

# The United States and Turkey

Friends, Enemies, or Only Interests

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### INTRODUCTION

**T**urkey has been one of the United States' most dependable and substantial allies for more than seven decades. It served as a bulwark against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. In the 1990s, it played a key role in containing Iran and Iraq as well as supporting the stabilization of the Balkans and the launch of the East-West energy corridor. Since the 9/11 attacks, it has been involved in state-building efforts in Afghanistan. Until only a few years ago, Turkey was touted as an inspirational model for the Middle East and the Muslim world. It is no coincidence that the relationship between Turkey and the U.S. has often been called a “strategic partnership”—and survived several regional wars, economic downturns, and successive administrations.

The relationship is not merely a defense pact. Turkey has not only been a NATO member since 1952, but is also the world's 18th largest economy. Despite recent setbacks in its integration with Europe, Ankara is still, at least in official terms, a candidate for membership in the European Union (EU). It is the closest to a Western democracy in the Muslim world; hence, the relationship is multilayered and complicated, at times to a fault, but

always relevant to U.S. concerns in the Middle East and Turkey's wider neighborhood. Without Turkey, it is difficult to see how a rule-based, U.S.-led world order could be sustained in this region, and how a successful policy on containing chaos in the Middle East could be envisioned. Similarly, there are arguably no Muslim-majority nations apart from Turkey that can serve as a bridge with the Western world or achieve the democratic standards, to which Turks have grown accustomed and, inadvertently or not, still expect.

Lately, however, there has been a noticeable downturn—an undeclared *crisis*—in the relations between Washington and Ankara. This crisis escalated in intensity particularly over the course of 2016. At the onset of the Obama administration in 2009, Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP)—having carried out impressive political and economic reforms at home and then showcasing an unprecedented potential for serving as a transformative political power in its own region—initially looked like a natural ally for Washington. This was arguably what Obama had in mind when he visited Turkey in April 2009, raising expectations that the relationship would be elevated to a “model partnership.”<sup>1</sup> In 2012, Obama went as far as naming his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan,

then serving as the prime minister, among the top five world leaders he trusted.<sup>2</sup> In hindsight, these were the “honeymoon” years, and the situation has since gone downhill. The collapse of Turkey’s domestic reform agenda since the Gezi Park protests in 2013 and conflicting priorities in the Syrian war, among many other factors, have soured the mood.

The areas of disagreement are by now well known: Turkey’s discomfort with Obama’s failure to enforce his “red lines” with the Assad regime; the more recent burgeoning U.S. alliance with Syrian Kurds; U.S. frustrations with what the White House once described as rising authoritarianism in Turkey; Ankara’s demand for the extradition of U.S.-based cleric Fethullah Gülen,<sup>3</sup> labeled by Ankara as the mastermind behind the failed coup-attempt in July 2016; and suspicions of prior U.S. knowledge of the coup. Acrimony grew on both sides.

By early 2017, one could easily remark that Turkey’s ties with the U.S. had not been any worse in decades. The authoritarian turn in Turkey has made it almost impossible for the U.S. administration to uphold Turkey as a model for the Middle East or as a candidate for the European Union—eliminating the key narrative in bilateral ties since the end of the Cold War.<sup>4</sup>

The relationship also suffered from deeper structural flaws. For example, the promise of a real economic partnership never materialized, despite ongoing efforts and activism since the mid-1990s, when the Clinton administration designated Turkey as one of the top ten emerging markets in the world.<sup>5</sup> The idea of a “Turkish-American Partnership” based on a free trade agreement, proposed by two prominent former U.S. officials,<sup>6</sup> and then subsequently the idea of docking Turkey into the Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) ran out

of steam.<sup>7</sup> This has not helped overcome long-standing anti-Americanism in Turkey that has flared up and reached a particularly high crescendo after the failed coup attempt in July 2016.<sup>8</sup>

There is an equally forceful disdain for Turkey’s current leadership among Washington’s policy elites. This was reflected in Obama’s remarks, as reported by Jeffrey Goldberg, that Erdoğan was “a failure and an authoritarian.”<sup>9</sup> More recently, institutional resentment has been building up in the defense and security apparatus over disagreements on how to stop the flow of foreign fighters to ISIS-controlled territories, and on how to fight ISIS on the ground. Furthermore, Turkey has not been immune to the sectarian and ethnic tensions in the region, trading its transformative soft power for hardcore military engagement in Syria and Iraq and thereby becoming a “security consumer” rather than a “provider.”

The easiest option in an atmosphere like this may have been to settle for a “transactional” relationship, but this has proven to be more difficult than expected. The legal impediments surrounding Gülen’s extradition and the strong presence of Gülen supporters in the U.S. loomed large on both sides’ calculus in the final six months of the Obama administration. Doubts about the future form of partnership ran so deep that both sides tested its limits by investing in ties with other actors to gain diplomatic leverage; while Turkey pursued a rapprochement with Russia, the U.S. engaged the Syrian Kurds in the fight against ISIS. Once a “model partnership,” the relationship deteriorated into a dysfunctional one with unsatisfactory results for both sides.

*This is where U.S.-Turkey relations stand today—in an undesirable state that serves the interests of nei-*

ther Turkey nor the U.S. in the long-run. Recent U.S. strikes on a Syrian airbase following a chemical attack in the Idlib province has set the U.S. and Russia on a collision course and underlined the volatility in eastern Mediterranean. Despite its growing democratic deficit, Turkey is still too important as a Muslim-majority country on Europe's periphery to be reduced to a mere defense partner; it needs to be re-anchored in the West. For that, the new U.S. administration has to think long and hard about how to engage this crucial ally in a tumultuous region. A "reset" in relations is in order, so that both Ankara and Washington can reach a *modus vivendi* on how to work together, if not work around each other, on a series of issues, ranging from Syria to the Balkans, in a way that does not cause long-term damage to bilateral relations.

In this respect, the onset of a new administration in the U.S. can be an opportunity for such a "reset." Trump's "unconventional" views on the U.S. role in the world has generated concern and uncertainty about the future course of the country's foreign policy, most importantly about its commitment to spearheading the international liberal order and underwriting Europe's security. Yet, this has prompted the U.S.' partners in the Middle East and Europe to show a keen interest in entering into a dialogue with Washington, and is providing Washington with an advantage. This is already evident in the goodwill extended by Ankara toward the new administration—and the uncharacteristic absence of any criticism on issues like the immigration ban on certain Muslim-majority countries or the possible designation of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization.

However, even with a fresh face, Washington will inherit the same set of questions and dilemmas that afflicted relations under the Obama adminis-

tration. Questions will be raised on how to balance support for the Syrian Kurds with military cooperation with the Turkish armed forces in the wake of the Raqqa offensive. Turkey's demands for Gülen's extradition will also be a taxing topic that will involve multiple actors inside the U.S. system, as was evident in a recent visit to Ankara by the new U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson.

On top of it all, the administration will ultimately have to face the larger and the more existential question of how to chart out a fresh course with Turkey: Is this merely a transactional relationship or should there be more of an effort to steer Turkey back into being a model for its neighborhood? Is Turkey's rapprochement with Russia a benefit or a risk to the Western-led international order? Can—and should—Turkey play a role in rolling back Iranian influence in the region? What about its specific role in the future of Syria? Should the U.S. continue the previous administration's policy of encouraging Turkey's European bid? Finally—and arguably, most importantly—is a Turkey with a functioning democracy and a liberal market a strategic asset that needs to be more actively and effectively preserved?

