U.S.-Turkish Relations: Re-situating the “Kurdish Question”

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Abstract

Historically many American policymakers have not prioritized the status of Turkey’s Kurds in bilateral relations, despite the significant political, cultural, and security implications of the “Kurdish Question”. The events over the past two years, including the devolution of the 2013 cease-fire between the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK) and the Turkish state, the concurrent increase in importance of the Kurds and Turkey in the fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and the Parliamentary elections in June and November 2015 have re-situated and further internationalized the “Kurdish Question”. Although Turkey’s July 2015 opening of the Incirlik air base to the anti-ISIL coalition was celebrated, Turkey’s air strikes against ISIL were matched with Turkish air raids of PKK targets in Iraq, urges for the anti-ISIL coalition to distance itself from the PKK-affiliated Democratic Union Party (PYD), and pressure on the coalition to create a buffer zone that strategically divides Kurdish cantons in Syria. These developments elucidate a concerning dilemma: the United States must find a way to balance its new cooperation with a strategic ethnic minority against an important military and security-focused relationship with the geostrategic NATO ally. Through a historical analysis of U.S.-Turkish relations regarding the Kurds, examination of U.S. national interests, and 24 elite interviews, this paper investigates the Unites States’ prioritization of security over human rights regarding its relationship with Turkey. This thesis concludes with policy recommendations to the United States, recommending the United States prioritizes the “Kurdish Question” and holds Turkey accountable for its actions in order to achieve peace, security, and stability both in the fight against ISIL and in the region.
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List of Acronyms

AKP: Justice and Development Party, current majority party in Turkey
BDP: Peace and Democracy Party, predecessor to the People’s Democratic Party (HDP)
CHP: Republican People’s Party, the part of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk
DP: Democrat Party, moderately right-wing party that was ousted in the 1960 military coup
DTP: Democratic Society Party, Kurdish nationalist political party that was outlawed by the Constitutional Court in 2009
HDP: People’s Democratic Party, first pro-Kurdish party elected to Parliament
KCK: Group of Communities of Kurdistan, umbrella organization of which the PKK is the military wing
MHP: Nationalist Movement Party, far-right party
NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PKK: Kurdistan Worker’s Party, Turkish Kurdish nationalist terrorist group
PYD: Democratic Union Party, Syrian Kurdish political party with strong affiliation with the Turkish PKK
RP: Welfare Party, predecessor to the AKP
YPG: People’s Protection Units, the main armed services of the Kurdish Supreme Committee, which is the self-declared governing body of Syrian Kurdistan
Chapter 1: Setting the Stage

The “Kurdish Question” Today

Although the Kurdish people lack a state and only make up a tiny fraction of the world’s 7.3 billion populace, they have become increasingly relevant to American foreign policy in the Middle East. As Syria devolved into civil unrest and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) rose to prominence in Iraq and Syria, the United States’ cooperation with the Kurds in the fight against ISIL and the subsequent heightened media attention of this cooperation has made the ethnic minority a more recognizable name in America. However, the mainstream media often glosses over the complexity surrounding Turkey’s July 2015 entrance into the fight against ISIL and the multifaceted “Kurdish Question”. Although media coverage of the Kurds has recently increased, the question of the Kurds’ role in the region is not new, as deep historical, political, and cultural aspects complicate the longstanding struggle of the Kurds. The events over the past two years have therefore not illuminated a new problem but have instead re-situated and further internationalized the “Kurdish Question”. The United States faces a difficult decision and must determine what policy it should pursue in addressing the position of the Kurds in Turkey, supporting a NATO ally in its fight against terrorism, and combatting the threat of ISIL. After presenting an analysis of the U.S.-Turkish relationship and the “Kurdish Question” in Turkey, this thesis recommends the United States prioritizes the “Kurdish Question” and holds Turkey accountable for its actions in order to achieve peace, security, and stability both in the fight against ISIL and in the region.

Who are the Kurds?

As the Middle East’s fourth largest ethnic group, the predominantly Sunni Muslim Kurds have played an important role in the history of the region. Despite, or perhaps because of, their large size—collectively there are around 30 million Kurds making up 18%, 17.5%, 10%, and 9.7% of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria’s population respectively—the Kurds have historically faced persecution and oppression in the region. The present-day “Kurdish Question,” also known as the “Kurdish Issue,” is a multi-faceted problem that came to a head following the 1925 Sheikh Said rebellion, which called for independence, or at least for more of a voice, for the Kurdish peoples in Anatolia. The “Kurdish Question” has since evolved into a complicated set of questions concerning autonomy, strategic underdevelopment, political manipulation, and the struggle for cultural recognition in the various countries the Kurds’ predominantly reside.

The tensions in their current form can be traced back to the end of World War I and the breakdown of the Ottoman Empire. For the Kurds, the empire’s dissolution presented them with an opportunity to form an independent Kurdistan. At the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, Şerif Pasha, president of the Kurd’s Delegation to the Peace Conference, proposed the creation of an independent Kurdistan spanning across present-day Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. However, the Western allies rejected the proposed map over disagreements regarding the suggested borders.

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1 This thesis will refer to the Islamic State as ISIL; however other names including Islamic States in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Daesh, and the Islamic State
and replaced it with the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, which delineated plans for a smaller territorial Kurdistan to be determined through a future referendum. The Treaty of Sèvres split up the Ottoman Empire, partitioned much of the land into “zones of influence,” and placed harsh terms on the Turks. The resulting Turkish War for Independence, led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Grand National Assembly, prevented the ratification of the treaty. The Treaty of Sèvres was replaced by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which established the borders of the present-day Turkish Republic. The Kurds were left without a nation-state. The development of the “Kurdish Question” can therefore be tracked back to this territorial splitting (see Map below) of the Kurds across Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria.

Map of present-day Kurdish areas throughout the region, from the Council on Foreign Relations, “The Time of the Kurds”

Although the Kurds are often referred to as the largest stateless nation, territorial integrity has not been the sole source of grievance for the Kurds throughout the region. Disagreements have also centered on questions of cultural, social, and political rights in their respective countries. Despite this shared experience of violence and treatment as second-class citizens, the Kurds are not always unified in their goals or beliefs. Often tensions follow internal divisions, including tribal, linguistic, ideological, national, and political differences. Historically, different Kurdish political groups and organizations have desired varying levels of political autonomy and preferred different means to achieve these goals, with some utilizing violence and others preferring political channels. Indeed, many Kurds who have integrated into life in Istanbul, Tehran, and other cities, do not want an independent Kurdistan. Whereas those who

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7 Charountaki, The Kurds and US Foreign Policy: International Relations in the Middle East Since 1945.
8 Abdulla et al., “The Time of the Kurds.”
have remained in the historical “motherland”—spanning across southeastern Turkey, northeastern Syria, northern Iraq, and western Iran—have higher levels of support for movements focused on fighting for independence. Nonetheless, when faced with adversity like ISIL’s attacks on Kurdish areas in Iraq, Syria, and along the Turkish border, some Kurds have begun to rally around their shared history and the need to protect each other. It is precisely this ability to plug in to a shared Kurdish identity, and the possible united call for a homeland or increased local autonomy that worries Turkey.

The “Kurdish Question” in Turkey

Impacting aspects of Turkey’s relationship with other countries, the “Kurdish Question” has remained a highly contentious issue within Turkey since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey. Although the Kurdish population in Turkey is the country’s largest ethnic minority, with estimates hovering around 18% percent of the population or around 14-15 million individuals, the Kurds’ ethnicity, along with other minority groups in Turkey, remains unrecognized in the current constitution. The brutal attempts from the Turkish state to suppress any Kurdish expression began at the foundation of the Republic when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk started a process of assimilation and “Turkification,” which included the creation of a civic identity and erasure of ethnic identities, including Kurdish expression of identity. This intense nationalism sparked unrest and protests that propped up sporadically over the following decades. Additionally, the oppressive treatment of the Kurds in Syria and Iraq in the 1970s and 1980s compounded the discontent of Kurds in Turkey.

Kurdish resentment ultimately led a group of leftist students of Kurdish descent to establish the Kurdistan’s Workers Party (PKK), in 1978. Led by Abdullah Ocalan the PKK sought to incite a revolution to free the Kurdish people, transform Turkish society to end the systemic suppression of Kurdish cultural identity, and establish an independent Kurdish state. After the violent military coup of 1980, the PKK fled to the Bekaa Valley in Syrian-controlled parts of Lebanon and set up training camps. They launched their first armed struggle in 1984 when they attacked Turkish army posts in Erbub and Semdinli, quickly becoming a threat to the Turkish state because of their use of guerrilla warfare and violence. The PKK received support

14 Abdulla et al., “The Time of the Kurds.”
not only from Turkish Kurds but also from Kurds throughout the region, the Syrian government, and the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{16}

In response to the PKK’s terrorism, Turkey began an armed conflict against the PKK. In support of its NATO ally, the U.S. sold Turkey $15 billion worth of weapons between 1980 and 1991. Human rights activists in the U.S. critiqued America’s support of Turkey, claiming that these weapons were used to fight the Kurds in an inhumane manner, resulting in tens of thousands of Kurds killed and millions relocated.\textsuperscript{17} Most estimates today place the death toll of the nearly four-decade conflict at over 40,000, with most of these deaths belonging to Kurdish individuals.\textsuperscript{18} The Turkish government estimates that 11,700 Turks—security personnel and Turkish as well as Turkish Kurdish citizens—and 30,000 to 40,000 PKK members have died since the 1980s.\textsuperscript{19}

The internal Turkish crackdown on the Kurds and other regional events, particularly in Iraq, internationalized the “Kurdish Question” during the bloodiest years of the protracted conflict—the 1990s. A no-fly zone created during the Gulf War led to the \textit{de facto} creation of a semi-autonomous Kurdistan in northern Iraq.\textsuperscript{20} The autonomy of the Iraqi Kurds, coupled with the Iraqi Kurds strong connections with the PKK, frightened Turkey. Although some U.S. politicians and human rights organizations condemned Turkey’s treatment of the Kurds and demanded America reconsider its military assistance, U.S. policy did not deviate. Only the U.S. Department of States acknowledged Turkey’s use of U.S. weapons to commit human rights abuses, while the Clinton Administration remained largely determined to ignore the internal conflict and deny America’s tacit support of these violations. Turkey’s strategic importance and relationship with Israel was considered more valuable than attempting to restrict arms sales and influence Turkey’s domestic developments.\textsuperscript{21}

Although some scholars believe that continued violence could risk U.S.-Turkish relations, the United States has generally supported its regional ally over Kurdish organizations or rights. In particular the United States has supported—rhetorically and through policy—Turkey’s anxieties about the PKK and policy of defeating the PKK in Turkey and in Iraqi

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\textsuperscript{16} Hevian, “The Main Kurdish Political Parties in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey: A Research Guide”; McKiernan, “Turkey’s War on the Kurds”; “Terrorist Organization Profile: Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK).”

