, with or without Erdogan, Turkey is one of the most successful economic powers in the region, with a longstanding role as an important U.S. ally. Managing relations with Turkey well or badly will have ramifications throughout the world.

## Flawed Traditional Approach

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The next president, however, cannot bring Turkey more securely into America's fold by using the traditional U.S. approach, whereby the United States assumes that it holds most of the cards with its foreign interlocutors, that given America's championing of universal values it knows better than other states themselves what is good for them, and that the other countries both value relations with the United States above most other interests and feel they have few alternatives. Washington thus is often tempted to treat its friends and allies as a parent handling "misbehaving children," with endless talk, persuasion, and, if necessary, threats to withdraw love. Not only does this approach often fail to elicit Washington's desired outcome, but with President Erdogan and to some degree Turkey as a "system," it has been, repeatedly, disastrously, counterproductive.

## A Way Forward

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Given these failings, the United States should adopt a transactional approach to Turkey focused on common security interests, while emphasizing, and to some degree negotiating to make progress on, democratic liberal values.

It is important in this transactional arrangement that the United States has tools with which to "trade." The Obama administration has challenged the efficacy of many of these tools, but if the next U.S. president were to offer them, this would generate greater interest than usual. Washington can respond to Turkey's needs with more vigor, effort, and resources if Ankara were more helpful on the U.S. agenda. This will vary specifically depending on the new administration's priorities and global events, but would likely include more sensitivity to America's legitimate concerns about Turkey's domestic trends under Erdogan.

## Erdogan's Agenda

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Step one to any "transactional reordering" is to understand Erdogan. His ultimate goal by 2023, the one hundredth anniversary of the Turkish republic's estab-

lishment, is to steward the creation of an internationally and economically stronger, politically stable Turkey that would eclipse the epochal achievement of Ataturk himself. That goal does not include a greater anchoring of Turkey in Western values, although Erdogan appears supportive of at least formal democratic procedure, nor does it include loyal sacrifice for an American global security system. However, if convinced that such a system can advance his international and economic agenda, he can be persuaded to support it.

To achieve his goals, he needs Ataturk-like power. In 2014, Erdogan stepped down from his post as prime minister to become the country's president. Despite his growing formal and informal powers, including continued de facto control over his party, the AKP, almost continuously running the government without coalition since 2002, the country remains a parliamentary system. Therefore, he has focused on transforming Turkey into an executive system ever since becoming president. Such a change would require a constitutional amendment to overturn the presidency's constitutionally mandated nonpartisan status, thus allowing him to officially lead his AKP. Here, the fate that befell two past leaders, Turgut Ozal and Suleyman Demirel, is instructive. Both saw their movements wither after they became head of state. Erdogan, as seen in his recent sidelining of former prime minister Ahmet Davutoglu, is determined to avoid this outcome by retaining direct control of the party. In this arrangement, he would be Turkey's head of state, head of its ruling party, and de facto head of government all at the same time.

Turkish law offers two ways to amend the constitution to eliminate the restraints on the presidency: through a two-thirds majority in parliament (i.e., 367 of the 550 deputies voting in favor) or a three-fifths majority (330 votes). In the latter case, the amendment would also need to pass a popular referendum. Currently, the AKP has 317 deputies in the legislature. Yet voting tallies and poll results indicate that the party may have maxed out its electoral support, so Erdogan will have to shift his approach to reach either of the thresholds for amending the constitution.

Enter the right-wing opposition Nationalist Action

Party (MHP). By courting this party, its forty seats, and its base in the event of a referendum, Erdogan can garner at least enough votes to create an executive-style presidency. In order to win over MHP deputies and voters, he has threatened legal action against the ultra-Turkish-nationalist MHP's bitter foe, the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). Such motives also partly explain the president's ferocious campaign against the insurgency conducted by the country's Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), considered a terrorist entity by Washington, as well as its opposition to the PYD, the PKK's franchise inside Syria. By thus widening the AKP's own popular support, Erdogan could help his party gain the majority it needs—whether in the current parliament, through early elections, or in a public referendum. Such an outcome would also effectively sideline Turkey's main opposition faction, the secular-leftist Republican People's Party (CHP), which currently holds 133 seats.