This paper examines some of these questions and dilemmas with the objective of helping Ankara and Washington map out a fresh trajectory in an uncertain global environment. The Turkey-U.S. relationship dates back to the immediate aftermath of World War II and the establishment of NATO against the background of fears of Soviet expansionism. Since then, the relationship has acquired a strong institutional grounding as Turkey became militarily, economically, and politically integrated into the Western alliance. In the interest of maintaining a forward-looking focus, this paper avoids some of the historical highlights in this long alliance. Any current analysis about the future of

the Turkish-American relationship is bound to run into the problem of “known unknowns”—in this case, the future of U.S.-Russia relations and the result of the upcoming Turkish constitutional referendum, scheduled for April 16, 2017. Where appropriate, the paper suggests plausible scenarios and a course of action. In conclusion, the paper offers a series of recommendations on how to revive this long-standing relationship in a way that it could benefit Turkey’s security, stability, and prosperity, and also serve the interests of the U.S. as well as those of the trans-Atlantic community.

## HOW TO LEAVE THE JULY COUP ATTEMPT BEHIND?

The origins of today’s undeclared crisis between Ankara and Washington go back to July 15, 2016, the night of a dramatic coup attempt in Turkey. What transpired that night was the most significant assault on a European democracy in decades, but the EU and the U.S. were slow to see it in such terms. As fighter jets were flying across Ankara and Istanbul and clashes between rebellious army units and the police force were raging, the Turkish government tried, through the embassy channels, to elicit a strong statement from Washington in condemnation of the putsch.<sup>10</sup>

Reeling from the terrorist attack in Nice, France, and unable to figure out exactly how the power struggle would play out, both the U.S. and Europe decided to sit on the fence on the night of the coup. Traveling in Mongolia, the EU’s foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini called Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu as the coup was unfolding to find out about the situation, but also urged restraint in dealing with the coup plotters.<sup>11</sup> Responding to widespread stories about

harsh treatment of coup plotters on social media, Mogherini subsequently “called for restraint and respect for democratic institutions.”<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile at a news conference in Moscow, the then-U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said he hoped for “stability and peace” when asked about the situation in Turkey, and did not comment further.<sup>13</sup>

Given that Ankara was hoping for a strong condemnation by the EU and U.S., this reaction was wide of the mark. Turkish leaders were outraged that the West did not stand with the democratically elected leadership in its hour of need. Taken together, the sluggish European and American responses were seen by the AKP, including Erdoğan, as a hidden wish, if not outright support, for a successful coup. When İbrahim Kalın, Erdoğan’s spokesperson, reacted on Twitter to a BBC web story that called Erdoğan “ruthless,” he was arguably referring to the West in general. “Had the coup succeeded, you would have supported it, like in Egypt. You don’t know this nation but they know you,”<sup>14</sup> he wrote.

Even though official condemnation from world leaders poured in over the following days, the events of July 15 dramatically changed Turkey’s perceptions of its key ally. The fact that there were planes refueling at the İncirlik Air Base, and that some of the putschists were from the ranks of NATO officers, some also living abroad, further reinforced Turkey’s belief that the U.S. had prior knowledge of the coup attempt. Within days after the coup, when asked about Gülen’s involvement, the U.S. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper said, “we haven’t seen it yet. We certainly haven’t seen it in intel”<sup>15</sup>—contradicting Turkey’s official narrative. The spy chief also commented one week later, “many of our interlocutors have been purged or arrested. ... there’s no question this is going to set back and make more difficult cooperation with

the Turks,<sup>16</sup>—further reinforcing Ankara’s notion that the U.S. was behind the coup.

In the following days and weeks, Turkish papers—particularly pro-government outlets like *Yeni Şafak*, *Sabah*, *Star*, *Takvim*, and *ensonhaber.com*—openly started associating the Gülen movement with the U.S. or the CIA.<sup>17</sup> Another public relations disaster for the U.S. was an op-ed that was published a week after the coup attempt by the former vice-chairman of the CIA’s National Intelligence Council, Graham Fuller, expressing doubt that Gülen could have “masterminded” the putsch. Fuller, who had written a recommendation for Gülen’s green card application in 2007,<sup>18</sup> praised his movement as “one of [the] most encouraging faces of Islam today.”<sup>19</sup>

It so happened that this retired intelligence official, unknown to many in Washington, was already a household name in Turkey. Fuller’s theory of a “green belt”—the suggestion that the U.S. should support moderate Islamists as a bulwark against radicalism—had long been an obsession and the topic of many conspiracy theories for Turkish nationalists and leftists, many of whom believed that Fuller was responsible for the rise of the Gülen movement or the emergence of the AKP. To AKP officials and the Turkish media, his op-ed seemed to confirm the CIA-coup connection. This was followed by articles in pro-government Turkish media, mistakenly placing Fuller in Istanbul on the night of the coup and ostensibly running the show.<sup>20</sup> Clearly, not facts but perceptions carried the day in shaping Turkish public opinion on the U.S. role in the coup attempt. This also needs to be seen against the background of a tense climate in U.S.-Turkish relations resulting from the delayed U.S. condemnation of the coup attempt, Kerry’s equivocation, and Clapper’s remarks.

## BIDEN’S TASK OF FIXING THINGS

It took many phone calls and visits for the Obama administration to convince their Turkish interlocutors—with mixed results—that the U.S. was not behind the coup. Successive visits to Ankara by the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford and the then-Vice President Joe Biden in August 2016 were meant to repair strained ties and dissuade the Turks from pointing the finger at the U.S. Both men visited the Turkish parliament, bombed on the night of July 15 by the putschists, hoping to visually press the point that the U.S. did not support attempts to overthrow Turkey’s elected government.

Biden’s visit on August 24, 2016, was functional in returning to a constructive dialogue between the two countries, but not enough to smooth over all the rough edges. Speaking at a news conference with Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım, the vice president said the U.S. “had no prior knowledge” of the Turkish coup attempt.<sup>21</sup> On the topic of extraditing Gülen, the U.S. had “no interest whatsoever in protecting anyone who has done harm to an ally,” Biden remarked after a meeting with Erdoğan. However, the vice president had privately told Turkish officials during meetings about the need to meet the standard legal requirements for their extradition demands.<sup>22</sup> Biden’s trip was a relative success, given the rampant anti-Americanism on the Turkish side and anger about the coup. Biden was also applauded by his Turkish counterparts for a stern—and an unexpected—warning to U.S.-backed Syrian Kurds, considered by Ankara an extension of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

The alliance between Syrian Kurds and the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) in northern Syria has been a constant headache, especially since

the breakdown of peace talks between Ankara and the PKK in the summer of 2015.<sup>23</sup> Syrian Kurds were effective in fighting ISIS, but the U.S.’ juggling act between an old ally and a new one required constant engagement and remained a source of tension. Prior to the coup attempt, in May 2016, President Obama had to personally plead with Erdoğan on a 70-minute phone call to convince the Turkish president to consent to American warplanes taking off from Incirlik in support of Syrian Kurds who were gearing up to cross the Euphrates river and take on Manbij, an ISIS stronghold.<sup>24</sup> The Euphrates had long been a “red line” for Turkey, and Ankara demanded that the Kurds not move west of the river, worried that they would control Turkey’s entire border region. Erdoğan reluctantly agreed to Obama’s demand and allowed the Kurdish-dominated opposition forces to take on the ISIS stronghold, on the condition that the Kurdish fighters, the so-called People’s Protection Units (YPG), returned to the eastern side of Euphrates once the town had been captured.

The operation in July was costly yet successful. Nevertheless, the Kurds never returned behind the imaginary red line on the Euphrates drawn by Turkey. This made Ankara even more distrustful of the Obama administration, and Turkey began to see the burgeoning military alliance between Washington and the YPG as a threat. The appearance in the media of American soldiers carrying the YPG insignia fueled further distrust.<sup>25</sup> In a surprise statement in Ankara, Biden said the Kurds, “cannot, will not, and under no circumstances will get American support if they do not keep” what he termed as their commitment to return to the east of the Euphrates river.<sup>26</sup> Ankara interpreted this as a positive step forward.