\textsuperscript{17} Mike Amitay, August 2015; McKiernan, “Turkey’s War on the Kurds.”


\textsuperscript{19} Zanotti, “Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations,” p. 27.

\textsuperscript{20} Abdulla et al., “The Time of the Kurds”; Hatem and Dohrmann, “Turkey’s Fix for the ‘Kurdish Problem’: Ankara’s Challenges.”

strongholds. After the “soft-coup” of 1997, the U.S. designated the PKK as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, effectively allying the U.S. and Turkey against the Kurds’ violent struggle for autonomy. The U.S. government’s designation of the PKK as a terrorist organization cemented the de facto support of Turkey’s fight against terrorism if ever a choice between the PKK and Turkey arose.

Changing the Game

Throughout the Obama administration, U.S.-Turkish relations have oscillated, with the “Kurdish Question” often superseded by other priorities in bilateral relations. In dealing with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the current President of Turkey and former head of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), the United States has prioritized stable relations in hopes of securing important points of cooperation, particularly regarding NATO and other security assistance. However, several recent developments have made avoiding the “Kurdish Question” harder for U.S. policymakers.

The changing political dynamics within Turkey have made it more difficult for the Obama administration to ignore the human rights violations committed by both the Turkish state and the PKK. Quite notably, and as recently as 2012, Prime Minister Erdoğan (current President) and the AKP took steps to address Kurdish grievance and began peace negotiations with Abdullah Ocalan. However, the peace negotiations threatened to disintegrate after ISIL’s attack on Kobane, a Syrian Kurdish town on the border with Turkey, spurred the October 2014 protests in Turkey. The Turkish government would not allow Turkish Kurds to cross the border and join the fight against ISIL, largely stemming from the Turkish government’s fear that the PKK would later use the weapons acquired in the fight against Turkey and resume violence in the future. The Turkish government’s inaction to support the Kurds in Kobane fostered a lot of frustration among Kurds throughout the country. The two-year cease-fire threatened to break; however the peace talks remained intact until the events in the summer of 2015.

The summer of 2015 saw both the historic win of a pro-Kurdish political party and the breakdown of the peace process. The June 7th elections were the first time the AKP feared it would lose votes and ultimately fail to achieve a majority in Parliament. It was also the first time a pro-Kurdish, left-leaning political party ran as a party instead of independent candidates. The People’s Democratic Party (HDP), which gains support from both pro-Kurdish and extreme left voting blocs, passed the 10% threshold and won 13.1% of the vote. The historic win for the Kurds angered Erdoğan, as the AKP was forced to either create a coalition with the Republican

23 In February 1997, the Turkish military issued an 18-point declaration of demands the Islamist Refah or Welfare Party needed to take in order to protect secularism. The threat of a military coup and the ultimatums led to the Necmettin Erbakan government to fall. Because there was no direct military force, the 1997 coup is often referred to as a “soft coup” or “post-modern” coup.
27 “Turkey and Its Kurds: Dreams of Self-Rule.”
People’s Party (CHP), Turkish Nationalist Action Party (MHP), or HDP or call snap elections. A coalition was not created and elections were announced to take place on November 1st.

The June elections were an important advancement toward pluralistic democracy in Turkey and anticipated progress on the “Kurdish Question,” but instability across Turkey’s border has highlighted the tensions in U.S.-Turkish relations in the region with regards to the Kurds. For years the United States has lobbied Turkey to join the fight against ISIL. In July 2015, Turkey announced it would allow U.S. planes to use its air base in Incirlik and would begin its own air strikes against ISIL. Turkish fighter jets attacked ISIL while simultaneously attacking Kurdish targets in northern Iraq and arresting individuals in Turkey for supposed ties to the PKK. Many experts link these developments to Erdoğan’s attempt to win back an AKP majority in the November 1st elections. By creating a diversionary war and linking this instability and insecurity to the June election results, Erdoğan hoped to win back votes from the HDP and the ultra-nationalist MHP in the November 1st elections. Erdoğan and the AKP were successful in this endeavor as the AKP gained 49.4% of the votes, while the MHP garnered 12%, the HDP won 10.8% and the CHP hovered around its previous numbers at 25%. Although the AKP may have taken back their desired majority, the air raids against PKK targets ended the cease-fire, completely halted the peace process, and led to increased violence throughout the country.

Tensions between the United States and Turkey currently center on the collapsed peace process, increasing authoritarianism of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, perceived disingenuous entrance into the fight against ISIL, and the role of the Kurds in the anti-ISIL coalition. As the “Kurdish Question” becomes re-situated within a larger regional context that embroils security concerns with questions of principles and political rights, the United States must determine what course of actions to take. This thesis will therefore seek to analyze the historical and political

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relations between the Kurds, Turkey, and the U.S. in order to answer the question: What should be U.S. foreign policy towards Turkey, considering the Turkish “Kurdish Question”?

**Defining America’s National Interest**

American foreign policy throughout the country’s history has evolved, and with the shifting of goals and approaches, theories about foreign policy strategy and the policy-making process have also developed. A fundamental underpinning in the study of international relations (IR) is the lack of an international governing body, rendering the international system quasi-anarchic. Early theories in international relations, therefore, conceptualized “rational” nation-states as the primary actor, seeking to balance power and achieve self-preservation. Although new IR theories have built off of early theory to include other levels of analysis and complexity, this understanding of a quasi-anarchic world order remains necessary to understand the bulk of American foreign policy. Diverging from these original theories, an important progression in foreign policy theory has been the increasing consideration given to non-state actors like the Kurds in foreign policy considerations. Furthermore, policymakers have introduced human rights concerns, with varying success, into foreign policy over the past decades, setting a precedent for the possible consideration of Kurdish rights in American foreign policy making.

The degree to which America should intervene in other sovereign nations’ internal affairs has been a consistent tension within foreign policy making. Part of this paradigm rests on the belief of American exceptionalism and the confidence that no other country poses a serious threat to the power and security of the United States. However other ideological movements and world events, such as wars and economic crises, have influenced American government leaders’ calculus on whether or not to act as the “global police”. The pendulum has swung back and forth, with the desire to “return to normalcy” after World War I impelling American leadership to turn inwards and attempt to stay out of global affairs. However, after World War II, American leaders stressed the country’s responsibility to shape a peaceful, secure world. President Franklin D. Roosevelt promoted the four freedoms: freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. Furthermore international institutions like the Bretton Woods Agreement and the United Nations were established to promote economic prosperity and spread democracy. The contrast between President Warren G. Harding’s “return


38 Charountaki, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy: International Relations in the Middle East Since 1945*.


to normalcy” and President Roosevelt’s four freedoms helps illustrate the variation in interests, goals, and ideals that have pulled American foreign policy in diverging directions.

Foreign policy-making also requires a balancing act between external, global factors and internal politics.\(^4\) Of course, global distribution of power and world political events influence American foreign policy priorities.\(^5\) However because foreign policy making is a “two-level game,” where policymakers must navigate both domestic and international politics to determine and pass foreign policy, the “optimal” foreign policy is not always followed.\(^6\) Domestic elements of a country, including public opinion, internal values and norms, history, and culture, greatly impacts the feasibility of certain policies. Furthermore, the policymaking process in America, which can be highly fragmented as the President and Congress wrestle over power, may result in policies that are limited in innovation and creativity. Individual government officials and policymakers with their personal values and perceptions of the national interest can also influence the grand strategy of the country. Overall foreign policymaking is a highly complex process that involves multiple actors—states, governments, individuals, and non-state actors—that hold varying interests.\(^7\) The challenge for government leaders is then to determine the best policy that is both strategic and feasible.

Because ensuring America’s national interest around the world remains a consistent goal for American policymakers regardless of their political ideologies, the question for government leaders’ centers on how to define the U.S. national interest. Rhetoric and policy patterns point to several enduring objectives: securing peace and stability worldwide, pursuing economic prosperity, attaining security and power, and promoting American ideals and values.\(^8\) These interests underpin the basis of Bruce Jentleson’s 4 P’s approach. Because Jentleson’s 4 P’s approach provides a useful framework to analyze both the tradeoffs and overlap between different foreign policy goals, this thesis utilizes the 4 P’s framework to examine the role of power, peace, prosperity, and principles in defining America’s national interest and developing American foreign policy. Using the 4 P’s as a framework, the researcher will derive four models of U.S. policy towards Turkey, considering the “Kurdish Question.” Because the pursuit of peace is relevant to the current political landscape regardless of the other three priorities—power, principles, and prosperity—securing peace will not constitute a separate model. Instead securing peace will be folded in to the models centered on power, prosperity, and principles. The four models described below will drive the analysis in subsequent chapters and the concluding creation of policy recommendations.

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\(^7\) Wittkopf, Kegley, and Scott, *American Foreign Policy: Pattern and Process*.

Pursuit of Power

Achieving power within the global structure has been the basis, and in most cases the most important factor, in determining American foreign policy. As emphasized by realist theory, nation-states act in pursuit of their own self-interest, self-preservation, and self-defense. Power often trumps other considerations, such as economic prosperity, human rights, peace, or promotion of American ideals. U.S. foreign policy during the bulk of the Cold War had realist underpinnings. Foreign policy centered predominantly on nuclear deterrence and containing Soviet expansion. Even after the Cold War, power remains an important priority in American foreign policy. The War on Terror, for example, places a premium on security, stability, and national defense in the service of defeating organizations and ideologies that pose a threat to America’s national interest.

With realist theory in mind and due to the balance of power between Turkey and the Kurds, Model 1 is:

*If the United States defines the national interest as prioritizing power, then United States’ foreign policy towards Turkey, considering the “Kurdish Question,” will always side with Turkey over the Kurds.*

As Turkey and the U.S. have a robust history of power-centered relations, particularly military and diplomatic ties because of Turkey’s NATO membership and its geostrategic proximity to Central Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, policymaking based on Model 1 would center on power, military cooperation, and other coercive forms of hard power. During the Cold War, U.S. foreign policy towards Turkey would therefore focus on containment, placing other human rights concerns, including Turkey’s contentious relationship with Greece and Cyprus, Turkey’s numerous military coups, and the internal Kurdish struggle on the backburner. During the post-Cold War period from President George H.W. Bush to President George W. Bush, Turkey’s importance as a NATO ally in the Gulf War, the Yugoslav Wars, and the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan would again supersede democratic or other human rights concerns, including the death squads and intensified violence with the PKK of the 1990s. Finally, during the Obama Administration, Turkey’s role in the fight against ISIL would be prioritized over rectifying the derailed peace process, partnering with the Kurds, and voicing concern over the generally disturbing democratic backsliding in the country.