A second concern for Erdogan, besides the Kurdish nationalists, is the Gulen movement. Erdogan is convinced that this movement and its founder, Fethullah Gulen, a U.S. permanent resident in Pennsylvania, are behind the failed July 15, 2016, coup plot in which 244 Turks died and the Turkish president himself almost lost his life. Given his suspicions, Erdogan will likely never give up his quest to have Washington extradite Gulen. Many people in Turkey share Erdogan's deep animosity toward the Gulen movement, including, most obviously, pro-AKP Turks (about half the country's population) but also opposition Turks, among them secular Turks who deeply distrust the Gulen movement as a cult that has tried to take over the Turkish state. Secular liberal Turks see the AKP as openly Islamist and therefore dangerous, but view the Gulenists as secretly Islamist, insidious, and hence even more dangerous. Even the Kurdish nationalists despise the Gulenists. And the Gulenists, as staunch Turkish nationalists themselves, have long opposed both the PKK and cultural and political concessions to the Kurds.

## What Can the United States Give?

For any relationship with Erdogan to succeed, it will, as noted, have to be transactional—that is, based on mutual interests and trade-offs rather than deep friendship and shared values. Thus, the incoming U.S. administration must know what its toolbox contains, and what it can “trade” with in such a relationship with Turkey. These trade items fall into three categories: bilateral issues, general foreign policy cooperation, and Syria/Iran.

### BILATERAL ISSUES

For starters, with the Gulen issue uniquely uniting many Turks, including Turkish Kurds, around Erdogan, Washington must convince Turkey that it is swiftly and thoroughly reviewing Ankara's request for Gulen's extradition. If extradition is delayed or denied by the courts, the administration must rapidly deploy measures, such as limits on movement and investigation of funding, to constrain the ability of both Gulen and his organization to influence Turkish domestic affairs.

Separately, the United States can quietly guarantee Turkey that the Armenian Genocide resolution in Congress will not pass. This has always been critical in the relationship, and most Turks care deeply about the issue.

On arms sales, the United States can make a serious effort to deal with Turkey's longstanding complaints about delay-in-delivering, detuning, and resistance to offsets in the U.S. Foreign Military Sales program for Turkey. Washington should commit to an early trip by the secretary of defense that focuses not only on geopolitics but also on adopting a model like the U.S.-Israel arms sales relationship to ensure a smoother and better-managed program. The flagship F-35 program should be given special attention. More broadly, the next president and defense secretary should repair U.S.-Turkey military ties, which have been damaged in part by Defense Department perceptions of Erdogan's negative role in the 2003 Iraq war, break with Israel, Syria policy—including, until recently, an open-door policy toward radicals there—and

opposition to the Syrian Kurdish PYD's alliance with Washington against the Islamic State.

## SYRIA/IRAN

The greatest strain on the U.S.-Turkey relationship apart from Gulen has been Syria policy, a scenario with three related threats to Turkey's south—namely, (1) the Assad regime, allied with Russia and Iran; (2) an anti-Turkish leftist Kurdish nationalist movement, the PKK, located in southeastern Turkey and in northern Iraq, and its sister organization, the PYD, in northern Syria; and (3) the Islamic State. The first is potentially existential. The second is a serious long-term threat to Turkish territorial integrity as well as a critically important domestic political football. The third is one danger among many to Turkey but not perceived as existential. The Obama administration, by contrast, saw its primary policy in Syria and Iraq as destroying IS. Officially, the administration wanted President Bashar al-Assad to leave and saw his regime as fueling Sunni Islamic terrorism and, as noted, considered the PKK a terrorist organization. In practice, however, the dangers of confronting Assad and the Russians, and the administration's diplomatic ambitions with Iran, severely limited interest in confronting Assad and his allies. Furthermore, Washington needed the PKK-associated PYD in the fight against the Islamic State. Both such policies placed it at loggerheads with Ankara.