Even with this crowd-pleasing statement about Syrian Kurds, however, the two outstanding issues

between Turkey and the U.S.—the demand for Gülen’s extradition and the U.S. military cooperation with Syrian Kurds—remained unresolved during Biden’s visit and throughout subsequent encounters with the Obama administration. These continue to top the agenda in Turkey’s dealings with Washington. They were pulled to the forefront repeatedly as late as during Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu’s visit to Washington and Rex Tillerson’s stopover in Ankara, both during March 2017.

It may have taken a while for the Obama administration to reach the conclusion that several high-ranking figures with ties to the Gülen movement played key roles in the July coup. Even then, however, there were constant questions about a “smoking gun” regarding Gülen’s personal involvement in the affair. As summed up by a senior U.S. official, “the difference is, Washington sees this largely as a legal matter and Turks see it as a political issue.”<sup>27</sup> From Biden to Kerry, senior U.S. officials listened to Turkish arguments on this issue—often laced with a high-pitched emotional plea and devoid of concrete references the U.S. legal system required<sup>28</sup>—constantly reiterating that the matter would be settled in an independent court of law. From the American perspective, the evidence Turkey presented to the U.S. Department of Justice was bulky but flawed, relying too much on testimonies from individuals under custody at the time and failing to link Gülen to the coup attempt in a way that would stand up in a court of law.<sup>29</sup>

Many Turkish officials repeatedly asked the same question to their American interlocutors: “Did you have the same level of legal scrutiny for Osama bin Laden when you sought our collaboration in the fight against al-Qaida?”<sup>30</sup> A few weeks after the coup, *The Washington Post* wrote that Turkey had sent 85 boxes of evidence that corroborated Gülen’s



involvement and thereby constituted a substantial legal premise for Gülen's extradition.<sup>31</sup> Turkish Minister of Justice Bekir Bozdağ made several visits to Washington in the ensuing months. Yet, there persisted differences between Turkish and U.S. officials in terms of what constituted a "smoking gun." In August, the U.S. Justice Department sent five experts to Ankara to assist Turkish officials in compiling evidence and putting together a more comprehensive file.<sup>32</sup> Turkey also retained a law firm and a public relations agency in Washington to make its case—and help combat Ankara's increasingly negative image in the American media. As Obama transitioned out of the White House, the case remained unsettled.

## IN COMES PRESIDENT TRUMP

For Turkish officials, the arrival of the Trump team was a welcome development on the Gülen issue. Even though leading AKP officials initially complained about candidate Trump and his anti-Muslim statements, following the coup, things had changed. When asked about the post-coup crackdown in Turkey in an interview with *The New York Times*, Trump said, "when it comes to civil liberties, our country has a lot of problems, and I think it's very hard for us to get involved in other countries when we don't know what we are doing and we can't see straight in our own country. ... I don't know that we have a right to lecture."<sup>33</sup> Faced with mounting criticism from Europe and the U.S. about the scale of the post-coup crackdown, Ankara appreciated Trump's dismissal of human rights as an issue worthy of the bilateral agenda. Trump also praised Erdoğan's role in reversing the coup.

His comments were much appreciated in Ankara, and pro-government media outlets started to adopt

a different tone when referring to the Republican candidate. Earlier articles about Trump's "Islamophobia" were gone, replaced by a vitriol for his rival, Hillary Clinton, based on her alleged ties with the Gülen movement in the U.S. as well as some stories about donations to the Clinton campaign from the U.S.-based followers of Gülen.<sup>34</sup> This led AKP activists on social media and pro-government websites to label Hillary Clinton as "the Gülenist candidate." Obama was also vilified in Turkish media and by pro-government trolls as a supporter of the Kurds.<sup>35</sup> Columns in the pro-government papers made clear that Trump was the candidate of choice for Ankara. On November 8, 2016, as panic and uncertainty spread through Europe following the Trump victory, Ankara was one of the few capitals rejoicing in the U.S. election results.<sup>36</sup>

What made a Trump victory sweeter for the Turkish government was an op-ed that appeared on Election Day by one of Trump's close aides. Michael T. Flynn, who was to subsequently become Trump's national security advisor before his resignation in February 2017, presented a passionate plea for greater Turkish-U.S. cooperation, calling on Washington to be more sympathetic to Ankara's demands. Flynn argued:

Turkey is vital to U.S. interests. Turkey is really our strongest ally against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), as well as a source of stability in the region. It provides badly needed cooperation with U.S. military operations. But the Obama administration is keeping Erdoğan's government at arm's length—an unwise policy that threatens our long-standing alliance.<sup>37</sup>

More to the point, the retired general called for Gülen's extradition, calling him "a shady Islamic

mullah” and finding similarities with Arab Islamists like Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb:

Gülen portrays himself as a moderate, but he is in fact a radical Islamist. He has publicly boasted about his “soldiers” waiting for his orders to do whatever he directs them to do. If he were in reality a moderate, he would not be in exile, nor would he excite the animus of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his government.

This was music to the ears of officials in Ankara, who had been frustrated with the Obama administration’s opposition to handing over Gülen. Even though a video surfaced of the retired general on the campaign trail on the night of July 15 celebrating the coup,<sup>38</sup> the Turkish government looked the other way. Erdoğan himself spoke warmly of Trump and accused his rival, Hillary Clinton, of receiving campaign contributions from the Gülen camp.<sup>39</sup>

Binali Yıldırım was more to the point. He congratulated Trump’s victory and said “I call upon the president for a speedy extradition of the head of terrorism as soon as possible. This is what damages our historic relations between the two peoples. If you extradite the head of the terrorist group, we would open a new page in the Turkish-U.S. relations.”<sup>40</sup>

## EXPECTATIONS RISE WITH A PHONE CALL

The Trump administration’s erratic start, the immigration ban on several Muslim-majority countries or the controversial designs to declare the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization did not sour Ankara’s mood. Turks were nonchalant about the domestic controversies surrounding the

Trump administration and focused solely on the Gülen saga and the Syrian Kurds.

This was reflected in the Turkish president’s first lengthy phone call with President Trump on February 7, 2017. Officials with knowledge of the conversation point out that both leaders were careful to stay on a positive note and the conversation was largely on Gülen and the upcoming Raqqa offensive, where the Obama administration’s earlier plans to arm Syrian Kurds were derailed due to the new administration’s review process. Erdoğan made a strong case that he considered Syrian Kurds terrorists and, more importantly, that Turkey itself would be willing to shoulder a part of the military burden if the U.S. would withdraw its support from the YPG forces.

One week after this call, Flynn, who had been present during the conversation, faced questions about his contacts with the Russian Ambassador to the U.S. Sergey Kislyak, which prompted him to resign. While facing an FBI investigation about his ties with Russia as part of a larger probe on Russian meddling in the U.S. elections, Flynn filed as a foreign agent under the Foreign Agent Registration Act (FARA). In his filing, Flynn disclosed that his firm was paid \$530,000 for three months of work on behalf of a Dutch company owned by a Turkish businessman with ties to the Turkish government—and that part of his work involved research and an investigation into the Gülen network in the United States.<sup>41</sup> Further revelations from Flynn’s meeting in September 2016 with two top Turkish officials, namely Çavuşoğlu and Minister of Energy Berat Albayrak, to discuss Gülen’s extradition and ways of bypassing legal deportation proceedings embarrassed both the Turkish government and the Trump administration. By all accounts, the Flynn scandal and the revelations about Turkish contacts

have significantly reduced the Trump administration's room for maneuver on the Gülen case; any movement in the direction of Gülen's extradition would be received with suspicion in the current media climate and questioned as acting in the interests of a foreign government. Mired in domestic and foreign policy issues, the administration is now less likely to prioritize this issue.