Prioritizing Prosperity

Foreign policy that prioritizes prosperity centers on economic policies that benefit America. Some theories seek to benefit all of America generally through free trade agreements and economic liberalization, while others strive to serve the interests of the capitalist elites, such as corporations and financial institutions. Despite focusing on different beneficiaries, foreign

policy approaches that emphasize America’s prosperity focus on improving economic relations. Model 2 is then:

If the United States defines the national interest as achieving prosperity, then United States’ foreign policy towards Turkey, considering the “Kurdish Question,” will prioritize economic interests.

If Model 2 most closely approximates U.S. foreign policy goals, then policy towards Turkey will be focused on economic relations. For example, Turkey’s pursued economic liberalization during the 1990s would be met with increased trade relations, economic cooperation through international institutions such as the World Trade Organization, and U.S. foreign direct investment in to the country. Furthermore trade with Turkey, including the selling of U.S. weapons despite human rights concerns that U.S. weapons were being used against Kurds in the Southeast, would be of top priority. Another possible policy that would be seen if Model 2 holds true would be U.S. companies increasing their foreign direct investment during the Obama Administration despite democratic considerations, concerns about lessening media rights, the Cyprus ordeal, and the “Kurdish Question”. Investment and business interests would drive policymaking and bilateral relations.

Promoting Principles

A principled approach focuses on American values and ideals. This method is grounded in Democratic idealism, which argues that: 1) “right” should be chosen over “might”, and 2) over the long-term “right” fosters “might,” achieving peace and power. Democratic peace theory, a classic example of Democratic idealism, argues that by promoting democracy the number of wars will decrease because of the inherent aversion of democracies to go to war. Generally prioritizing principles is controversial, as long-standing debates exist over the role America should play in imposing its values throughout the world. In the Post-Cold War world President George H. W. Bush and numerous subsequent presidents have followed the legacy of President Woodrow Wilson and President Jimmy Carter, at least rhetorically, and promoted the spread of democracy. However principles are often subjugated over other concerns in foreign policy decision-making. If this does not happen then Model 3 is:

If the United States defines the national interest as prioritizing principles, then United States’ foreign policy towards Turkey, considering the “Kurdish Question,” will center on advancing ideals regardless of its effect on bilateral relations.

If this model most closely illustrates American foreign policy making, then United States’ foreign policy towards Turkey would not shy away from various “thorny issues” that

51 Jentleson, American Foreign Policy; Wittkopf, Kegley, and Scott, American Foreign Policy: Pattern and Process; Christopher, American Foreign Policy: Principles and Opportunities.
53 Jentleson, American Foreign Policy.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.; Allison and Zelikow, Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis; Hook and Spanier, American Foreign Policy Since World War II.
56 Jentleson, American Foreign Policy; Wittkopf, Kegley, and Scott, American Foreign Policy: Pattern and Process; Shestack, “Human Rights, the National Interest, and U.S. Foreign Policy”; Forsythe, “Human Rights in U.S. Foreign Policy: Restrospect and Prospect.”
mark U.S.-Turkish relations, including Cyprus, the Armenian genocide, internal politics, and the “Kurdish Question”. During the Cold War, the United States would then be more publicly and privately critical of Turkey’s military coups, invasion of Cyprus, and lack of democratic institutions. The Truman Doctrine and subsequent economic and military aid might have contained more democratic conditions, and the desire to contain the Soviet Union would not be the only consideration in determining bilateral relations. Post-Cold War relations would include Congressional resolutions recognizing the Armenian Genocide and a halting of military aid founded on a principled approach regarding the “Kurdish Question” and treatment of the Kurds. Additionally, the U.S. might not have classified the PKK as a foreign terrorist organization. Throughout the current administration, President Obama would be more critical of Erdoğan’s increasing authoritarianism, occasionally doubtful genuine commitment to the PKK peace process, and bombing of Kurdish targets in Iraq and Syria.

Balancing The 4 P’s

Although the aforementioned models isolate American goals, all of the national interests are considered in almost all foreign policy decisions. Sometimes all four can be achieved, but often a policy decision requires tradeoffs. Regarding the “Kurdish Question” the best foreign policy would achieve power, peace, and prosperity, as well as promote principles. Model 4 is:

If the United States prioritizes the “Kurdish Question,” it will carefully weigh the tradeoffs to formulate foreign policy that defines the national interest as a combination of power, peace, prosperity, and principles.

In general there exists a continuum of policy recommendations regarding the Kurds, with some options prioritizing principles and human rights considerations and other approaches arguing that the “Kurdish Question” is too sensitive to risk unhinging U.S.-Turkish relations. Policy that focuses on human rights and principles urge the U.S. to pressure Turkey to grant rights to the Kurdish population, including promoting economic development in the Southeast of the country, cultural rights, and local autonomy. A common power-oriented recommendation is assisting Turkey in their attempts to defeat the PKK through intelligence sharing, dismantling PKK safe havens in Iraq, providing Turkey with weapons to fight the PKK, and supporting the current peace talks between Turkey and the PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. However in light of current developments in Syria and Iraq, some recommendations include supporting the Kurds in the fight against ISIL, declassifying the PKK as a terrorist organization in order to enable the U.S. to arm them as a “moderate rebel,” and supporting the possibility of an independent Kurdistan. Present-day policy recommendations therefore span across wide variations in U.S. involvement and understandings of America’s obligations and desired goals.

If Model 4 can be achieved, this thesis seeks to determine the best way the United States can balance these priorities—power, peace, and prosperity—while still justly addressing the

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57 Jentleson, American Foreign Policy; Wittkopf, Kegley, and Scott, American Foreign Policy: Pattern and Process.
59 Carpenter, “Estrangement: The United States and Turkey in a Multipolar Era.”
62 Atran and Stone, “The Kurds’ Heroic Stand Against ISIS.”
“Kurdish Question,” which is often categorized as a principle-based priority. By applying the 4 P’s to U.S. policy towards Turkey, considering the “Kurdish Question,” this thesis will provide a new lens to frame the policy options. In doing so this thesis will ultimately focus on the Obama administration and current policy options in order to provide policy recommendations to the U.S. Government.

Methodology

In answering the research question, this thesis examines the “Kurdish Question” in the context of general U.S.-Turkish relations by marrying historical analysis and foreign policy analysis. Through surveying the historical relationship from the formation of the Turkish Republic until present-day, this thesis examines what has been U.S. policy towards Turkey considering the “Kurdish Question” and why. The successes and failures of U.S. policy towards Turkey, as well as the internal developments in Turkey and regional changes, inform what the current policy should be.

Understanding the U.S.-Turkish and U.S-Kurdish relationships requires an in-depth historical case study starting from the Cold War. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 examine both U.S.-Turkish relations and Turkish domestic politics, particularly Turkish-Kurdish relations. Chapter 2 will focus on the Cold War period, Chapter 3 will analyze developments from President George H.W. Bush’s administration to President George W. Bush’s administration, and Chapter 4 will focus on the Obama administration. As the ultimate aim of this thesis is to determine what policy recommendations the United States should pursue, considerably more attention is paid to outlining the more recent progressions in U.S.-Turkish and U.S.-Kurdish relations during the Obama administration.

Throughout the historical analysis, attention will be paid to the four models to determine if and how they apply. The conclusion will analyze current policy options to determine the tradeoffs and utility of each policy. In doing so, the thesis will use Model 4 to determine what the U.S. policy should be towards Turkey considering the current re-situation of the “Kurdish Question”. By determining what the best course of action is for the U.S., this thesis hopes to illustrate the significance of Turkey as an ally and the growing importance of structuring a foreign policy strategy that fairly considers the Turkish “Kurdish Question” in an increasingly unstable region.

The data will be compiled from a detailed literature review, document analysis, and expert interviews. The literature review and document analysis draws on primary and secondary sources. In addition to extensive research of written sources, the researcher interviewed experts in order to contextual the research and policy recommendations. The interviews were semi-structured and the questions sought to address several themes, or modules, and were tailored according to the specific interviewee. The modules used were as follows: perceived U.S. national interest towards Turkey, perceived Turkish national interest towards the U.S., current instabilities, the historical and current “Kurdish Question,” the 2015 Parliamentary elections, and policy recommendations for the United States.

The researcher conducted the first rounds of interviews between May 13 and May 25, 2015, in Istanbul and Ankara. Overall, 17 individuals, including journalists, think tank experts, human rights activists, professors, and military officials, were interviewed. The researcher chose interviewees using a combination of factors: research and expertise, availability, and the researcher’s ability to leverage contacts to identify interviewees. The interviews provided a much deeper understanding of the Turkish and Turkish Kurdish perspective, as well as the Turkish perception of the United States and U.S.-Turkish bilateral relations.
The second round of interviews took place in Washington, D.C., in July and August 2015. The researcher interviewed 7 U.S. foreign policy experts and government officials to gain a deeper understanding of U.S. goals in Turkey and feasible policy recommendations. Specialists on Turkey from various think tanks and research organizations provided insight into the evolution and future direction of U.S.-Turkey relations.
Chapter 2: Foundations of Modern U.S.-Turkish Relations: The Cold War

Understanding the establishment of the Republic of Turkey and the subsequent formation of a nation-state modeled on Europe informs a deeper analysis of the modern U.S.-Turkish relationship and the current Turkish “Kurdish Question”. The Republic of Turkey was founded in 1923 after two bloody wars: World War 1, which led to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, and the Turkish War of Independence. Mustafa Kemal, also known as Atatürk (meaning father of the Turks) was the Republic’s first President and began an instant civilizing and secularizing mission. Often seen as the “savior” of Turkey both from foreign occupation and from territorial disintegration, the legacy of Atatürk remains strong today. Likewise, the rejection of multiculturalism that he fostered also weighs heavy on the current “Kurdish Question”.63

Atatürk pushed forth an intense ideological and cultural shift within Turkey, referred to as Kemalism. The three main pillars were 1) radical secularism, 2) assimilationist nationalism, and 3) a pro-modern and pro-Western perspective. Heavily influenced by the French Revolution and the French concept of laïcité, Atatürk promoted laïklık, which was an intense and militant form of state-enforced secularism. The new Republic would not allow religion in the public sphere. The Islamic call to prayer was to be spoken in Turkish and the central government maintained control over the Friday prayer’s sermons. In regards to the second pillar, Atatürk and his military elites defined “Turkishness” as a “common national, linguistic, and territorial identity superseding tribal and other ethnic identities.”64 Multiculturalism was not accepted and all citizens were to embrace “Turkishness” in an attempt to create a fully homogenous state that would not encounter the same dismemberment as the multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire.65