In this regard, the Turkish incursion into Syria in late summer 2016 offered an opportunity. The Jarabulus operation provided Turkey with a bridgehead in Syria that increased Ankara's value to the United States as a partner in fighting the Islamic State. But U.S. and Turkish perceptions of how to fight IS in northern Syria are strongly divergent, with these differences coming to a head in early January 2017. After suffering significant casualties fighting IS in the al-Bab region, Turkish forces were unable, for technical reasons, to obtain U.S. air support and turned to the Russians for airstrikes. This led to a flurry of Turkish threats to close down the U.S. anti-IS operations out of Turkish bases. Setting aside technical issues, the underlying problem is the U.S. reliance on the PYD and its Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

Arab allies for the assault on the IS capital, Raqqa, in eastern Syria. The Turks, for their part, fear that the PYD is using its U.S. alliance to eventually create a large, contiguous Kurdish-controlled enclave that would provide a new front for PKK activities against Turkey and possibly a corridor for Iran to reach western Syria and Lebanon.

These concerns are legitimate. If Washington could reach an agreement with Turkey on its northern Syrian safe zone that would support the Turks and their Syrian opposition allies with advisory teams and airpower, limit PYD activity in non-Kurdish areas, and refuse to recognize PYD autonomy, much of the rancor in the current relationship would dissipate. Such joint effort would also afford leverage to the United States against Iranian and Russian efforts to push for a total victory against the Syrian opposition despite the current ceasefire. Shared U.S.-Turkey efforts, including a possibly separate front to the west of the PYD forces against Raqqa, could expedite the destruction of the Islamic State. In any case, the United States can hardly prosecute a serious campaign against IS in northern Syria without Turkish bases, entailing a cost in cooperation.

The PKK provides another basis for cooperation. The United States could contribute more intelligence support in Turkey's fight against the PKK, asking in return for additional insight into Turkish plans for combating the group. Washington also needs to manage the Turkey-PYD relationship in Syria beyond the Islamic State campaign. In the long term, managing this relationship should culminate in renewed peace talks between Ankara and the PKK (Ankara and the PYD both view each other through the lens of Turkey-PKK ties), a development that would almost immediately change the tenor of Turkey-PYD ties. Erdogan, who wants to become an executive-style president, knows that if he can deliver a military victory against the PKK, this development would make him massively popular in the eyes of many voters. He could thus be rewarded with more than 50 percent of the vote, opening the path for an executive and partisan presidency and fulfilling his long-awaited dream.

Indeed, Turkey is unlikely to enter into peace talks with the PKK until Erdogan has forced the group into



some sort of military defeat, which means Turkey-PYD ties will be fraught with tensions until Erdogan has registered such a victory. The United States might consider delivering enhanced military assistance to Turkey to help bring forth this outcome. In this regard, Erdogan's greatest asset is Abdullah Ocalan, the PKK's founder, who is now in a Turkish jail serving a life term. Ocalan has charismatic pull over the PKK—and also the PYD, with Ocalan posters in PYD offices and Ocalan badges on uniforms of the People's Defense Units (YPG), as the PYD militia is known, signaling the group's affiliation with the PKK. So far, Erdogan has kept Ocalan incommunicado. When he feels that he has inflicted enough military damage on the PKK, he will allow Ocalan to speak, at which point the PKK leader will likely call on the organization to lay down its weapons. Ocalan wants to get out of jail as part of a compromise with Erdogan, and to this end, he will deliver a ceasefire message to the PKK when Erdogan is ready for it. Both the PKK and the PYD will likely listen to Ocalan, their honorary and, more important, ideological leader. At this point, Turkey-PYD ties would seemingly shift back to the post-2013 period, with tensions falling significantly and Ankara and the PYD reestablishing contacts active in 2014–15.