It is important to be forthright with Turkish officials on this topic. The fact that there is a new team operating in the White House is certainly a matchless opportunity to reinvigorate bilateral ties; nevertheless, U.S. officials need to be careful in their dealings with foreign partners, and should not create undeliverable expectations or over-promise support on issues that are not settled or where there is no unanimous policy decision.

In the case of Gülen, the U.S. needs to be clear in terms of what it can and cannot do. One senior Turkish official with knowledge of bilateral contacts between Turkey and the Trump transition team commented after the call between Erdoğan and Trump that Ankara now expected Trump to “extradite” Gülen, citing a bilateral extradition treaty that made possible bypassing lengthy court proceedings in cases of threats to “national security.” The reality is, as U.S. officials frequently highlight, the administration does not have the option of bypassing a judicial review and therefore the matter will have to be settled in U.S. courts. While executive pressure on the courts is not unheard of, it is less likely after the Flynn saga. It is also possible for the 76-year-old cleric to legally fight a deportation case and gain public sympathy in the current media climate. Whether there existed a unanimous White House decision on the case during Flynn's brief tenure is unclear; yet, with the chief proponent of extradition, Flynn, now gone,

the administration might just be less willing to spend any resources on the issue.

There is a fine line between deporting Gülen and not doing anything to acknowledge Turkey's concerns. It is important for U.S. decisionmakers to understand that a broad section of Turkish society, including secularists and Kurds, blamed the Gülen movement for the coup attempt. But how should the U.S. acknowledge this in a way that would allay Turkey's concerns and abide by U.S. laws? Turkish officials have quietly been telling their U.S. counterparts that they expect a tougher stance—including legal and financial scrutiny—on Gülen's wider network within the U.S., which consists of thousands of followers, a myriad of organizations, several think tanks, and over 150 charter schools across the nation. The movement has been keeping a lower profile, especially in Washington, where it had funded think tanks prior to the coup attempt.

While the Trump administration wants to improve ties with Turkey, it is not yet clear how far it can go in practical terms to address Turkey's demands on Gülen. The credit extended to the Trump administration by Erdoğan—a credit mostly in the form of dialing down criticism and anti-Americanism in the country—hinges in part upon this issue. In the end, what constitutes satisfactory progress will depend on the Turkish side. In the meantime, the U.S. will have to show that it takes the issue seriously, and not make promises where there is no consensus.

## **TACKLING THE KURDISH ISSUE IS UNAVOIDABLE**

Whatever the final verdict on the Gülen case may be, the Trump administration is likely to seek clos-

er cooperation with Turkey on Syria. This is inevitable, since not consulting a NATO ally and a major Sunni power on decisions that will be executed in its neighborhood makes little sense. Turkey is a crucial partner in the fight against ISIS, through its own military involvement inside Syria as well as because of the İncirlik air base, and is destined to play a key role in stabilizing and reconstructing Syria once ISIS has been driven out. However, a real partnership with Turkey in Syria will only be feasible after a “grand bargain” to create a *modus vivendi* among Turkish Kurds, their Syrian affiliates, and the government of Turkey. This is at the heart of the U.S.’ problems in the fight against ISIS and in planning future peacekeeping efforts in the region after ISIS is eliminated. The current situation is more of a “mess” than a *modus vivendi*.

Since the breakdown of peace negotiations between Turkey and the PKK in the summer of 2015, Turkey has redesigned its Syria policy. The focus is no longer on overthrowing the Assad regime at all costs, even to the extent of supporting radical extremists groups, but has shifted to preventing the rise of a Kurdish entity in Syria, fearing the impact it would have on the aspirations of Turkey’s own Kurdish population. Their agenda for territorial autonomy is seen as galvanizing the PKK to the same cause, and is therefore framed as a threat to Turkey’s own territorial integrity. The situation has at times produced bizarre scenes, with Turkey-backed opposition groups fighting the U.S.-backed Syrian Kurds, while Ankara and Washington paid lip service to working toward the same goals in Syria. Turkish-Kurdish tension has spilled over into Syria, and has often been at the heart of diplomatic problems and delays in major offensives against ISIS.

The origins of the U.S.-Kurdish military alliance go back to the epic defense of the town of Koba-

ni on the Turkish border against besieging ISIS forces in October and November 2014. Pictures of Kurdish men and women defending their territory and their way of life attracted sympathy in Western media, and drew U.S. attention to this potential new ally on the ground. It was thanks in large part to the U.S. decision in October 2014 to provide air cover for the embattled Kurdish forces that allowed the YPG militia to eventually repel ISIS. With continued U.S. support, the YPG subsequently steamrolled through ISIS territory, capturing in June 2015 the border town of Tel Abyad, an ISIS stronghold and a major population center.

The Turkish government did not share Washington’s enthusiasm about the Syrian Kurdish forces, and the capture of Tel Abyad was certainly not a cause for celebration in Ankara. Inside Turkey, politics were becoming more complicated. The pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) had just won a significant electoral victory, capturing a record 13 percent of the national vote in the June 2015 elections. This denied the ruling AKP the ability to form a single-party government for the first time in 13 years, and clashed with Erdoğan’s ambitions for an executive presidency. The dual anxiety about Kurds—that they had become the kingmaker in Turkish politics and that a Kurdish belt was forming on the southern flank of Turkey—sounded alarm bells in Ankara. A pro-government daily ran a full-page headline, declaring that “the PYD is more dangerous than ISIS.”<sup>42</sup> Turkey’s National Security Council also convened and Erdoğan expressed “concern about attacks on civilian population in the region and efforts to change the demographic structure.”<sup>43</sup>

The rest was chaos. An urban guerilla war started in the summer of 2015, affecting in particular border towns adjacent to the Kurdish-run Syrian cit-

ies—namely Nusaybin, Silopi, Şırnak, Cizre, and downtown Sur in Diyarbakır. Both the HDP and AKP were willing to instrumentalize the Kurdish issue and the growing tensions in Kurdish regions to increase their votes in the repeat elections that took place in November 2015. With a decisive win, the AKP assumed a mandate to carry out an all-out offensive against the PKK inside Turkey. Between the summer of 2015 and the coup attempt in July 2016, hundreds of Turkish soldiers,<sup>44</sup> civilians, and PKK militants died because of clashes, bombs, suicide attacks, or urban warfare in Kurdish cities.<sup>45</sup>

By the end of the Obama administration's second term, U.S. cooperation with Syrian Kurds, affiliated with the PKK in their ideological leanings and command structure, had turned into the most contentious issue between the two allies since the Gulf War of 1991 and the creation of a no-fly zone in Iraqi Kurdish areas. The cause for Turkey's concern was similar, but this time the situation was more explosive. Washington dealt with the Turkish anxiety by pretending to decouple the Turkish and Syrian equations. The U.S. emphasized that the PKK and YPG were separate entities and encouraged the formation of an umbrella group, the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that included the YPG along with other Arab opposition forces. To Turks, employing the SDF looked like a fig leaf to conceal the coalition's cooperation with the YPG. Detailed reports in the U.S. media that these Arab fighters were actually being indoctrinated in PKK ideology reinforced Turkish convictions and concerns.<sup>46</sup>

The greatest problem with the U.S. policy of “compartmentalization,” or decoupling the two conflicts, was its disregard for the deterioration in Turkey's domestic politics; in this sense, there was in reality no “Chinese wall” between these two conflicts. De-

spite the worsening security situation in Turkey, the U.S.' relations with the Kurdish fighters in Syria improved. The PKK's campaign against government targets in eastern Turkey was met with harsh reprisals and human rights abuses by the Turkish government in Kurdish cities. Round-the-clock curfews in rebellious Kurdish towns further bolstered the PKK's strategy of driving a wedge between the Kurdish population and the Turkish government. In May 2016, at Erdoğan's request, the Turkish parliament lifted the immunity of mainly Kurdish deputies. By the end of February 2017, over 80 Kurdish mayors and 12 deputies from the pro-Kurdish HDP were in detention, and the HDP's co-chair Selahattin Demirtaş was facing a 143-year prison sentence.<sup>47</sup> This effectively put a freeze on Turkey's accession process into the EU. These developments were reminiscent of the early 1990s, when a number of Kurdish deputies had their immunities lifted, were imprisoned, and were ironically freed a decade later by Erdoğan's government that was, at the time, keen to pursue an EU-driven reform agenda. They also chipped away at Turkey's hard-won democratic gains, the result of a series of reforms that were set in motion over the course of the previous decade, and deeply weakened Turkey's chances of advancing on the European accession path, at least for the foreseeable future.