In the process of “Turkification,” Atatürk outlawed any practice considered “backwards” or tied to the Ottoman past. Headscarves were outlawed, the previously Ottoman hybrid of the Perso-Arabic script was changed to the Latin alphabet, and other regulations on proper, “modern” attire were enforced. Furthermore, Atatürk erased ethnic identities by creating a civic identity. Kurds were described as “mountain Turks,” and Atatürk’s motto, “How happy is the one who says ‘I am a Turk’,” was publicized throughout the country.66 Moreover in 1924, a mandate outlawed the existence of Kurdish organizations, schools, and publications. The mandate even outlawed the words “Kurd” and “Kurdistan,” effectively making written or verbal acknowledgement of the existence of Kurds illegal in the new Turkish Republic.67 Overall the formation of the Turkish Republic and the subsequent decades were characterized by authoritarianism and suppression in the name of secularism and modernity.68

64 Gordon and Taspinar, Winning Turkey: How America, Europe, and Turkey Can Revive A Fading Partnership.
Not surprisingly, this militant secularism and suppression of disparate ethnic identities angered Kurds and other ethnic minorities throughout the country. The 1925 Sheikh Said rebellion was violently crushed by the Turkish military and followed by the declaration of martial law and placement of 52,000 Turkish troops into the predominantly Kurdish regions of the country. Later rebellions including the 1930 revolt in Ararat and 1938 revolt in Dersim were met with similar suppression as the Kurdish call for a degree of independence was viewed as a threat to the Kemalist conception of a unified, secular Turkish state.69

In fact between 1925 and 1938, the Turkish Republic withstood 16 Kurdish rebellions that threatened the stability of the new country. These revolts tempered the new Republic’s territorial ambitions, including its previously enthusiastic claims over the oil-rich, but predominantly Kurdish, Mosul and Kirkuk in northern-Iraq. However, the British Foreign Office determined that these disputed territories should become a part of the British mandated-modern Iraq. The losses of Mosul and Kirkuk have left permanent dents in Turkey’s collective memory. Many Turks believe Britain instigated Kurdish rebellions in hopes of revealing the difficulties Turkey would face if it attempted to acquire Mosul and Kirkuk.70 This territorial loss bolstered the earlier implanted idea that the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, which had included plans for an independent Kurdistan, illustrated Western conspiratorial plans to weaken the Turkish state.71

In response to the Kurdish uprisings, Turkey pursued forced displacement and assimilation in Kurdish regions. In 1927, the Republic passed a law allowing the government to forcibly relocate “an indefinite number of Kurds” from southeastern provinces and a 1934 law gave the state the power to forcibly assimilate of “evacuate” regions in the country with “non-Turkish culture” or language.72 The Association of France-Kurdistan estimates that between 1925 and 1939, 1.5 million Kurds, or a third of the Turkish Kurdish population, were deported and/or massacred.73 The 1927 and 1934 laws, and subsequent deportation and assimilation policies, were intent to weaken Kurdish social bonds, erase the Kurdish identity, and encourage urbanization of the Kurdish population.74

Atatürk’s legacy of Kemalism, militant secularism, and rejection of disparate ethnic or national identities has greatly influenced Turkey even decades after his death. The cult of personality surrounding Atatürk remains, to a large degree, within the political and military elite of Turkey and was utilized to justify military coups and other assimilationist practices. The “cultural revolution” he led has informed domestic politics, Turkey’s foreign policy position, and the Turkish “Kurdish Question,” even today.75

Turkey’s “Kurdish Question”: Foundations for the Kurdistan Worker’s Party

The Cold War period was marked by Turkish military coups and a general militant secularism in line with Atatürk’s dedication to a civic definition of a “Turk”. 76 Although Turkey

69 Hatem and Dohrmann, “Turkey’s Fix for the ‘Kurdish Problem’: Ankara’s Challenges.”
71 Hatem and Dohrmann, “Turkey’s Fix for the ‘Kurdish Problem’: Ankara’s Challenges.”
72 Ibid.
73 Callimanopulos, “Kurdish Repression in Turkey.”
74 Hatem and Dohrmann, “Turkey’s Fix for the ‘Kurdish Problem’: Ankara’s Challenges.”
began to democratize with the introduction of multi-party elections in 1950, the Cold War period, particularly the early period, illustrated a devotion to stability and security over principles. In the 1950s and 1960s, the United States’ prioritization of stability and containment enabled Turkish militant secularism to squash minority rights, particularly those of the Kurds. This approach to the “Kurdish Question” was fairly uniform throughout the region as the United States’ policy regarding the Kurds depended on how Kurdish demands may or may not detract from U.S. national interests in the Middle East.

Although the United States sought to maintain the status quo throughout the region, including in Turkey, Kurds in Turkey protested and sought increased rights. In the 1950s and 1960s, Kurdish rebellions were sporadic, generally religious in nature, and dependent on tribes. During the same period, many Kurdish and Anatolian families migrated to big cities because of the mechanization of the agricultural sector. This migration from rural to urban facilitated an increasing number of Kurds working in factories. As political leftist groups, such as communism, influenced these factories, Kurdish activism became leftist during the 1960s and 1970s.

This evolution of the Kurdish nationalist struggle coincided with a general movement throughout Turkey in which the traditional twin threats of Islamism and Kurdish activism evolved into the struggle between the right and the left. In 1960 the military carried out a coup, ousting Prime Minister Adnan Menderes and “restoring” the Kemalist order. True to Kemalism’s legacy, multiculturalism was not embraced. The 1961 Constitution legitimized military intervention in to civil political life whenever the military believed Kemalist principles were in peril. Furthermore, the Constitution restricted recognition of non-Turkish identities like Kurdish. Despite the undemocratic nature of the military coup, the United States supported it. This support was predicated on the belief that the military and new government were strongly anti-communist and would therefore ensure stability in the important ally of Turkey. Similarly, the CIA-backed the March 1971 military coup, which further marginalized the Kurds through increased forced assimilation and intimidation.

The various military coups and continuation of Atatürk’s legacy led to continued unrest within Kurdish populations. The Turkish government continued its violent suppression of the Kurdish identity and deliberately kept the Kurdish regions underdeveloped. Between 1968 and 1975, only 10.7 billion liras were invested in to East and Southeast Anatolia, representing 2.4% of national investment. This percentage lays in stark contrast to the 31.1% invested in Marmara, 20.8% in the Aegean region, and 16.4% in the Mediterranean area. This underdevelopment continued and remains a point of tension in the current Kurdish regions.

During the 1970s, Turkey experienced extreme political unrest. The Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK) was founded in 1974 and was heavily influenced by Marxism-Leninist communism and general leftist ideologies prevalent during the period. The PKK was extremely active during the violence in the 1970s and this instability prompted the 1980 military coup. The new 1980 Constitution banned the formation of any political party centered on ethnic or cultural grounds.

78 Charountaki, The Kurds and US Foreign Policy: International Relations in the Middle East Since 1945.
79 Unver, “Turkey’s ‘Kurdish Initiative’: What Went Wrong? (Or Did It?)”
80 Charountaki, “Turkish Foreign Policy and the Kurdistan Regional Government”; Unver, “Turkey’s ‘Kurdish Initiative’: What Went Wrong? (Or Did It?)”; Gordon and Taspinar, Winning Turkey: How America, Europe, and Turkey Can Revive A Fading Partnership.
81 Charountaki, The Kurds and US Foreign Policy: International Relations in the Middle East Since 1945.
82 Hatem and Dohrmann, “Turkey’s Fix for the ‘Kurdish Problem’: Ankara’s Challenges”; Callimanopulos, “Kurdish Repression in Turkey”; Unver, “Turkey’s ‘Kurdish Initiative’: What Went Wrong? (Or Did It?).”
83 Callimanopulos, “Kurdish Repression in Turkey.”
provided for non-recognition of the status of ethnic minorities, and codified the belief that all citizens in Turkey were exclusively Turkish. The Kurdish language was banned and other expressions of Kurdishness were repressed. Again the United States supported these actions, as the United States worried about the spread of Communism.\textsuperscript{84} As the PKK was greatly influenced by communism and received support from the Soviet Union, the United States was not particularly sympathetic to their cause.\textsuperscript{85}

The result of the 1980 coup, however, was extremely devastating to the Kurdish population. The military began to “Turkify” the villages and towns and many Kurdish activists faced dire living conditions and torture in the Diyarbakir military prison.\textsuperscript{86} During the nine months immediately following the coup, 122,609 people were taken into custody, including 20,000 Kurdish political protestors. By 1982, 81,634 individuals living in Kurdish provinces were arrested with many being tortured or receiving the death penalty.\textsuperscript{87} Furthermore between 1980 and 1982 the Southeastern and Eastern provinces experienced five military campaigns aimed at terrorizing the Kurds.\textsuperscript{88} The dissatisfaction due to the arrests, prison sentences, and general military campaign of terror enabled intense recruiting for the PKK. Kurds who had been imprisoned felt betrayed by the state and the PKK prepared for an armed resistance.\textsuperscript{89} In August 1984, the PKK launched its first armed attack against two military outposts in Erub and Semdinli. This attack is marked as the beginning of the protracted violence between the PKK and the Turkish military.\textsuperscript{90}

Largely in response to the PKK, Turkey set up a “village guard” system in 1985. Through the creation of a special law, the Turkish military recruited villagers to fight against the militants. The village guard system largely failed to provide security and instead exacerbated Kurdish hostility towards the state as the system deepened tribal tensions in the region. It is important to note that today the village guard system remains and at least 59,000 armed village guards remain on the government’s payroll, while an additional 23,000 individuals are volunteers.\textsuperscript{91}

Although the conflict between the PKK and Turkey became increasingly worse throughout the 1980s, it was during the 1990s that relations completely soured.\textsuperscript{92} The seeds for the extreme bloody conflict between Turkey and the PKK were sown during the Cold War, only to explode after.