Peace talks between Turkey and the PKK would help normalize Turkish ties to the PYD in Rojava, its Syrian homeland. In the long term, assuming an accommodation with Ocalan and the PKK, Turkey might even conceivably build a relationship with Rojava akin to its ties with the KRG. In 2007, the KRG leadership, realizing that it was surrounded by hostile states—Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey—and needed at least one friend to survive over time, picked Turkey. In the ensuing years, Erbil offered Ankara economic and financial incentives, such as access to KRG markets, as well as natural gas and oil deals. Economic ties became the building blocks of the relationship, establishing confidence, and soon closer political and even security cooperation ensued between Ankara and the Iraqi Kurds.

Although Rojava does not have nearly as much oil as does the KRG, Turkish access to its markets and

construction sectors would be a definite sweetener in any pursuit of rapprochement between Ankara and the Syrian Kurds. More important for Ankara, Rojava could offer Turkey a cordon sanitaire protecting Turkey from instability, sectarian warfare, conflict, and jihadist threats coming from the rest of Syria, in the same way the KRG acts as a very effective buffer between Iraq's unstable center and Turkey.

The budding of a close relationship between Turkey and Rojava can only be envisioned against the backdrop of peace talks and good ties between Ankara and the PKK, and by extension good ties between Turkey and the PYD. For their own part, the Syrian Kurds might eventually decide, following the KRG example, that they cannot survive in a hostile neighborhood surrounded only by enemies, and that they will need at least one friend—Turkey—in order to survive in the long term. U.S. policy should help Ankara weaken the PKK militarily in order to usher in Turkey-PKK talks, a definite precursor to Turkey-Rojava normalization. Even if Turkey-Rojava ties never reach the level of Turkey-KRG ties, the KRG is a much larger entity than Rojava and offers Turkey many more economic benefits, Turkey and the Syrian Kurds could still come to a *modus vivendi*.

## GENERAL FOREIGN POLICY ISSUES

Most important beyond the Syria/Iran conundrum is Russia. Highest-level discussions are needed to assess where Ankara and Washington stand on the issue of both Russia in general and Russia as an informal ally of Iran in Syria and perhaps elsewhere in the region. Turkey needs to know whether the United States will contain Russia or whether Turkey will be left on its own, as was recently the case in the al-Bab battle. For their part, U.S. officials need more clarity on the Turkish vision for the Turkish Stream pipeline project announced by Erdogan earlier this year in Saint Petersburg. If the intent is truly to substitute for the 60 billion cubic meters of Russian natural gas now flowing annually through Ukraine (one-quarter to Turkey, the rest to EU states), it would have serious geopolitical and energy security implications requiring in-depth discussion.

If the informal Russia-Iran alliance on Syria continues, particularly if the Russian deployments to Syria remain, Washington should also demonstrate a willingness to keep NATO's Patriot presence, including redeployment of U.S. Patriot batteries in Turkey, until a final Geneva agreement on Syria or pullout of Russian reinforcements is enacted. The United States could also periodically deploy F-22 or F-35 fifth-generation fighters to Turkey's Incirlik Air Base to signal the seriousness of U.S. efforts to contain Russia. This U.S. commitment could also include more frequent Black Sea operations as part of NATO naval deployments, both by the United States unilaterally and with Turkey cooperatively.

On the Cyprus dispute as well as Turkey-Israel relations, Washington should increase engagement. This would be done in conjunction with U.S. efforts on eastern Mediterranean gas exports to a Turkish "Eurasian gas hub" and U.S. support of the Baku (Azerbaijan) pipelines to Turkey. Likewise, the United States could give concrete support with the EU on the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) and Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) to bring Azeri and possibly other Caspian or even Iraqi gas to Europe through Turkey.

On Iraq, Washington and Ankara should continue their cooperation on security for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The United States should be careful, within the limits of its own relations with Baghdad, not to discourage Turkey-KRG hydrocarbons cooperation. Given the possibilities for both direct trade with and transit shipments through an ever more oil-rich Iraq, the United States should support reconciliation between Baghdad and Ankara. Real progress on this front, however, will depend on U.S.-Turkey success coordinating effective policy toward Syria and Iran.

