



Why US-Turkish ties won't get better

May 24, 2019 **Ilan I. Berman** *The Hill*

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"Every year, we hear that this is the worst year ever for U.S.-Turkish relations," a prominent Turkish academic wryly remarked to me last month during my visit to the country. "This year, they might be right."

He may have a point. The relationship between the United States and Turkey, which has deteriorated precipitously in recent years over an array of strategic and political disagreements, is poised to become significantly worse in the days ahead.

Taken from Turkey's perspective, two principal factors have driven a wedge into its once-robust relationship with the United States. The first is the so-called "Kurdish question." Turkey has long opposed any movement by the region's Kurds toward autonomy, worried over the practical and political consequences that an independent Kurdish state could have on the country, and on the broader region. These worries have been sharpened in recent years by the leading role that Turkish militias have played in the fight against the Islamic State terrorist group, and the international recognition they have garnered as a result.

In particular, Turkey has been a strident opponent of the U.S. policy — initiated under the Obama administration — to provide weapons to the Syria-based People's Protection Units militia (colloquially known as the YPG) because of its close links to the Kurdish Worker's Party, which has long been the principal terrorist threat to the Turkish state.

In an effort to appease Ankara, the Trump administration pledged last year to stop providing weaponry to the YPG. It has also promised to take back those arms once the Syrian civil war winds down — but as yet has not articulated a clear plan for doing so. America's promises, meanwhile, have met with widespread skepticism among ordinary Turks, who have come to view U.S. counterterrorism policies as at least partially inimical to their national interests.

Turkey's second bone of contention revolves around America's attitudes toward the Fethullah Gulen movement, which Turks broadly blame for the failed summer 2016 coup against the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. In the wake of the attempted putsch, Erdogan launched a sweeping nationwide crackdown on suspected Gulen collaborators, as a result of which thousands of state employees were removed from their posts and more than 20,000 teachers and academics were fired.

But Erdogan has not been content to simply purge Gulenist influence from Turkish politics. For nearly three years, his government has actively pressured the U.S. to extradite the movement's reclusive leader, Fethullah Gulen, from his residence-in-exile in Pennsylvania's Poconos mountains. So far, the U.S. government has resisted this pressure — something that has bred significant resentment not only among regime loyalists but nationalist Turks as well.

Washington, meanwhile, now harbors deep suspicions about Turkey's regional intentions. This can be seen most clearly in the context of the Syrian civil war; the Trump administration's partial reversal, earlier this year, of the President's December 2018 decision to pull U.S. troops out of Syria was informed at least in part by worries that the Turkish government would use America's absence to launch a broad campaign of repression against the Kurds.

Equally divisive has been Turkey's decision to acquire advanced Russian air defenses. That purchase has moved forward in recent months despite protestations from Brussels about the inherent incompatibility of Russia's S-400 with NATO systems and hardware. In Ankara, the deal is seen by many as primarily commercial in nature, and a transaction that Turkey is perfectly entitled to make. In Washington, by contrast, Ankara's decision is being viewed as a litmus test of sorts of its larger commitment to the West. To that end, Congressional lawmakers have put forward legislation that would deny Turkey the ability to purchase the advanced F-35 fighter jet, a platform it covets, if it does indeed acquire the S-400.

Yet, significant as they are, all of these problems are simply symptoms of a more fundamental strategic divergence.

During the four-plus decades of the Cold War, the United States and Turkey were bound together by the common vision underpinning the NATO alliance: Confronting, containing and deterring the Soviet Union and its assorted satellites. In the post-Cold War era, however, that unifying principle has disappeared, and — without a suitable substitute — Turkish-American relations have become defined by diverging worldviews and a pervasive lack of trust.

That state of affairs seems unlikely to change any time soon.

Neither U.S. nor Turkish officials seem to have any idea about how to get the bilateral relationship back on track absent a fundamental change in political direction in one or both countries. As a result, Washington and Ankara — though still formally bound together as treaty partners — seem destined to continue drifting further and further apart.

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