**U.S.-Turkish Relations: Security Interests in a Bipolar World**

The United States and Turkey’s relationship deepened with the onset of the Cold War. Turkey was viewed as an instrumental ally to stem the spread of communism, provide the United States access to the Eastern Mediterranean, collect intelligence on the Soviet Union, and provide a needed buffer between the Soviet Union and the West’s allies. Because of Turkey’s geographic location, Turkey would eventually be considered the indispensible southeastern anchor to the

\textsuperscript{84} Charountaki, “Turkish Foreign Policy and the Kurdistan Regional Government.”
\textsuperscript{85} Hatem and Dohrmann, “Turkey’s Fix for the ‘Kurdish Problem’: Ankara’s Challenges.”
\textsuperscript{86} Unver, “Turkey’s ‘Kurdish Initiative’: What Went Wrong? (Or Did It?).” Ibid.
\textsuperscript{87} Callimanopulos, “Kurdish Repression in Turkey.”
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{89} Unver, “Turkey’s ‘Kurdish Initiative’: What Went Wrong? (Or Did It?)”; Gordon and Taspinar, *Winning Turkey: How America, Europe, and Turkey Can Revive A Fading Partnership*.
\textsuperscript{90} Unver, “Turkey’s ‘Kurdish Initiative’: What Went Wrong? (Or Did It?).” Ibid.
\textsuperscript{92} Unver, “Turkey’s ‘Kurdish Initiative’: What Went Wrong? (Or Did It?).” Ibid.
North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Turkey, along with Iran and Greece, comprised what was considered the “Northern Tier,” necessary to act as a regional buffer and provide proximity to Central Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. Turkey’s location was perceived as particularly important for stationing and transporting arms, cargo, and personnel for the United Nations and NATO. During this time period, Turkish foreign policy encompassed three main themes: 1) a hyper-focus on security founded in fear fostered from the breakdown of the Ottoman Empire, 2) a western orientation anchored in Kemalism, and 3) a more general desire to maintain the status-quo. These outlooks meant that U.S.-Turkish relations often aligned and centered on security interests. However, the dispute between Greece and Turkey over Cyprus was a longstanding point of contention, particularly in the 1970s. Overall the Cold War was a period in which the United States and Turkey strengthened military and security cooperation, with relations centering on power interests.

The beginning of the Cold War relationship between Turkey and the United States can be marked by the 1939 Soviet demand for control over the Turkish Straits. At first the United States supported the Soviet Union’s claims; however, upon pressure from Britain, U.S. Secretary of State James F. Byrnes changed this position. Britain perceived the Turkish Straits as vital to their oil interests in the Middle East, but Britain needed the support of the United States to challenge the Soviet Union. Upon Britain’s request, in 1945 the United States privately guaranteed the Turkish government that it would support Turkey if it resisted the Soviet Union’s demands to revise the Montreux Treaty. Turkey rebuked the Soviet proposal and the United States responded in April 1946 by sending the U.S. Battleship Missouri as a symbolic sign of strength and support meant to intimidate the Soviet Union.

The tension over the Turkish Straits in many ways marks the beginning of present-day U.S.-Turkish relations. America’s support of Turkey against the Soviet Union also marked the symbolic geographic borders that defined the Cold War period. Edward C. Wilson, the U.S. Ambassador to Turkey at the time, believed that the Soviet Union’s desires were to control Turkey. U.S. policymakers feared that allowing Turkey to fall under the Soviet Union’s sphere of influence would more easily enable the USSR to control other countries in the region. The subsequent falling of dominoes would ultimately tip the balance of power in favor of communism. Following the logic of the “domino theory,” allowing the Soviet Union to win control over Turkey would jeopardize U.S. interests throughout the region.


94 Han, “From ‘Strategic Partnership’ to ‘Model Partnership’: AKP, Turkish-US Relations and the Prospects Under Obama.”

95 Pearson, “The United States and Turkey: A Model of Sustained Engagement.”

96 Larrabee, “The ‘New Turkey’ and American-Turkish Relations.”


The “domino theory” as well as George Kennan’s policy of containment, which required preventing the expansion of Soviet influence, prompted the United States to support Turkey even when other Western countries perceived Turkey to be less important. In 1947 Britain withdrew its soldiers from Greece and terminated its military and economic aid to Greece and Turkey. The United States responded with Congressional declarations that without military and economic aid, Turkey and Greece would fall to communism. Therefore in March 1947, President Harry Truman spoke before Congress and delivered what would come to be called the Truman Doctrine. He requested military and economic assistance for Greece and Turkey, arguing that the two countries were part of the geopolitical line between the “free world” and the “enslaved world”. The Truman Doctrine, Marshall Plan, and National Security Council Resolution-68, combined, committed the United States to giving billions in economic and military aid to Western Europe, including millions to Turkey alone. These resolutions and policies secured the perception of Turkey’s geostrategic importance in the fight against communism.

However, Turkey was still not completely viewed as “Western”. When 12 Western countries established NATO in 1949, Turkey’s application for membership was initially rejected. Turkish policymakers attempted to reverse this decision by declaring fear about Turkey’s security and stressing Turkey’s geopolitical importance to containing the USSR. Although these actions did not reverse the decision of the United States and Britain, the Korean War did. In 1950 Turkey re-applied to NATO and simultaneously sent 4,500 troops to Korea. Turkey’s involvement in the Korean War and the positive reputation the Turkish forces gained for themselves won Turkey approval by the West and secured its position as a strategic ally. In 1952 Turkey became a member of NATO and also became the “indispensable” southeastern flank for NATO. Realpolitik therefore solidified Turkey’s alignment with the “West”.

During the 1950s, American foreign policy focused considerably on the Middle East. The United States wanted to prevent a Soviet attack on the region, secure its oil interests, and maintain its access to the Mediterranean Sea. Turkey, along with the rest of the Northern Tier, was instrumental in achieving these goals. Turkey became the first Muslim country to recognize the state of Israel in 1949, securing strong relations between the two countries for many decades, and providing a future asset for the United States when protecting Israel became a strategic goal in the 1960s. Turkey also proved important in containing the Soviet Union, particularly in regards to Iran, Iraq, and the Suez Canal in Egypt. Additionally, Turkey joined the Baghdad Pact in 1955, which allowed the United States to use Turkey’s military bases in an operation in Lebanon. When the Baghdad Pact was renamed to the Central Treaty Organization (CENTCO) in 1959 after Iraq left the pact, Turkey remained a signatory. Also in 1959, Turkey became the first Muslim country to allow the deployment of the Jupiter Missiles. The 1954 Turkey-U.S. Military Facilities Agreement allowed the United States to open bases on Turkey’s

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99 Carpenter, “Estrangement: The United States and Turkey in a Multipolar Era”; Atmaca, “The Geopolitical Origins of Turkey-American Relations: Revisiting the Cold War Years”; Hook and Spanier, American Foreign Policy Since World War II.

100 Carpenter, “Estrangement: The United States and Turkey in a Multipolar Era”; Atmaca, “The Geopolitical Origins of Turkey-American Relations: Revisiting the Cold War Years”; Hook and Spanier, American Foreign Policy Since World War II.


103 Kuniholm, The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East: Great Power Conflict and Diplomacy in Iran, Turkey, and Greece; Atmaca, “The Geopolitical Origins of Turkish-American Relations: Revisiting the Cold War Years.”

104 Atmaca, “The Geopolitical Origins of Turkish-American Relations: Revisiting the Cold War Years”; Umut Uzer, “Turkish-Israeli Relations: Their Rise and Fall,” Middle East Policy 20, no. 1 (Spring 2013). Atmaca, “The Geopolitical Origins of Turkish-American Relations: Revisiting the Cold War Years”; Uzer, “Turkish-Israeli Relations: Their Rise and Fall.”
territory. These bases were extremely important for defending American global interests; later, they would become a future point of contention.\(^\text{105}\)

Despite the strengthening of relations in the 1950s, the détente between the United States and the Soviet Union also led to a cooling of relations between the United States and Turkey. A main point of contention between the two countries during the 1960s and 1970s was the issue of Cyprus.\(^\text{106}\) In 1963 the Greek Cypriot president attempted to limit the rights of Turkish Cypriots through constitutional amendments, leading to violence on the island. The Turkish government informed the United States that it would intervene militarily to protect the Turkish Cypriots. Although their decision was justified under the 1960 Treaty of Guarantee, the United States response was extremely negative. President Lyndon B. Johnson sent the “Johnson Letter” in which he warned President Ismet Inönü that NATO would not defend Turkey if the Soviet Union invaded Cyprus in response. The Johnson Letter took the Turkish government aback and relations chilled. To Turkey, the letter illustrated that the United States was not a reliable ally. The Johnson Letter therefore forever changed relations between the two countries, as Turkey now believed it must safeguard its interests in case of future betrayal. A concrete example of the altered balance of power was the 1969 Bilateral Defense Cooperation Agreement, as it was the first military agreement in which the United States was forced to accept Turkish sovereignty over all of its military installations in the country.\(^\text{107}\)

The Cyprus issue cropped back up in the 1970s when the military junta of Greece supported a coup in Cyprus in 1974. Turkey intervened, utilizing the Treaty of Guarantee, and took control of 40% of the island. United States’ policymakers debated how to respond, highlighting a distinct example of balancing the 4 P’s. There were power and security concerns, as Cyprus was important due to its role in the southeastern flank of NATO and as a military base for intelligence collection.\(^\text{108}\) Additionally, the United States felt betrayed by Turkey’s usage of U.S. weapons in the invasion of Cyprus. However, maintaining strong relations with Turkey was also important, particularly for the utility of the U.S.-Turkish partnership. Some U.S. policymakers supported the use of an embargo as a means to protect U.S. interests and take a principled stance against the invasion. Critics of the embargo, including President Gerald Ford, believed that it would hinder the United States’ ability to participate in the future peace talks between Turkey and Cyprus because of the unavoidably strained U.S.-Turkish relations. Therefore considerations of principles, peace, and power were a part of the internal American calculus on how to react to the invasion.\(^\text{109}\)

Ultimately, the United States responded with a military embargo, ending all arms sales in 1975, based on considerations of power and principles. Over $200 million in arms sales and military grants were cancelled, supported by the argument that the arms sold to Turkey were used in the invasion of Cyprus.\(^\text{110}\) Turkish relations deteriorated as predicted by critics, including President Ford, because of the embargo. Turkey declared the Turkish Federated State of Cyprus

\(^\text{105}\) Atmaca, “The Geopolitical Origins of Turkish-American Relations: Revisiting the Cold War Years”; Aydn and Erhan, “Chronology of Turkish-American Relations.”


\(^\text{107}\) Atmaca, “The Geopolitical Origins of Turkish-American Relations: Revisiting the Cold War Years”; Aydn and Erhan, “Chronology of Turkish-American Relations.”

\(^\text{108}\) Atmaca, “The Geopolitical Origins of Turkish-American Relations: Revisiting the Cold War Years”; Aydn and Erhan, “Chronology of Turkish-American Relations.”