Finally, Washington could find ways inside or outside the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (T-TIP) to deepen bilateral trade and investment. Going forward, building economic leverage in Turkey is the best way of ensuring U.S. political leverage in the relationship.

## What Can Turkey Give in Return?

In return for the proposed U.S. steps, the five main issues on which Turkey can be helpful involve

- a stronger commitment to the fight against the Islamic State;
- a return to peace talks with the PKK;
- more flexibility on Cyprus and Israel;
- closer cooperation with Washington on military moves, especially in Syria and against Russian provocations all around Turkey; and
- more emphasis on democratic values, rule of law, and domestic freedoms.

Unfortunately, the Islamic State has targeted and, as seen with the New Year's Eve Istanbul attack, will increasingly target Turkey; thus, cooperating with Turkey against the jihadist group provides an opportunity for building ties. Furthermore, even in the aftermath of Turkish-Russian normalization, the broader resurgence of Russia—now Turkey's neighbor in Crimea and on the southern border—will undoubtedly remind Erdogan of NATO's value and could help improve U.S.-Turkey military ties during the new administration. Relatedly, Russia's aggression toward Turkey following the November 2015 downing of a Russian military plane demonstrated clearly how vengeful Moscow can be. Nevertheless, in agreeing to the Russia-brokered Syrian ceasefire in December, and then calling on Russia to provide (apparently ineffective) airstrikes around al-Bab in early January 2017, Turkey signaled to Washington that absent U.S. engagement and support for Turkish objectives, Turkey will make deals with Putin.

Ultimately, though, what the United States and Turkey can do against the Islamic State together, with potential peace between Turkey and Kurds in mind, will dictate the success of this transactional relationship. If Turkey makes peace with Kurds at home, something enhanced U.S. assistance to Turkey against the PKK can usher in, it can even more easily make peace with Kurds in Syria, facilitating a Turkish-

Kurdish bond in the Middle East similar to Ankara's with the KRG—and one in the U.S. interest.

Washington's ability to deliver on Turkish issues is affected by Turkey's behavior on human rights and democracy, and how Turkey is viewed from the outside. Therefore, it is important that U.S. policy on Turkey be guided by an emphasis on rule of law, which has been damaged considerably by a decade and a half of AKP rule. The next president must raise rule of law in his dealings with Turkey as a means not only of limiting the AKP's authoritarianism but also of reminding Erdogan that he, too, will need this norm should the AKP and Erdogan fall from power.

In the last decade, under Erdogan, Turkey went from being a country of mostly poor to a country of mostly middle-income people. Now, Turkey has a chance to move up the ladder and become a high-income economy, despite slumping economic performance in 2016. The country, though, cannot do so simply by making cars, as it does now, but instead by becoming a hub for the "Googles" of the world and other value-added and information-based industries. This is where unfettered freedoms come into play. In order to be a hub for "Googles," Turkey

needs to become an open society, able to attract creative professionals from around the globe and to keep its creative people at home. Only a society that provides unlimited rights and freedoms, that is seen as having a respected and independent judicial system, will achieve such a result, one in the interests of all Turks. The United States is uniquely positioned to make this argument, but then only if both transactional cooperation and leader-to-leader personal relations function better than they do today.

It is possible that Erdogan's impetuous actions, frequent disdain for the West, and penchant for ever more authority will render any cooperative policy with the United States moot. But that is a possibility, not a certainty. The United States can tip the scales toward a different outcome with the right policies and personal relations. The latter include reigning in the understandable ire of many U.S. government and military officials who chafe under Turkish criticism, a characteristic of the relationship that predates, and goes beyond, Erdogan. Finally, Washington has little to lose with a more-carrots-than-sticks approach. Sticks are in short supply: the United States and the West need Turkey; Turkey and Erdogan, in return, need the United States.

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