## **TO ARM OR NOT TO ARM THE SYRIAN KURDS**

To a large extent, the Obama administration chose to ignore the democratic backsliding in Turkey, ostensibly to have a freer hand in working with YPG forces in Syria. This was also out of necessity. As far as U.S. military interests were concerned, the YPG was the most effective partner on the ground, given the group's battlefield successes against ISIS

and disciplined organizational structure. Faced with the immediate ISIS threat, it seemed as if nobody in Washington was prepared to ask whether the U.S. reliance on the YPG would be at the cost of democracy in Turkey.

This was evident in Obama's former Deputy Secretary of State Tony Blinken's call for arming the Syrian Kurds while somehow cajoling Erdoğan by not dwelling on the deteriorating Kurdish situation inside Turkey.<sup>48</sup> In offering tactics for his successors to move swiftly on the Raqqa offensive, he based his suggestions on the premise that the two conflicts could be separated. He did not seem concerned about the dozens of Kurdish politicians and elected mayors in jail, or the possibility that this situation could escalate Turkey's Kurdish conflict into an explosive confrontation, in turn undermining the U.S.' broader strategic interests in the region. Blinken was clearly more focused on managing the Turkish discontent about YPG when he remarked:

“As deputy secretary of state, I spent hours with my Turkish counterparts trying to find a *modus vivendi* for continuing American support to the Syrian Democratic Forces. At every juncture—from the liberation of Manbij in northeastern Syria to the isolation of Raqqa—they protested angrily and threatened repercussions, including denying the international coalition access to Incirlik air base and slowing counterterrorism cooperation. Anti-American rhetoric surged in the Turkish media. Each time, it took President Obama's direct engagement with Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, to smooth the way just enough to keep going. If President Trump approves the Pentagon's recommendation to arm the S.D.F., it will fall to him to keep Mr. Erdoğan onboard—a first,

highly charged test of his diplomatic skills. There is an art to this deal.”<sup>49</sup>

If the U.S. administration could have expended more efforts toward safeguarding the Kurdish peace process, managing Ankara's security concerns *vis-à-vis* the PKK would have been much easier. Trying to contain the mess in Syria at the cost of ignoring Turkey's democratic backsliding was not the most effective way forward. It was during the second half of 2015 and in 2016 that the Kurdish problem in Turkey collapsed from a successful case of conflict resolution into a scorched earth campaign, similar to what the country had witnessed in the mid-1990s. Throughout this period, Turkey's allies were unwilling to address the issue. The EU solely focused on safeguarding its refugee deal with Ankara, while Washington focused on how to make progress in the fight against ISIS. Instead of actively engaging with a NATO ally that was going through challenging times and making many mistakes along the way, there seemed to be frustration and eye-rolling regarding the developments in Turkey.

Actually, a grand bargain between Turkey and the Kurds is eminently possible with more active U.S. involvement, and this would make the fight against ISIS and the task of stabilizing Syria much easier. Yet, any rapprochement or any effort at conflict resolution on the Kurdish issue will have to start in Syria. Facilitating a thaw between Turkey and the YPG would be the first step. It is important to develop a *modus vivendi* between Turkish forces and YPG-led units inside Syria that are currently in a combative posture in flashpoints like Manbij, Afrin, and to the south of al-Bab. Erdoğan could be more amenable to a dialogue with the U.S. on this issue, especially since Turkey will have understood by now that neither Russia nor the U.S. is willing to

cut off any ties or end cooperation with the Kurdish forces. Turkey's newfound understanding of its geographical and political limits inside Syria is underlined by its abrupt decision to end the Euphrates Shield military offensive in Syria in late March 2017, abandoning plans to push further ahead into Syria's Kurdish-controlled territories. Nevertheless, tensions remain high.

One possible approach is to engage in conflict resolution between Turkey and the Kurdish forces in Syria. After Turkey's April 2017 constitutional referendum, the U.S. should directly engage the Turkish leadership and explore this issue. This would require top-level U.S. engagement, possibly even a conversation at the presidential level. Even though Erdoğan is currently aligned with a nationalist bloc to win enough votes in the upcoming constitutional referendum, he is a pragmatic politician and can adopt a more flexible approach after the vote, depending on the outcome. President Trump has expressed an interest in spearheading such negotiations in an interview in July 2016.<sup>50</sup> When asked about the tension between Turks and Kurds in Syria, Trump said, "it would be ideal if we could get them all together. And that would be a possibility. But I'm a big fan of the Kurdish forces. At the same time, I think we have a potentially—we could have a potentially very successful relationship with Turkey. And it would be really wonderful if we could put them somehow both together."<sup>51</sup> He also added that this would be on his agenda "very early on." Following the Turkish referendum, he would be well-positioned to explore this option.

Hence, Washington could develop a roadmap that not only focuses on the short-term military goal of defeating ISIS, but also contains an integrated approach to the Kurdish issue in the region. Defeating ISIS is important, but it should not come at the cost

of destabilizing—or alienating—a key NATO ally. For a comprehensive deal, a peaceful resolution to the Kurdish conflict inside Turkey is important, but would have to involve a carefully calibrated series of steps inside Turkey and in Syria. The U.S. would need to use its leverage with the Kurds to pressure the PKK for a ceasefire inside Turkey. Kurdish experts point out that while the PKK leadership in the Qandil mountain range in Iraqi Kurdistan prioritizes Kurdish gains in Syria, they also value the burgeoning alliance with U.S. forces and the possibility of U.S. military aid to bolster their standing in Syria. This gives the U.S. significant leverage over Kurds to push for a ceasefire.

For Turkey and the PKK to be cajoled into a peaceful resolution of the conflict, it is very critical that the eventual political map of northern Syria be drawn along ethnically-sensitive lines by factoring in the demographic and political realities in the region. Syria is the start. Both sides want assurances about territorial control inside Syria in order to agree to a deal inside Turkey. There will have to be a special effort by the U.S. to prevent Sunni Arab towns in Syria from coming under Kurdish rule—a fundamental concern to Turks. Fearing a contiguous Kurdish statelet on its southern flank, Ankara is concerned that the Sunni Arab and Turkmen towns on its border area (namely Tel Abyad, Raqqa, Azaz, Manbij, and Jarablus) do not connect with a PKK-affiliated Kurdish zone. Ankara would be more amenable to a grand bargain with the Kurds if the post-conflict restructuring in northern Syria effectively produces a map that includes non-Kurdish or independently-run Sunni Arab towns splintering Kurdish cantons on Turkey's border with Syria.

Such an arrangement could become a catalyst for a Kurdish peace process inside Turkey. As Wash-

ington faces the question of how far, or to what extent, it should arm the Syrian Kurds for the Raqqa offensive, it should take a broader view of the region's future prospects for stability and push for a comprehensive peace deal between the Turks and Kurds. Since the Iraqi Kurds under the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and its President Masood Barzani are among Ankara's key allies in the region, they could also play a role as a facilitator in this process. While the Trump administration has not been forthcoming in its regional plans, and has distanced itself from ambitious tasks like nation-building or democracy promotion, it has expressed a willingness to improve ties with Turkey and to work with the Kurds. Investing in a resolution of the conflict between the two might be the only way to achieve those goals. It would show a serious commitment to international diplomacy from the Trump administration; and it would help remove one of the factors accelerating Turkey's downward spiral into instability and authoritarianism. It would also build a strong Kurdish-Turkish axis against Iranian influence in the region and ease the political pressure on the KRG about the PKK presence in its territory.