\(^\text{109}\) Atmaca, “The Geopolitical Origins of Turkish-American Relations: Revisiting the Cold War Years”; Aydn and Erhan, “Chronology of Turkish-American Relations.”

\(^\text{110}\) Atmaca, “The Geopolitical Origins of Turkish-American Relations: Revisiting the Cold War Years”; Aydn and Erhan, “Chronology of Turkish-American Relations.”
in February 1975, overturned opium production prohibition, placed all U.S. military and intelligence facilities on “provisional status,” and canceled the 1969 Defense and Economic Agreement (DECA). Again Turkey determined that the United States was an unreliable ally with differing interests. The embargo and subsequent developments weakened the Western Defense System, did not solve the Cyprus issue, and started a “new era” of U.S.-Turkish relations. Turkey realized its need to decrease its dependence on the United States and Turkey’s insecurity about America’s loyalty would inform Turkish policy decisions for decades to come. Although the embargo was lifted during President Jimmy Carter’s administration in 1978, the damage to the Turkish perception of the United States was done.

At the beginning of the 1980s, the end of détente led to a re-strengthening of relations between the United States and Turkey. The 1980 Turkish military coup reinforced relations as the United States, choosing security and power over principles, viewed the military government as a strong ally in the fight against communism. In 1980 another Defense and Economic Cooperation Agreement was signed. U.S. military aid increase substantially and economic aid also rose through the assistance of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Security and power relations were strengthened through Turkey’s important role in the invasion of Afghanistan, during the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and through the Iran-Iraq War. Nonetheless, the partnership was not perfect, particularly in the late 1980s due to the re-emergence of the Cyrus and Armenian issues. In 1987 the U.S. Congress almost passed two bills that consecutively 1) stated that U.S. military aid to Turkey could not be used in Cyprus and 2) recognized the Armenian “genocide”. However, Turgut Özal’s pro-U.S. position, coupled with conversations between Prime Minister Özal and President Ronald Reagan, assisted in salvaging U.S.-Turkish relations.

**The 4 P’s During the Cold War**

Overall, U.S.-Turkish relations during the Cold War centered on achieving power, ensuring security, and containing the Soviet Union. Occasionally principled policy positions such as Cyprus and the Armenian “genocide” threatened relations, but the bipolar world order for the most part secured their cooperation and the United States’ support of Turkey. This partnership and prioritization of U.S.-Turkish relations hurt the Kurdish position within Turkey. The United States not only turned a blind eye to coups but also supported the military coups implicitly or explicitly. These military coups “strengthened” secularism and Kemalist principles at the expense of minority rights and democratic principles. The Cold War period can therefore be characterized as often fulfilling Model 1. Although the military embargo of the 1970s highlighted an instance in which U.S. policymakers wrestled more in attempt of achieving Model 4, security implications and the power politics of containment cemented U.S.-Turkish relations to center on stability, military and defense cooperation, and security.

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113 Atmaca, “The Geopolitical Origins of Turkish-American Relations: Revisiting the Cold War Years.”
114 Ibid.; Larrabee, “The ‘New Turkey’ and American-Turkish Relations”; Aydin and Erhan, “Chronology of Turkish-American Relations”; Uslu, “The Factors Affecting Turkey’s Relations with the United States in the Post-Cold War Period.”
Chapter 3: The Relationship Diversifies: From Bush to Bush

U.S.-Turkish Relations: A More Balanced Friendship

With the end of the Cold War, Turkey’s strategic importance remained but the nature of its importance shifted. Turkey’s membership in NATO, coupled with its ability to act as a bridge between Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia heightened its regional importance. American politicians and government officials believed that Turkey’s secular democracy and predominantly Muslim population positioned the country as an important ally in bolstering regional stability. Furthermore relations over the three Presidential administrations – George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush – were characterized by cooperation on several key international issues: Iraq, during the Gulf War, Israel up until 2008, the Yugoslav Wars, and Afghanistan. Although the U.S.-Turkish relationship centered on American security interests in the Middle East, this time period also saw a strengthening of economic relations. Nonetheless, the period was not without its tensions. The post-Cold War period sometimes illuminated diverging regional and national interests causing strain, particularly regarding the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, Turkey’s increasing relations with Iran, and principled tensions on the Armenian “genocide” and the protracted conflict with the Kurds.

At the beginning of President George H.W. Bush’s administration, Turkey assisted in the Gulf War and initially strengthened U.S.-Turkish relations. Turkey allowed NATO jets to launch operations into Iraq from the Incirlik air base in Adana. Turkey’s cooperation, both militarily and with the sanctions, were instrumental in the United States’ attempts to contain Saddam Hussein. In many ways the 1990-1991 Gulf War reinforced U.S.-Turkish relations, as the United States once again recognized the important geostrategic position of Turkey within the region.

However, the Gulf War and its’ impact on the Turkish “Kurdish Question” would have lasting negative implications on the partnership. Saddam Hussein retaliated against Turkey’s cooperation in the Gulf War by pushing a large amount of Iraqi Kurdish refugees into Turkey. Within a few weeks after NATO air strikes in Iraq, Turkey had around a million Kurdish refugees inside its borders. Turkey requested the development of a “safe haven” in Iraq that could be used to protect Iraqi Kurdish refugees and eventually allow them to return to their homes in Iraq. The United States and United Nations obliged, leading to the creation of Operation Provide Comfort. Simultaneously to the safe haven, the U.S. air forces assisted Kurdish refugees by air.

Despite America’s contribution to Operation Provide Comfort, the Turkish government would later critique America’s invasion of Iraq. Turkey complained that they were not properly compensated for economic losses incurred because of the war, which Turkey states is around $35 billion in lost revenues due to the sanctions. Furthermore, Turkey still criticizes the creation of a no-fly-zone in northern Iraq during the Gulf War. The no-fly-zone strengthened relations

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115 Carpenter, “Estrangement: The United States and Turkey in a Multipolar Era.”
116 Pearson, “The United States and Turkey: A Model of Sustained Engagement.”
118 Unver, “Turkey’s ‘Kurdish Initiative’: What Went Wrong? (Or Did It?).”
120 Unver, “Turkey’s ‘Kurdish Initiative’: What Went Wrong? (Or Did It?).”
121 Aydin and Erhan, “Chronology of Turkish-American Relations.”
between the PKK and the Iraqi Kurds, subsequently increasing the PKK’s ability to target the Turkish military.\footnote{Jenkins, interview; Abdulla et al., “The Time of the Kurds”; Brown, “The Turkish Imbroglio: Its Kurds.”} All combined, the legacy of the Gulf War—the economic loss, increased refugees, and bolstering of the PKK— influenced Turkey’s future decision not to support the U.S. 2003 invasion of Iraq. Yet it did not take too long after the Gulf War for the United States and Turkey to smooth over relations. In 1992 Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel and President George H. W. Bush met and agreed to continue sanctions against Iraq. At the same meeting, they also agreed on strengthening cooperation and intelligence collaboration against the PKK.\footnote{Carpenter, “Estrangement: The United States and Turkey in a Multipolar Era,” p. 59. Ibid. p. 59.} By the end of the 1990s, U.S.-Turkish relations were quite strong. The United States therefore characterized U.S.-Turkish relations in 1999, as a “strategic partnership,” representing a “broad, bipartisan recognition of the importance of Turkey to the United States.”\footnote{Gordon and Taspinar, Winning Turkey: How America, Europe, and Turkey Can Revive A Fading Partnership.} President Bill Clinton intervened with the European Union and helped secure Turkey’s EU candidacy status.\footnote{Ibid.} Additionally, Turkey allowed NATO to use its air bases to launch airstrikes in Kosovo during the Yugoslav Wars and Bosnian genocide.\footnote{Ibid.}

Economic relations and prosperity became a more considerable interest starting in the 1990s.\footnote{Pearson, “The United States and Turkey: Allies at Odds?”; Wexler, “The United States and Turkey: Allies at Odds?”; Togan, “Turkey: Trade Policy Review, 2007.”} After the fall of the Soviet Union, Turkey began an ambitious economic reform program with the goal of integrating into the world economy.\footnote{Pearson, “Turkey Relations: A New Partnership.”} The 1990s therefore saw Turkey liberalize its trade policy,\footnote{Pearson, “The United States and Turkey: A Model of Sustained Engagement”; Wexler, “The United States and Turkey: Allies at Odds?”; Togan, “Turkey: Trade Policy Review, 2007.”} receiving around $35 billion from the United States, the G-7, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank,\footnote{Pearson, “The United States and Turkey: A Model of Sustained Engagement”; Togan, “Turkey: Trade Policy Review, 2007.”} and joining the World Trade Organization as a Most Favored Nation.\footnote{Pearson, “The United States and Turkey: A Model of Sustained Engagement”; Wexler, “The United States and Turkey: Allies at Odds?”; Togan, “Turkey: Trade Policy Review, 2007.”} The results of economic liberalization were profound, with the United States Commerce Department declaring Turkey one of the ten “big emerging markets for U.S. businesses” in the 1990s because of Turkey’s prospects to serve as a stepping-stone to other markets in the region.\footnote{Ibid.} Turkish exports grew, and foreign direct investment increased substantially as the country positioned its markets as attractive to foreign investors in the 2000s through economic stabilization, privatization, liberalization, and membership negotiations with the EU.\footnote{Ibid.} As a result, Turkey’s FDI grew from U.S. $791 million in 2000 to U.S. $20.2 billion in 2006.\footnote{Ibid.}

Overall, U.S. military and economic relations were exceedingly strong up until the attacks on September 11th, 2001 and subsequent invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. A 2000 poll revealed that 52% of Turkish individuals viewed the United States favorably.\footnote{Ibid.} After the 9/11 attacks, Turkey was quite supportive of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. Turkey’s history with the PKK made it very sympathetic to the United States’ fight on terror and subsequently Turkey was one of the first countries to offer troops towards their efforts in Afghanistan.\footnote{Wexler, “The United States and Turkey: Allies at Odds?”; Pearson, “The United States and Turkey: A Model of Sustained Engagement”; Zanotti, “Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations.”}
Conversely, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 created tensions between the United States and Turkey. The United States lobbied Turkey to allow 62,000 American military troops march through Turkey’s soil to open a northern front against Iraq. Although the newly elected, political Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) wanted to establish itself as pro-Western and garner support from the United States, the AKP was wary of the nationalist backlash it would receive if it supported the invasion. The United States lobbied extensively, offering a $6 billion assistance package that could be leveraged to provide $24 billion in loan guarantees. Furthermore the United States promised to allow Turkey to send 20,000 Turkish troops in to northern Iraq to prevent the creation of PKK safe haven. The AKP-government was placed in a tough position. On one hand they wanted to strengthen cooperation with the West, particularly considering Turkey’s EU bid, and could have benefitted from the terms proposed by the United States. On the other hand, the fear of a strengthened PKK and the overwhelming opposition to the war held by 94% of the Turkish public supported rejecting the motion. Ultimately, the Turkish Parliament narrowly voted in 2003 to refuse U.S. forces from using its territory for an invasion of Iraq from the north, dealing the American military a heavy tactical blow.

