



The U.S. And Turkey: Past The Point Of No Return?

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U.S.-Turkish relations have deteriorated for some time. But until recently, no one would have thought that the American and Turkish militaries, closely allied since the 1950s, could end up confronting each other directly. Yet in northern Syria today, that is no longer unthinkable.

In mid-January, to forestall U.S. intentions to build a "Border Security Force" composed mainly of Syrian Kurdish fighters, Turkey launched a military operation in the Kurdish-controlled Afrin enclave in northwestern Syria. On January 24, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan expressed his determination to move beyond Afrin into other parts of northern Syria, mentioning specifically the town of Manbij, where U.S. forces are deployed alongside Kurdish YPG troops. Turkish officials warned the United States to sever its ties to the Kurdish forces, which Turkey considers a terrorist group. This led President Donald Trump to tell Erdogan to "avoid any actions that might risk conflict between Turkish and American forces."

The collision course Ankara and Washington are on is making any notion of a Turkish-American alliance increasingly hollow. If a point of no return is to be avoided, both sides will have to rethink their priorities, and begin to build trust. That process can begin with an honest appraisal of how we got to this point, with America and Turkey on the verge of coming to blows.

In the United States, much of the blame has naturally been laid at the feet of Erdogan, the headstrong and authoritarian Turkish President. To American eyes, it is easy to see how Erdogan's growing intolerance of dissent goes hand in hand with an increasingly adventurist foreign policy that directly challenges American interests. Yet while Erdogan is part of the problem, its full scope goes far beyond a single individual. The real story of the past several years is how the Syrian and Kurdish issues have interacted with Turkish domestic politics to pull Ankara and Washington apart.

Turkey, Syria, and the Kurds: A Long Story

For a variety of reasons ranging from water distribution to border disputes, Turkey and Syria were archenemies during the Cold War. Even then, the Syrian and Kurdish questions were interrelated: Hafez al-Asad provided safe haven to the leadership of the Kurdish separatist PKK, which Turkey, the European Union and the United States all rightly considered a terrorist organization. After the Cold War, the threat hardly abated: From training camps in Lebanon's Syria-controlled Bekaa Valley and bases in northern Iraq, the PKK mounted an increasingly sophisticated campaign of terror targeting the Turkish state and Turkish civilians in the early 1990s.

Herein lies the seed of Turkish-American discord: While Turks had no love lost for Saddam Hussein, Ankara and Baghdad had cooperated quite effectively against the PKK. By contrast, it was the American intervention in Iraq, and the subsequent creation of a de facto Kurdish state in northern Iraq, that allowed the PKK to establish a foothold in the mountainous areas bordering Turkey. This generated frustration, but America was still helping Turkish efforts to fight the PKK. By the mid-1990s, Ankara had made numerous military operations on Iraqi soil to manage the problem. In 1998 Turkish threats of military action forced Assad to expel the PKK and its leader, Abdullah Ocalan. With the help of American and Israeli assistance, Turkey was eventually able to apprehend Ocalan in Kenya, and confine him to the prison island where he remains today.

By the time Erdogan was redesigning Turkish foreign policy in the mid-2000s, Syria occupied center stage. It was Turkey's conduit to the Arab Middle East, where Erdogan wanted to play a bigger role. The objective was to turn Syria from an adversary into a vassal—essentially replacing Iran's role for the Assad regime. Yet these plans came to naught with the onset of the Arab upheavals of 2011. Those events touched a sectarian and ideological nerve among Erdogan's Islamists: They saw in the upheavals the impending crumbling of the post-Ottoman order in the Middle East, and a historic chance to impose a new order led by the Muslim Brotherhood under Turkish tutelage. This led Erdogan to support the opposition against Assad, and in particular to help arm the Free Syrian Army components that were close to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Lacking deep understanding of the regional dynamics, however, Ankara miscalculated. Evidently, Erdogan and his then-Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu thought the Assad regime would fall much like Qaddafi had in Libya. But they underestimated both Tehran's commitment to the Assad regime and Assad's ability to counter Turkish moves. In July 2012, the Syrian regime effectively ceded the northeast of Syria to the Kurdish Syrian YPG forces that are aligned with Turkey's archenemy, the PKK.

This move had deep implications for Turkey. As the Syria conflict turned into a quagmire, the rise of a Kurdish entity emboldened Kurdish nationalism in Turkey itself, thus sabotaging Erdogan's attempt to negotiate with the imprisoned PKK leader from a position of strength. For Turkey, the biggest threats in Syria were the PKK-aligned PYD and the Assad regime. The Sunni jihadis fighting the regime were seen not so much as a problem as an asset: Turkey's initial proteges on the battlefield had turned out hopelessly inept, leading Ankara to move to support increasingly radical factions, including domestic jihadi groups like Ahrar al-Sham and the Nusra front, while turning a blind eye for some time to ISIS's use of Turkish territory as a rear base for its establishment of a caliphate in Syria.