## **KNOWN UNKNOWN: RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA**

As two resurgent powers interested in greater influence in the Middle East, Turkey and Russia struck an unlikely alliance in the past few years based on shared economic interests, a personal relationship at the leadership level, and a wary approach toward the Western liberal order. The last factor is cited as the source of the "axis of the excluded" between the two sides, resulting from a shared concern about "color revolutions" and conflicting interests with the West in their "near abroad."<sup>52</sup> Even

though Turkey and Russia have been on different sides of the Syrian equation, and even came to the brink of confrontation after Turkey's downing of a Russian fighter jet in November 2015, they managed to mend fences and reach a fragile consensus on Syria after Erdoğan's letter to Vladimir Putin in June 2016, in which he apologized for the death of the pilot,<sup>53</sup> and his subsequent visit to Moscow.

Turkey's relations with Russia present a unique challenge to the U.S. and its regional policies. When relations are "too good," it leads to concerns in Washington about a significant NATO member pivoting toward a resurgent Russia. When they go sour, as they did after the downing of the Russian fighter jet, there are worries that Turkey risks dragging NATO into an unwanted confrontation with Russia. More recently, Russia's growing activity in northern Syria as a power broker and especially its engagement with the Syrian Kurds<sup>54</sup> is raising questions about the long-term viability of restored Russian-Turkish relations. The U.S.' ambivalence *vis-à-vis* Russia makes this terrain harder to navigate and raises challenging implications for the U.S. interests in the region.

Still, it is worth remembering that Turkish-Russian ties stretch back to the 15th century, and their long diplomatic history should act as a reminder for Turkey to be mindful of its powerful neighbor to the north. The Ottoman and Russian empires fought 17 wars over 400 years, and the Turks never emerged victorious from any of them.<sup>55</sup> They only rejoiced in a momentary victory at the end of the Crimean War in 1856, when the Ottoman Empire fought in alliance with European powers, namely Britain, France, and Sardinia. Despite the good vibes during the Putin-Erdoğan era, this past animosity is still fresh in institutional memory. In other words, there is a marriage of convenience but



not a labor of love. Turks are cognizant of Russian intentions and have firsthand experience of how Russia can hurt Turkey with economic sanctions, as it did after the downing of the jet.<sup>56</sup> They recognize that “it would be foolhardy to suggest that Erdoğan would contemplate abandoning NATO. Turkey lives under the shadow of the Russian giant —its anger at the United States and its Western allies notwithstanding, it needs the protection the alliance offers. Without it, the Russians would be able to intimidate Ankara at will.”<sup>57</sup> In other words, Turks are conscious of the dangers of “snuggling up to Russia.”<sup>58</sup> Turkey is in no position to abandon its longtime U.S. ally; as awkward a relationship as this can be at times, the U.S. is still a longtime ally with which Turkey shares geopolitical and regional interests.

These should act as a reminder to Washington that Turkey could strategically draw closer to Russia, especially when relations go awry, but would not let itself be absorbed into the Russian sphere of influence. The cultural, institutional, and political divide is too wide. Ankara might use Russia to create leverage in bilateral relations with the U.S., for example by threatening to buy Russian defense systems, but this is essentially a bluff. Turkey is aware of the implications of a full-scale pivot in defense procurement, and is wary of pursuing it. As noted by an observer of U.S.-Turkey relations, “Ankara’s rapprochement with Russia has occurred amid increasing tensions with the United States” and “Erdoğan’s anger at the Obama administration.”<sup>59</sup>

Since Russia is an important actor in the Middle East and a key economic partner for Turkey, good relations between Moscow and Ankara are desirable. Yet, just like Washington, Ankara is irritated by Russian policies that violate acceptable international norms, such as committing war crimes

in Syria, getting involved with domestic politics in Europe, or annexing Crimea. Again, just like Washington, Ankara is interested in focusing on finding common interests with Russia, for example countering ISIS, stabilizing Syria and Central Asia, or fighting terrorism.<sup>60</sup>

A large part of Turkey’s dependence on Russia today stems from the civil war in Syria. The recent Turkish-Russian rapprochement has been invaluable to the Turkish military incursion in Syria. With the Turkish-Russian handshake in the summer of 2016, Turkey embarked on a large-scale military offensive, Operation Euphrates Shield, to seal off the ISIS enclave that stretched for 61 miles along its border, sandwiched between two self-declared Kurdish cantons. When Turkey was at loggerheads with Russia, by contrast, it could not fly planes, send troops, or intervene to protect friendly opposition forces inside Syria.<sup>61</sup>

In November 2016, with the consent of Russian forces and the support of U.S. warplanes, Turkey moved south of its self-described safe haven to the town of al-Bab, which Ankara perceived as a strategic target of high value on the grounds that controlling that town would break up a contiguous Kurdish zone on its southern flank. The operation in al-Bab was important but costly for Turkey, and during the siege of the small town throughout January and February 2017, the Turkish military lost 70 men, including officers and members of its special forces. It is possible that Turkey is risking a long-term, open-ended engagement in Syria—one that will not only involve running a safe zone on its borders, but also a prolonged fight with ISIS and the YPG. It is also quite likely that this will present a problem for Russia-Turkey or U.S.-Turkey relations, and may have Turkey feeling caught between the two sides.<sup>62</sup> It will be interesting to see how the

Turkish decision to end the Euphrates Shield operation just ahead of Tillerson's visit will play out.

Ankara knows that while it is developing a strong military and intelligence partnership with Russia, Moscow has other friends in the region, including the Assad regime, the Iranian-backed militias, and the Syrian Kurds. This was already evident in the Astana Summit in January 2017, organized by Moscow and Turkey to broker a ceasefire in Syria. Even though the international media interpreted the summit as marking the pinnacle of Turkish-Russian partnership and Syrian Kurds were not invited at Turkey's request, the talks did not culminate in a meaningful resolution. The Turks were uncomfortable with Russia's draft constitution for Syria that hinted at the possibility of regional autonomy for Kurds.<sup>63</sup> Sunni opposition groups allied with Turkey felt pressured into a handshake with the Assad regime. There was also nervousness that the Russian proposals to forge a united position against the Nusra Front was ultimately designed to weaken the opposition in Idlib and greater Aleppo. Immediately after the Astana Summit, Russia invited a Syrian Kurdish delegation to Moscow for a debriefing on the summit's proceedings.

The Turks have reasons to worry. Russia's relations with the Kurds have a long history entrenched in the Cold War and the PKK's former socialistic ideological underpinnings. Russians have never felt the need to sever ties with Syrian Kurds, and have a tendency to turn the heat up and down on that relationship, depending on the state of affairs with Ankara. It is not surprising that a Russian expert of the region observed, "there is an understanding that despite the pressure from Erdoğan, cutting ties with Kurds is not in Russia's interests" and "if Moscow abandons the Kurds now, it will reinforce America's position."<sup>64</sup>

Having to get Putin's consent in the summer of 2016 to establish a safe zone along its borders forged into existence an uncomfortable hierarchical dynamic between Moscow and Ankara. Sources within Turkey's security bureaucracy acknowledge the need to balance reliance on Russia with greater cooperation with the U.S.<sup>65</sup> This became evident during the siege of al-Bab in January 2017, when Turkish and Russian joint efforts failed to seize the town from ISIS on their own, and it was only after the U.S. decision to provide air power that significant progress was made.