A large reason for Turkey’s decision stemmed from fear grounded in the aftermath of the Gulf War. Turkey, promoted by its Kemalist legacy, holds an existentialist fear of losing territory and sovereignty to the creation of an autonomous Kurdish state. Although both the United States and Turkey agreed on protecting Iraq’s territorial integrity and stability, they diverged over military strategies and the importance of possible consequences. Turkey’s violent history with the PKK makes them wary of any form of Kurdish autonomy even in Iraq where the safe area created in the Gulf War made it harder to eradicate the PKK. Turkey therefore spent the rest of the 1990s suppressing the PKK and the Kurds and was fearful that the 2003 invasion would undo any progress made in eradicating the PKK. It was not until President George W. Bush agreed in 2007 to increased intelligence sharing on the PKK and the PKK’s relationship to northern Iraqi Kurdistan that U.S.-Turkish relations regarding their policy towards Iraq became more aligned.

**Turkey’s “Kurdish Question”: Violence and Unrest**

The conflict between the PKK and the Turkish government intensified during this period. Between 1984 and 1999, an internal struggle between the PKK and the Turkish military killed

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140 “The Effects of the Iraq War on the U.S. - Turkish Relationship,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 6, 2003,
141 http://www.cfr.org/turkey/effects-iraq-war-us-turkish-relationship/p6024; Taspinar, “Turkey’s”Kurdish Question”.”
143 Gunter, “The Five Stages of American Foreign Policy Towards the Kurds.”
144 Pearson, “The United States and Turkey: A Model of Sustained Engagement.”
145 Larrabee, “The ‘New Turkey’ and American-Turkish Relations.”
146 Taspinar, “Turkey’s”Kurdish Question”.”
147 Larrabee, “The ‘New Turkey’ and American-Turkish Relations”; *U.S.-Turkey Relations: A New Partnership*; Zanotti, “Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations.”
nearly 37,000 people and led to $120 billion in military expenditures alone. Over the 1990s, the Turkish government, like the Kemalist governments of the past, defined its twin threats as political Islam and Kurdish nationalism. To respond to these threats, the government and military squashed all dissent and rejected any political or cultural compromise. The “lost decade of the 1990s” is remembered by extreme polarization, violence, instability and authoritarianism.

There were, however, aspects of hope. Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel sought a new path that ran counter to the country’s traditional military strategy. Shortly after he reassumed office in 1991, he stated that although Turkey’s “border, flag, and official language cannot be debated,” ethnic groups’ demands to “retain their own ethnic identity and culture should not be rejected...they have their own history, language, and folklore. If they wish to develop them, let them do so.” PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan expressed similar sentiments and the violence thawed, only to resume after clashes during the Kurdish Newruz New Year (originally a Persian holiday) celebrations in 1991.

The creation of a PKK safe haven during the Gulf War, the PKK’s goals of attaining civil rights and autonomy for the Kurds, and the volatility in the region largely exacerbated by the village guard system prevented solving the “Kurdish Question”. Furthermore the United States overlooked this violence in order to court Turkey and ensure future security cooperation following the Gulf War. In 1992, the United States and Turkey signed a $1.1 billion dollar contract for 95 Black Hawk Helicopters. Reports of widespread abuses committed by the Turkish military against the Kurdish population worried individuals in Congress. Some members in Congress argued that military aid should be tied to certain restrictions. In 1994, Turkey told the United States that they might reject military aid if any of it was withheld due to human rights concerns. Although the U.S. Senate decided not to cut the military aid, it conditioned the aid. They added the wording “understanding that it would not be used for domestic security concerns,” signaling to Turkey that the U.S. would not support the use of military aid to commit human rights abuses against the Turkish Kurdish populations. Eventually this clause was dropped, but instead, a condition that 10% of aid be used to improve human rights in Cyprus was added. In 1994 the Turkish Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel notified the United States that it would reject the 10% of the military aid linked to Cyprus.

Overall the domestic struggle with the PKK was a contentious issue between the United States and Turkey. Turkey was unhappy with the United States’ Congress for attempting to restrict aid due to human rights concerns over the treatment of the Kurds. As a way to rectify relations, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke gave a 1995 speech in which he declared it would be unproductive for human rights to strain bilateral relations, stated that the United States viewed the PKK as a terrorist organization, and expressed the importance of ensuring Turkey’s territorial integrity. U.S. policy after the “soft-coup” of 1997, in which
the Islamist Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan who had advocated a poorly defined ‘just solution’ to Kurdish problems and encouraged lifting the state of emergency in the Southeast region,\textsuperscript{157} was ousted, followed Holbrooke’s sentiments. At Turkey’s urging and in an attempt to further solidify U.S.-Turkish relations, the U.S. designated the PKK as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in 1997 immediately following the coup.\textsuperscript{158} This designation seeks to stigmatize and isolate designated terrorist organizations and carries financial restrictions and travel bans. It further allied the U.S. and Turkey in the fight against Kurdish violent independence.\textsuperscript{159}

U.S.-Turkish cooperation to defeat the PKK continued throughout the rest of President Bill Clinton and President George W. Bush’s administrations, largely with the goal of securing power and prosperity-centered cooperation. Turkey placed forces on the Syrian border in 1998 in order to force the Syrian government to end its protection of the PKK’s leader Abdullah Ocalan.\textsuperscript{160} For four months the United States then worked to provide intelligence to Turkey on the whereabouts of Ocalan, eventually helping in the capture of Ocalan in 1999.\textsuperscript{161} Abdullah Ocalan then declared that the PKK would no longer use violence to achieve its goals and announced a self-imposed cease-fire. In 2000 the PKK decided during a party congress to use political means to achieve their goals.\textsuperscript{162} Despite these overtures, the treatment of the Kurds in the Southeast continued to deteriorate. The state of emergency that began in 1987 was not lifted until 2002. During that time the village guard system worsened violence between the PKK, the military, and the village guards. Between 1987 and 2002, 378,335 Kurds were forced to evacuate.\textsuperscript{163} While Ocalan was in jail, PKK hardliners gained control of the organization and in 2004, they ended the cease-fire.\textsuperscript{164} Violence continued as Kurdish individuals faced displacement and terror by both the PKK and the state, as well as suppression of their ethnic identity by Turkey.

\textbf{The 4 P’s From Bush to Bush}

Overall U.S.-Turkish relations from President George H. W. Bush to President George W. Bush saw a larger degree of diverging interests than the Cold War period. Although relations were strong on specific issues, tensions flared on many others. The absence of a common enemy that had previously united the two countries during the Cold War revealed that U.S.-Turkish relations were not as aligned as previously thought. Nonetheless the geostrategic importance of Turkey was recognized and set the stage for the Obama administration. In general, the relations were less power and security-fueled, although regional stability and security interests were still extremely important. The time period did, however, see more considerations of principles,

\textsuperscript{156} In February 1997, the Turkish military issued an 18-point declaration of demands the Islamist Refah or Welfare Party needed to take in order to protect secularism. The threat of a military coup and the ultimatums led to the Necmettin Erbakan government to fall. Because there was no direct military force, the 1997 coup is often referred to as a “soft coup” or “post-modern” coup.

\textsuperscript{157} Hatem and Dohrmann, “Turkey’s Fix for the ‘Kurdish Problem’: Ankara’s Challenges.”

\textsuperscript{158} Hanna, “The Ethics of Fighting With Terrorists.”


\textsuperscript{160} Hatem and Dohrmann, “Turkey’s Fix for the ‘Kurdish Problem’: Ankara’s Challenges.”


\textsuperscript{162} “Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK).”

\textsuperscript{163} Hatem and Dohrmann, “Turkey’s Fix for the ‘Kurdish Problem’: Ankara’s Challenges.”

\textsuperscript{164} “Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK).”
particularly during the “lost decade” of the 1990s. Power and security ultimately prevailed in regards to the “Kurdish Question”. Despite human rights concerns, the United States has continued to support Turkey’s fight against the PKK, agreeing to provide military and intelligence assistance in the fight against the terrorist group, with the hope that Turkey returns the favor. Unlike the previous period, the Bush to Bush years illustrated a more complex consideration of interests, but it also revealed more cracks in the partnership.

**From the Cold War to President George W. Bush: Which Model did the U.S. Follow?**

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<th>U.S. Interests Regarding Turkey</th>
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<td><strong>Cold War</strong></td>
<td>- Predominantly Model 1&lt;br&gt;- Relations centered on power, security, and containment due to Turkey’s geostrategic importance&lt;br&gt;- Some considerations of peace and principles during the Cyprus issue of the 1970s</td>
<td>- Generally not a consideration&lt;br&gt;- The U.S. supported coups that further marginalized the Turkish Kurds</td>
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<td><strong>Bush to Bush</strong></td>
<td>- Generally Model 1&lt;br&gt;- Examples of U.S. policymakers attempting to apply more pressure on principles until 9/11 refocuses relations on security&lt;br&gt;- Increasingly prioritizing prosperity (Model 2)</td>
<td>- Some instances of principle-based arguments to solve the “Kurdish Question,” particularly in the mid-1990s&lt;br&gt;- Ultimately strong U.S.-Turkish relations and security interests are prioritized and the U.S. supports Turkey’s fight against the PKK</td>
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Chapter 4 – The Obama-Erdoğan Relationship: From Optimism to Unease

When Barack Obama became president in 2008, he undertook the task of reversing the negative perception of the United States throughout the world. His “New Strategic Plan” was designed to reset strained relations, including those with the Middle East, and utilize common interests like energy, climate change, and countering extremism to strengthen bilateral and multilateral partnerships. Because Turkey was seen as both a Western, Europeanized ally and a gatekeeper to the Sunni Muslim world, Obama visited the country as part of his first Presidential overseas trip in April 2009. In his speech to the Turkish Grand National Parliament, President Obama touched upon almost all aspects of U.S.-Turkish relations. He discussed their historical friendship, highlighted Turkey’s security and military importance as a NATO ally and member of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, congratulated Turkey on its democratic progress, supported Turkey’s bid to the EU, stated the importance of energy cooperation, and stressed their mutual commitment to preventing a nuclear Iran and supporting a two-state solution regarding Israel and Palestine.