Thus, American and Turkish interests began to diverge. Obama and Erdogan had initially coordinated closely on Syrian matters, with Turkey calling for an American intervention to topple Assad, and planning to be America's subcontractor in Syrian affairs. Disagreements were initially minor, as when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton sought a much more broad-based opposition coalition than the Muslim Brotherhood-dominated version boosted by Ankara. But gradually, America's main objective shifted from overthrowing Assad to containing and combating the ISIS caliphate. This, in turn, pushed the United States into the arms of the Syrian Kurds, who had the only fighting force willing and capable of fighting ISIS in Syria. Meanwhile, Americans were growing increasingly suspicious of Turkish covert support for jihadi factions in the war.

Domestic politics now intervened to worsen matters: In 2013, the repression of the Gezi Park demonstrations that began in Istanbul but spread across Turkey wrecked Erdogan's international image. A disappointed President Obama now essentially stopped talking to Erdogan. Meanwhile, the split between Erdogan and his erstwhile allies in the Fethullah Gulen movement intensified into an open and direct conflict. Erdogan, who was growing increasingly conspiratorial, saw an American hand behind both Gezi and the Gulen movement, whose leader he believed to steer a vast network of supporters from his home in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania.

To counterbalance the Gulen network, Erdogan now rehabilitated, then struck up an alliance with the neo-nationalist America skeptics within the Turkish military that had been purged in previous years. By 2015, this alliance led him to end talks with the Kurds and adopt the military's preferred option: a renewed reliance on the military option to destroy the PKK inside Turkey. This had the added benefit of shoring up nationalist support for Erdogan, making his transition to a presidential system possible. His new friends also happened to fervently buy in to the notion that America's aims in Iraq and Syria included the promotion of Kurdish nationalism, and that this policy in the long term envisaged the breakup of Turkey itself. Unfortunately, it is increasingly clear that Erdogan himself bought into this conspiracism.

American Errors

It goes without saying that America's dithering in Syria has been a major factor in the growing suspicions in Turkey concerning America's intentions. As noted, Turkish suspicion of American intentions started with the creation of autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan in the early 1990s. It intensified with the Iraq War in 2003. And it has reached a boiling point with the conflict in Syria. In all three cases, Turkey has entertained the notion of partnering with America, but ultimately seen America take steps that undermine Turkey's interests and security.

Americans frequently look back to the Presidency of Turgut Ozal as the golden age of Turkish-American relations. Ozal, indeed, supported America's war against Iraq, provided America with the use of the Incirlik base in southern Turkey, and closed pipelines delivering Iraqi oil to Turkey. But he did so at great cost: In 1990, both the chief of general staff and the foreign minister resigned in protest against Ozal's Iraq policies. In subsequent years, the economic costs to Turkey were estimated in the billions of dollars, not counting the rising PKK insurgency, which would hardly have been as intense had Baghdad remained in control of northern Iraq.

These matters were very much on the minds of Turkish leaders in late 2002, when the George W. Bush Administration came calling to enlist Turkey's help to invade Iraq once again. Immense pressure was brought to bear on the newly elected AKP government - formally run by Abdullah Gul, because Erdogan had yet to rid himself of a ban prohibiting him from political activity. The Turkish military remained far from enthusiastic, and a parliamentary vote in March 2003 failed to approve the use of Turkey's territory for a U.S. land invasion. This debacle sent Turkish-American relations into a tailspin, fostering lingering resentment between what had been the core of the relationship: the respective military leaderships of the two countries. While Turkey's various power brokers mishandled the matter, there was enough blame to go around: U.S. officials largely failed to provide Turkey with an incentive to support American plans in Iraq.

From Ankara's vantage point, the main consequence of America's invasion was that the PKK, sensing an opportunity, broke a long-standing ceasefire and began operations on Turkish soil again. America, preoccupied with Iraq, did little to mitigate this, and even went as far as apprehending Turkish special forces officers in northern Iraq, generating fury across the Turkish political spectrum. Meanwhile, Iran was actively cooperating with Turkey in cracking down on the Iranian PKK affiliate, PJAK. Ironically, to most Turks Iran now seemed a better ally against terrorism than the United States.