When it comes to Turkish-Russian relations, the lesson for the U.S. administration is twofold: that in the long-term, Turkey's relations with Russia are not as comfortable as they sometimes look and that Ankara's pivot to Russia is more a negotiating tactic than a real possibility. However, Washington should be cognizant of Turkey's vulnerability on the Kurdish issue and how Russia could exploit this at times. The truth is, both Turks and Kurds have allowed themselves to be instrumentalized by greater powers due to their own inability to reach a peace in their own backyard with their own resources. In the long run, brokering a Turkish-Kurdish deal either in Syria or inside Turkey would not only make the U.S.' fight against ISIS easier, but also make Turkey less vulnerable to Moscow.

While the future shape of relations between Moscow and Washington remain unclear, Turkey will be directly affected by the rising tensions in that relationship. If the recent U.S. missile attacks on a Syrian regime airbase in retaliation against the use of chemical weapons on civilians in the Idlib province were indeed a first taste of a major shift in U.S. policy in Syria, Ankara would once again gravitate towards Washington for a role in Syria's transition, at the risk of angering Putin. Yet, in the

absence of a clear U.S. policy of regime change from the Trump administration, Turkey's only option would be to continue to play a juggling act between Russia and the U.S.

## ROLLING BACK IRANIAN INFLUENCE?

Turkey faces a similarly determined Iran in Syria, which offers challenges as well as opportunities for U.S.-Turkish relations moving forward. Revisiting the Iranian nuclear deal and the possible re-introduction of sanctions against Iran remain objectives of the Trump administration. This is accompanied by a desire to address the concerns of the U.S.' Sunni allies in the region about Iran's strategic objectives in the Middle East at large and Syria in particular. Washington is likely to find a sympathetic listener in Ankara regarding its discomfort with the rise of Iran's influence in the region. After all, Ankara finds itself on the opposite side of Iran in the Syrian conflict. Turkey has deep concerns about the rise of Shiite political influence and hard power through various non-state actors affiliated with Iran inside Iraq and Syria. This is reflected in Turkey's ever-deepening ties with the Gulf states, including an expansion of military and intelligence ties with the Saudi regime and Gulf states, and the establishment of Turkey's first full-scale foreign military base in Qatar. Erdoğan's recent biting remarks against Iran are a reflection of this trend.<sup>66</sup>

However, it is important to note that Turkey's ability and willingness to roll back Iranian influence is limited. Turkey's democratic progress and economic dynamism no longer stand as an alternative to the Iranian model of political Islam, particularly with rising authoritarianism as well as ethnic, sectarian, and political polarization within

the country.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, Turkey's once highly-praised "zero problems with neighbors" foreign policy<sup>68</sup> has come to be known, sarcastically, as "no neighbors without problems,"<sup>69</sup> undermining Turkey's soft power in the region. Hence, the days when Turkish officials shuttled to Beirut to help broker deals between the Lebanese government and Hezbollah<sup>70</sup> and then headed to Yemen to advise the new Islamist government about the transition are over.<sup>71</sup> Ankara's diplomatic influence fell victim to the intensifying sectarianism of the post-Arab Spring Middle East, and Turkey favored the Muslim Brotherhood across the region. There were public fights with the Shiite leaders in Iraq, a cold winter with Iran, a vendetta against the Assad regime, and a total collapse of relations with Egypt after the military coup that removed the Muslim Brotherhood from power. By August 2013, Turkey seemed so cut off in its region and its policy so adrift that a key advisor to Erdoğan felt the need to write on social media, "It's not true that Turkey is isolated in the Middle East, but if this is a criticism, then loneliness is a precious [prized] one."<sup>72</sup> Some commentators saw this kind of "loneliness" as a function of then-Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's "imperial fantasy" that aspired to dismantle the "Western led order" in the Middle East and instead unify the *ummah*, the Muslim community.<sup>73</sup>

It is against such a background that Turkey's Syria policy started to receive heavy criticism domestically and internationally. As described by a former assistant secretary at the Turkish foreign ministry, the government had misjudged the Arab Spring "as a sign of an irreversible regional trend and engaged in regime change in Syria," but this policy had "boomeranged" and only multiplied Turkey's problems.<sup>74</sup> Others, including several Turkish experts and former ambassadors, had already questioned whether Turkey had reprioritized its na-

tional interests and redefined them according to religious motives.<sup>75</sup>

By May 2016, it had become obvious that the notion of “precious loneliness” could no longer be maintained as a foreign policy guideline.<sup>76</sup> Davutoğlu’s resignation from his later position as prime minister was, therefore, no surprise to anyone, and thought to have been at least partly brought onto himself by his foreign policy toward Syria.<sup>77</sup> Instead, pragmatic and *realpolitik* considerations moved to the forefront. It was reflected in the new Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım’s remarks in May 2016 that the new government’s foreign policy objective was to “increase the number of our friends” and “decrease the number of our enemies.”<sup>78</sup> It is against this background that Turkey’s focus, as discussed above, changed from regime change in Syria to immediate national security concerns about the emergence of a Kurdish statelet along its border with Syria and the fight against ISIS, which had begun to target Turkey.

These developments are reflected in policies toward Iran and were manifested in the Turkish government’s readiness to work closely with Iran and Russia to ensure the evacuation of eastern Aleppo and the establishment of a ceasefire late in 2016.<sup>79</sup> Additionally, there are other reasons that have traditionally compelled Turkey to maintain pragmatic relations with Iran. The two countries are neighbors and have a firm policy of avoiding confrontation that has been in place for centuries. Since the 1639 Kasr-ı Şirin agreement between the Ottoman and Persian empires, Turks and Iranians have agreed to desist from interfering in each other’s domestic affairs and provoking any sort of confrontation that could escalate to a regional conflict, directly or through proxies. Despite the rivalry and sectarian urges on both sides, this policy of non-belligerence has been a constant in Turkish foreign policy over

centuries. It is unlikely to change now. Furthermore, importing natural gas from Iran helps reduce Turkey’s otherwise extensive energy dependence on Russia. Ankara is also keen to revive its trading relations with Iran, especially now that its own exports to the neighborhood are falling, and with the lifting of international sanctions, the Iranian market is opening up to foreign trade.

However, these developments are unlikely to make Turkey amenable to the idea of becoming a counterweight to Iran in a manner that the Trump administration may wish. The challenge will be whether the U.S. and Turkey are able to strike a transactional relationship and coordinate efforts to shape the future of northern Syria. In the short run, the ability of the two countries to work together when engaging Iran and Russia will be critical as a new order in Syria takes shape. Turkey’s role in the transition and governance of the safe zone carved out by the Euphrates Shield operation will be critical in stabilizing this region—and require at least tacit acquiescence from Russia and Iran.

In the longer run, however, rather than thinking of Turkey as a Sunni power to counter Iran, it would be much better to strategically engage Turkey in a way that would help the country realize its soft power potential. It was this soft power that had made Turkey influential in the region, independent from sectarian affiliations, and transformed it into a security provider. The attractiveness of the Turkish model had boosted the region’s prosperity, most visibly in the form of increased trade and Turkish foreign direct investment (FDI) in the region.<sup>80</sup> However, whether these short- and long-term objectives can materialize and a constructive relationship between the U.S. and Turkey can emerge will depend foremost on the shape of Trump’s foreign policy.

## CONCLUSION

The history of U.S.-Turkish relations goes back to the immediate aftermath of World War II. Since then, this relationship has gone through many ups and downs. Yet, in the past, both sides were able to overcome many crises in bilateral relations and contribute to stability and security in Turkey's neighborhood and beyond. The civil war in Syria, rising Russian and Iranian assertiveness, as well as domestic political developments in Turkey, including the coup attempt in July 2016, have once more complicated the U.S.-Turkish relationship. This is compounded by growing anti-Americanism in Turkey, the continuing uncertainty that characterizes the new U.S. administration's foreign policy as well as the outcome of Turkey's constitutional referendum on April 16, 2017. There are nevertheless a number of policy steps to be taken that could help both sides overcome their differences and engage each other in a way that will serve their mutual interests, but also contribute to the long-term stability, security, and prosperity of Turkey and its neighborhood. In return, this will benefit the interests of the trans-Atlantic community.

