



Dealing With Turkey: Taking the Long View

October 31, 2017 **Svante E. Cornell** *Real Clear Defense*

Related Categories: Central Asia; Turkey

The U.S.-Turkish relationship has recently become so bad that analysts in both countries now wonder if it is beyond repair. There are good grounds for the worsening of this relationship, not least President Tayyip Erdoğan's increasingly blatant anti-Americanism. But going forward, American leaders must not make the mistake of equating Turkey with Erdoğan. They must devise a policy that maintains a long-term view of Turkey as an American ally.

Relations between the U.S. and Turkey have been deteriorating since at least 2013. Much of the blame goes to the Turkish strongman. Under Tayyip Erdoğan's leadership, Turkey developed an increasingly Islamist and authoritarian direction. Erdoğan's foreign policy became adventurist, increasingly and at odds with American interests after the Arab uprisings in 2011. To gain influence, his government began supporting Islamist groups ranging from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood to jihadi groups in Syria. Not staying at that, Erdoğan developed increasingly anti-American and anti-Semitic rhetoric, often obliquely and sometimes directly blaming some combination of Jews and America for Turkey's problems.

These tendencies worsened with the July 2016 coup attempt against Erdoğan. The United States was slow to condemn the coup, which Erdoğan blames on Pennsylvania-based preacher Fethullah Gülen. There is indeed good reason to think that supporters of Gülen in the Turkish military were implicated in the coup. Erdoğan's conspiratorial worldview cannot countenance that a network led from Pennsylvania could operate without guidance from American authorities – or that American prosecutors can hold an Erdoğan acolyte, Iranian-Turkish businessman Reza Zarrab, without guidance from the "deep state."

Worse, Erdoğan appears to think the Trump administration could just hand these individuals over by bureaucratic fiat. Indeed, Erdoğan seems to think that lashing out against America makes it more likely that he gets his way.

In fact, he has good reason for this. During Barack Obama's tenure, the U.S. largely tolerated such misbehavior. For eight years, Washington responded with appeasement to Turkish provocations – such as Erdoğan's threat to expel the American ambassador, or his repeated accusations that America orchestrated the 2013 protests against him. Summing up the mood in Ankara, a key advisor to President Erdoğan was once overheard telling his president that "Americans are weak, if we push hard they will back off."

However, Erdoğan miscalculated the changes in Washington since the Trump Administration took over. Apparently, Washington's patience with such abuse had run out, as had its appetite for appeasement. Going forward, it is tempting to focus on Erdoğan's appalling policies, and conclude that Turkey can no longer be a U.S. ally. Calls to kick Turkey out of NATO or leaving the base at Incirlik are growing. However, the question is: would such policies serve U.S. interests or make Turkey a more pliable partner?

Erdoğan wants to be equated with Turkey, but America should not fall into that trap. Erdoğan's rule is increasingly authoritarian precisely because he is no longer able to win elections fair and square. At least half of the population vehemently opposes him. As Erdoğan insists on controlling all major issues personally, the economy is stagnating. While Erdoğan appears unassailable, his opponents are sensing weakness.

Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party, having been reduced to no purpose except expressing its love for the leader, is in deep disarray. A recent internal poll shows the party at around 35 percent of the vote, a far cry from the 49 percent it received in 2015. This summer, main opposition leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu attracted widespread support when he walked the 300 miles from Ankara to Istanbul to protest Erdoğan's judicial abuses. Meanwhile, a new political movement led by former Interior Minister Meral Akşener has broken away from the sclerotic Nationalist Action Party. If it succeeds in adopting a center-right identity, it could threaten Erdoğan's core voter base.

The point is that Erdoğan's rule is not forever, and Washington should not fall into the trap of equating the country with its leader. American policymakers must focus on the long-term: while responding to Erdoğan, they must consider policies that could help restore the U.S.-Turkish relationship in the future.

The Trump administration did the right thing by indicating to Erdoğan that his behavior has consequences. But America needs a coherent strategy in Turkey, including increasing America's leverage by reducing its dependence on Turkey. This means keeping the U.S. presence at the Incirlik base, but increasing redundancy by boosting cooperation with partners from Jordan to Georgia. Second, American officials must counter Erdoğan's anti-American propaganda. Today, a vast majority of Turks are hostile to the U.S. This was not always the case, and need not be in the future if proper public diplomacy efforts are undertaken.

America must also carefully review its Syria policy. In the short term, support for Kurdish forces there may make sense – especially since Erdoğan's Turkey has hardly behaved like an ally there. However, in the long term, U.S. support for the fragmented Kurdish groups in Syria and Iraq may backfire. It will alienate not just Erdoğan's supporters, but all Turks, who rightly point out that some Syrian Kurds supported by America are under the effective control of anti-Turkish terrorist groups. America will need to balance these interests carefully.

Turkey is not yet lost. American officials must take steps to rekindle respect for the U.S. in Ankara. However, they must also work toward the long-term goal of rebuilding, after Erdoğan, the U.S.-Turkish alliance.

Svante E. Cornell is Director of the American Foreign Policy Council's Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Non-Resident Senior Fellow of the Gemunder Center at the Jewish Institute for National Security of America with a focus on Turkey and the Caucasus.