Against this background, it may seem surprising that Erdogan actively encouraged an American intervention against Assad, while his population and much of the Turkish elite were largely opposed. But at the time, Erdogan thought he could use American cover to implement his vision of a "moderate Islamist" order in the Middle East under Turkish leadership. This is how Erdogan interpreted Obama's support for the Arab upheavals.

Yet over a few months of 2013, Erdogan came to revisit this assumption. The starting point was the Gezi protests of May and June, followed in early July by the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood regime in Egypt, in which Erdogan had invested heavily. Turkish fury at America's equivocation on the coup (which Turkey's Islamists equated with the Gezi protests) was exacerbated only weeks later by Obama's Syria red line controversy. It was now clear that the United States was not going to play along with Erdogan's regional plans. Instead, due to a combination of domestic and foreign factors, U.S. actions in the Middle East came to be viewed as directly antithetical to Turkey's vital interests.

Indeed, the trigger for the current crisis was the American decision to create a largely Kurdish "border security force" of over 30,000 personnel in northern Syria. There is no question that when the Pentagon developed that plan, Turkey was not the main motive. It was at least as much about establishing a foothold in Syria to contain Iranian hegemony, and to ensure that ISIS was unable to regroup. But to the Turks, none of those factors are relevant: American actions are viewed against the background of the events of the past three decades, and through the prism of the leadership's particular penchant for conspiracy. American officials are aware that Erdogan blames Washington for involvement in the failed July 2016 coup against him, and are equally cognizant of the vehemence with which Turkey opposes America's intimacy with the Syrian Kurdish forces. Erdogan has lately even come to speak obliquely of America as the force behind ISIS, echoing Russian propaganda to that effect. Erdogan's reaction should have been quite predictable: To Turks it all follows a clear pattern of America working over three decades to establish a Kurdish vassal entity in the Middle East that undermines the security and integrity of Turkey itself.

Is There a Way Out?

Whether or not the current crisis is overcome, the longer trajectory of U.S.-Turkish relations is alarming. The leadership of a close NATO ally has effectively become a cheerleader of anti-Americanism; its leadership views America as its primary adversary, accusing it of scheming to undermine its very statehood. And unfortunately, as this analysis has sought to demonstrate, this is not due solely to the idiosyncrasies of an erratic leader. Erdogan's perspective on America's role in Syria and Iraq is shared by broad segments of Turkey's political spectrum.

The Turks have a point: American policies in Syria and Iraq have had the effect of undermining Turkey's interests. And it borders on the absurd for the United States to "train" a PKK affiliate in Syria, while hoping that this will not affect relations with a country it terms an ally. Any Turkish government will see this as a hostile act; Erdogan enjoys the support of over 80% of Turks on this issue.

But the United States, too, has a point. The growing anti-Americanism of Turkey's leaders - Erdogan first and foremost - is not primarily a result of America's Syria policy, or even of any of America's actions. Rather, it is a result of an ideologically grounded, conspiratorial mindset that sees America as a force for evil in the world. It is not America's fault that Erdogan now appears to view everything from protests in Istanbul and coups in Cairo and Ankara to campaigns against his Qatari friends as efforts to undermine Turkey's prestige and his own position of power. If this is what Turkey is becoming, why should America defer to Ankara on matters of regional security in the Middle East?

The problem is, effectively, on two levels. First, American and Turkish objectives in the region have come increasingly to diverge. Were there trust and goodwill between leaders on both sides, this divergence could be overcome, or at least managed. Defense Secretary James Mattis has expressed understanding for Turkey's security concerns, and Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu seeks to convince Americans that his country is a better partner for America than the YPG. Left to their own devices, these leaders and others like them would probably be able to work things out. For example, Washington and Ankara could agree to the creation of a Turkish security zone on the Syrian side of the border. That would significantly calm tempers in Ankara.

But on another level, America lacks a strategy for either the region or for its relationship with Turkey. Without such a strategy, U.S. officials will likely bounce from crisis to crisis, seeking to contain the damage while being unable to take on the underlying problem. And similarly, as long as Erdogan and important forces in the Turkish leadership continue with their anti-American pronouncements, the likelihood of anyone making a serious effort to rescue the relationship will diminish by the day.

In the final analysis, U.S. officials would be well-advised to take a long view: How important is Turkey for American interests in Europe, Eurasia, and the Middle East in a 20-year perspective? If they determine that it continues to maintain the immense strategic value that many assume, they should focus on ensuring that the average Turks find no reason to buy into the loony conspiracies peddled by some of their leaders, and instead view America as a reliable and positive force. That will require adjustments to the Administration's Syria policies. In the meantime, Erdogan's government can be treated in a transactional way-as a troublesome force that needs, somehow, to be managed with that broader objective in mind.

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