The onset of a new administration in Washington presents an opportunity to start a fresh dialogue on Gülen's role in the coup attempt. Ankara is already acrimonious toward Washington about the coup. The U.S. should be careful not to raise unrealistic expectations on Gülen's extradition, but is advised to study the evidence put forward and eventually start an independent judicial inquiry. The question of what kind of a response would suffice to allay Turkey's concerns cannot be easily answered, yet an answer will have to be formulated by Trump, if he is keen on maintaining an open dialogue with Ankara.

Turkey is in a deeply polarized and tense election cycle with a referendum scheduled for April 16, 2017, on whether or not to expand the president's powers, and essentially transform Turkey's parliamentary system into an executive presidency with very limited checks and balances.<sup>81</sup> Since the breakdown of talks with the PKK in the summer of 2015, the Turkish government has been pursuing hardline policies on the Kurdish issue and invoking increasingly nationalist rhetoric. Referendum politics have led the AKP to form an alliance with the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and smaller nationalist parties. In an effort to sustain this alliance and mobilize his nationalist base, Erdoğan has made opposition to the YPG and PKK the centerpiece of his referendum campaign. On the other side of the Atlantic, there is a desire to broaden CENTCOM's alliance with the Syrian Kurds by arming them for an upcoming Raqqa offensive. The final decision on the matter will be made at the White House; however, Washington would be wise to postpone any final decision on the matter until after the Turkish referendum to avoid influencing the Turkish domestic debate or being drawn into the Turkey's domestic politics.

Turkey's Kurdish issue is no longer a matter of national security, but has become a transnational affair that spans across Syria, Iraq, and Iran. It is also at a potentially explosive stage that could engulf all of these nations in smaller regional conflicts. Washington should take a broader view and push for a Turkish-Kurdish peace deal instead of trying to manage the explosive situation in an *ad hoc* manner. The current U.S. policy of decoupling the Kurdish situation inside Turkey from the issues that stem from the Kurdish presence in northern Syria is not working; the conflict has already spilled over into the Syrian theater. The U.S. policy is therefore flawed in two significant ways:

(1) it lacks credibility, since nobody is convinced that the YPG and the PKK are unaffiliated, and (2) it leads Washington to turn a blind eye to the dangerous deterioration of the Kurdish situation inside Turkey, ultimately destabilizing a significant NATO ally. A return to political negotiations between Turkey and the PKK could alleviate some of these tensions and help create a more realistic settlement in northern Syria. This requires engagement at the highest level, so that the U.S. could initially push for a PKK ceasefire inside Turkey and for a thaw in relations between Turkey and the PYD—which could, in return, facilitate a return to the negotiating table.

Washington has limited means to halt and reverse the democratic backsliding in Turkey; nevertheless, it is important that it pay attention to the quality of Turkish democracy as a means to ensure stability and economic growth in the country. The U.S. should also engage with a broader section of society and continue to support the institutions that struggle to preserve pluralism and democratic culture in Turkey. It should maintain an open and frank dialogue with the Turkish leadership about its concerns for free speech, rule of law, religious freedom, and minority rights, and should encourage steps to expand freedoms. While Erdoğan's plans for an executive presidency, which could essentially turn into one-man rule, are a major challenge to Turkey's democracy today, Washington should take a longer-term view of Turkey's potential and help preserve its civil society and independent institutions for future generations.

Unlike most of its neighbors, Turkey has no gas or oil to export and must maintain a competitive economy that is open to foreign trade. The Trump administration's departure from traditional U.S. policy in support of free trade may at first appear

unconducive to exploring ways to enhance bilateral trade. However, the U.S. enjoys an important trade surplus with Turkey, and the only way to expand U.S. exports to Turkey would indeed be to have free and fair trade. Trade expansion can also be seen as a policy that can encourage reform in Turkey in return for greater market access to the U.S. Indeed trade policy could become a policy to enhance the rule of law and governance in Turkey. As a corollary, the U.S. should also encourage the upgrade of the EU-Turkey customs union as a means to better anchor Turkey into the trans-Atlantic alliance.

Turkey's relations with Russia, while seemingly thriving, still suffer from centuries-long distrust. It is unlikely that any sort of cooperation between Moscow and Ankara will result in a decisive shift of Turkey's foreign policy away from its Western orientation. Maintaining cordial ties with Russia is important from an economic perspective, and may galvanize support from Syrian Sunni opposition groups for the Geneva process, tasked with finding a diplomatic and political solution to the civil war. Therefore, the U.S. should not meddle and keep in mind that there are limits to this cooperation. Those limits are best captured by the fact that Turkey's exports to the U.S. in 2015 were twice of those to Russia, and the difference became almost fourfold in 2016 as Russian sanctions adversely impacted Turkish exports. Furthermore, while Turkey exports to the U.S. mostly manufactured goods with greater value-added, it exports agricultural goods to Russia that often face arbitrary restrictions.

Turkey's ability to project influence in its region and its transformative soft power have been significantly reduced by the sectarian conflict in the region, the civil war in Syria, and Turkey's own do-

mestic woes. Turkey has surrendered its “imperial fantasy” in the Middle East in favor of a more realistic and defensive foreign policy in its own immediate neighborhood. However, there is still a significant role the Turkish government can play in the region: Erdoğan and the AKP still have an undeniable degree of legitimacy based on their political ideology and could deliver a template for good, or better, governance. A good test in this regard could be the Turkish-backed safe zone in northern Syria that has been cleared of ISIS. Ankara’s efforts to establish order in that area will demonstrate the limits of its capacity to play a leadership role in Sunni communities in northern Syria and Iraq. The U.S. should support these efforts and help extend them to Raqqa once the area has been cleared of ISIS. However, utmost care will be required to make sure that such a safe zone receives the support of the international community and is not perceived as undermining the territorial integrity of Syria. Ensuring Russia’s support and cooperation would be critical to such an endeavor, and would have to be seen within the context of the broader objective to end the conflict through political dialogue while respecting Syria’s territorial integrity.

While unhappy with Iranian influence and the presence of non-state sectarian actors in its immediate region, Ankara has always been cautious about direct confrontation with Iran. This has been one of the constants in Turkish foreign policy for centuries. Energy dependency on Iranian natural gas and proximity as a neighbor also limit Ankara’s ability to play a vigorous role in rolling back Iranian influence. Washington should engage

with Ankara about its concerns regarding Iranian overreach within Kurdish areas and inside Syria. It should also consult Turkish officials on policies to curb Iranian nuclear capabilities, but as discussed above, should not expect too much. It would be unwise and uncharacteristic for the two states to have an open confrontation.

The Trump administration came into power questioning the role of NATO in meeting contemporary defense needs, but that well-publicized discontent for the alliance has somewhat been redressed by Secretary of Defense James Mattis’ comments and assurances. For Turkey, NATO has been the key vehicle for a strong anchor to the West and this discussion can be extremely negative. The failed coup has already institutionally distanced Turkey from the alliance (due to Turkish suspicions of prior knowledge of the coup on the grounds that Turkish NATO officers were among the coup supporters) and the Trump administration’s ambivalence is adding to that. Turkey has been an invaluable and loyal NATO ally and the U.S. should seek new ways to engage Turkey in NATO operations. While it would be unrealistic to expect a more active Turkey in operations against Russia in the Black Sea or the Baltics, Turkey could play a role in NATO-led efforts in the Mediterranean, for example, in monitoring illegal migration and in helping stabilize Libya. In the longer run, such engagements might help both sides move once more beyond an interest-driven, transactional relationship toward a dynamic that resembles the “model partnership.”

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