President Obama also discussed some sensitive topics. He urged Turkey to right past wrongs, including the Armenian issue and the Cyprus problem. His statements regarding the Kurds were, on the whole, positive. Obama commended Turkey’s recent cultural concessions to the Kurds while simultaneously stressing the two countries’ mutual commitment to combating extremism and defeating terrorist group like the PKK. Obama viewed Turkish-American relations as a “model partnership,” and Turkey’s democratic progress enabled the United States to strengthen security, political, and economic relations. Unfortunately many of Turkey’s strategic “assets” viewed as valuable by the United States at the beginning of 2008 deteriorated throughout Obama’s time in office for multiple reasons including Turkey’s diminishing regional power, various genuine policy disagreements between the two countries, and Turkey’s increasing authoritarianism. The result has been multiple ups and downs in U.S.-Turkish relations. The souring of personal relations between Erdoğan and Obama, in addition to the inconsistent cooperation between the two countries, leaves the United States in a particularly cumbersome position regarding the rising threat of ISIL and the re-situated “Kurdish Question”.

U.S.-Turkish Relations: The Evolution of the Relationship

Although Obama-Erdoğan relations have remained positive whilst dealing with certain topics like Iraq, both Obama and Erdoğan have at many times felt that the relationship was one-sided. At many critical policy junctures—such as Turkish-Israeli relations, sanctions against Iran, and military cooperation—Turkey has not fully supported America. Likewise, Turkey has been disappointed by perceived abandonment from the United States and Europe. Regardless, Turkey’s foreign policy position as a regional power has lessened considerably, contributing to

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166 Carpenter, “Estrangement: The United States and Turkey in a Multipolar Era.”
168 Charountaki, The Kurds and US Foreign Policy: International Relations in the Middle East Since 1945.
169 Carpenter, “Estrangement: The United States and Turkey in a Multipolar Era”; Larrabee, “The ‘New Turkey’ and American-Turkish Relations.”
Turkey’s ever-weakening soft power and lessening Turkey’s strategic importance as a diplomatic and symbolic ally to the United States in the region.\textsuperscript{171}

Historically Turkey’s positive relationship with Israel, despite objections from Muslim and Arab allies, was seen as an asset.\textsuperscript{172} However, Turkish-Israeli relations began to deteriorate drastically almost as soon as Obama became president and the two countries’ relations have not since repaired. In 2009 Ankara harshly criticized Israel’s offensive into Gaza. Later that year, the Israeli deputy foreign minister humiliated the Turkish Ambassador to Israel Ahmet Oguz Celikkol by having him sit on a couch lower than the host’s chair. Turkey perceived this action as symbolically placing Turkey below Israel.\textsuperscript{173} As if to put salt in Turkey’s wounds, Israeli Special Forces attacked and boarded a Turkish-led flotilla that was allegedly on a humanitarian mission to Gaza in 2010. Nine Turks were killed in the \textit{Mavi Marmara} affair and Turkish-Israeli relations were severed.\textsuperscript{174} This deterioration has worried Washington, as the U.S. had hoped to coordinate its policies with both countries.\textsuperscript{175} Furthermore, many members of Congress have become unhappy with what they perceive as Turkey’s aggravation of a strong U.S. ally.\textsuperscript{176} Turkey’s negative relations with Israel have impacted U.S. policymakers’ decisions regarding other aspects of the U.S.-Turkey partnership, as to be discussed below. Overall, normalizing Turkish-Israeli relations is one of the biggest priorities for the U.S. government moving forward.\textsuperscript{177}

Turkey’s relationship with Iran has also strained U.S-Turkish relations. Currently Iran and Turkey are at odds regarding the Kurds as Ankara suspects Tehran supports the PKK and may leverage this support to increase its influence over Kurds in the region.\textsuperscript{178} However Turkey previously found Iran as a useful ally, stemming from their shared concerns of an independent Iraqi Kurdistan.\textsuperscript{179} This led to a strengthening of relations between the two countries, and subsequent rise in energy and economic cooperation.

Although Turkey, like the U.S., fears the emergence of a nuclear Iran, the two countries disagreed on the tactics necessary to accomplish this goal. Ultimately this difference of opinion, bolstered by Turkey’s prosperity considerations regarding Iran, led to a failed nuclear deal in 2010.\textsuperscript{180} Turkey and Brazil attempted to broker a nuclear deal with Iran in 2010 while the United States attempted to shepherd support for a vote on sanctions at the UN Security Council. After Brasilia, Ankara, and Tehran released a joint announcement of the deal, Washington maintained that the UNSC would continue with the new round of sanctions. Secretary of State Hillary

\textsuperscript{171} Zanotti, “Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations”; Bulent Aras, “The Davutoğlu Era in Turkish Foreign Policy,” \textit{Insight Turkey} 11, no. 3 (2009): 127+; \textit{U.S.-Turkey Relations: A New Partnership}.

\textsuperscript{172} Carpenter, “Estrangement: The United States and Turkey in a Multipolar Era”; Uzer, “Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations.”

\textsuperscript{173} Pearson, “The United States and Turkey: A Model of Sustained Engagement.”

\textsuperscript{174} Zanotti, “Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations.”

\textsuperscript{175} Carpenter, “Estrangement: The United States and Turkey in a Multipolar Era”; Zanotti, “Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations.”

\textsuperscript{176} Carpenter, “Estrangement: The United States and Turkey in a Multipolar Era”; Zanotti, “Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations.”

\textsuperscript{177} Carpenter, “Estrangement: The United States and Turkey in a Multipolar Era.”

\textsuperscript{178} Pearson, “The United States and Turkey: A Model of Sustained Engagement.”

\textsuperscript{179} Carpenter, “Estrangement: The United States and Turkey in a Multipolar Era.”

Clinton even harshly criticized Brazil and Turkey for pursuing this diplomacy. Turkey and Brazil voted against the sanctions and U.S.-Turkish relations were strained.  

Today, both the United States and Turkey support the current Iran nuclear deal. 182 However Turkey’s complicated relationship with Iran, spurred by Turkey’s important bilateral trade and energy relations, will likely continue to be an important aspect of possible cooperation or tension between the United States and Turkey. Policy towards Iran is therefore an area where Turkey’s interests and the United States’ interests may converge or diverge because of each country’s varying goals and national interests. The challenge for the U.S. will center on how to align Turkey’s interests towards Iran with the United States’ interests; otherwise, the United States may need to come to terms with the reality that Iran is a potentially important future partner for Turkey.

Military aid and cooperation has been a historically strong point of cooperation between the United States and Turkey: however Turkey’s desire to maximize and diversify its defense relationships may impact future military cooperation. 183 Currently, U.S. military education and training (IMET), narcotics and law enforcement, and non-proliferation and anti-terrorism aid (NADR) to Turkey hovers around $4-5 million, down from 2010’s $8 million in military and security assistance. 184 Turkey seeks advanced U.S. military equipment as a member of NATO, often boasting of having the second largest military in NATO. 185 However, for several years now Turkey has declared the possibility of acquiring an air and missile defense system from China, despite statements from NATO and the U.S. that such a system would not be integrated in to the NATO system structure. 186 These declarations have added insult to injury as Turkey first stated its intentions to acquire the Chinese missile system in 2012 after the United States had—at Turkey’s request—deployed its Patriot Missile defense system in Turkey. Thus, American policymakers perceived Turkey’s actions as double-sided—simultaneously relying on NATO’s support while cavorting with the enemy. 187 Conversely Turkey believes decreasing its dependence on the United States and diversifying its defense relationships, even with countries typically seen as at odds with American and “Western” interests, including China, Russia, and Pakistan, are within its strategic and security interests. As discussed in previous chapters, military cooperation has at times been cut off or dangled as a carrot for Turkey, utilized to advance U.S. interests. In searching for more defense partners, Turkey is trying to level the playing field. Nonetheless, the Chinese missile system debacle has significantly strained U.S.-Turkish relations. 188

Although military and intelligence cooperation has concentrated on the PKK and combating terrorism, various U.S.-Turkish foreign policy divergences have destabilized this assistance. Repeatedly, White House and U.S. Department of State officials have publicly stated

181 Carpenter, “Estrangement: The United States and Turkey in a Multipolar Era”; Larrabee and Nader, “Turkish-Iranian Relations in a Changing Middle East.”

182 Unver, “Iran Deal and Turkey: Time for a Soft-Power Reset.”


the United States’ commitment to cooperation with Turkey in the fight against PKK terrorism. At the onset of Obama’s administration, he committed to intelligence cooperation aimed at ensuring the PKK neither flourished nor cemented a safe haven in northern Iraq and the continued U.S. recognition of the PKK as a foreign terrorist organization. In accord with these agreements, Turkey has repeatedly asked to purchase American drones for usage against PKK strongholds; however, many in Congress have been hesitant to pass such proposals. In 2011, Congress did not want to sell drones to Turkey for counter-terrorist purposes because of Turkey’s deteriorating relationship with Israel. Despite this hesitation and separate from Turkey’s request for drones to use against the PKK, in October of that year the United States placed four drones were placed at the base in Incirlik. Additionally, Turkey’s strengthened relations with Iran, particularly as Iran publicly accused Israel and the United States of membership in a “plot” against the Muslim world, hurt U.S.-Turkish military cooperation on PKK-focused counter-terrorism efforts. After the Mavi Marmara incident, Turkey shared information about Israel’s intelligence agency to Iran and the United States responded by cancelling the 2013 sell of 10 Predator drones, which were to be used against the PKK.

Throughout the Obama administration, economic cooperation and prosperity-centered policy has been more important rhetorically than in actuality. In 2011, Turkey had the 17th largest economy and the 6th largest in Europe, with an average annual growth rate around 7 percent. The Obama administration re-emphasized the importance of increasing bilateral trade, however economic relations remain the weakest link between the U.S. and Turkey. Although Turkey has substantially increased foreign trade and foreign direct investment, the U.S. share in this growth has remained much smaller in comparison to other countries, particularly those in Europe. In fact, the United States’ foreign investment decreased from U.S. $1.4 billion in 2011 to U.S. $325 million in 2014. Furthermore, recent political instability and the presence of other


193 Han, “From ‘Strategic Partnership’ to ‘Model Partnership’: AKP, Turkish-US Relations and the Prospects Under Obama.”

194 Ibid.

foreign policy concerns, including the Armenian genocide, have severely limited the likelihood of any free trade agreement.\(^{196}\) Turkey’s growth has been largely consumption-fueled and reliant on foreign investment, leading to large deficits and high inflation, causing analysts to worry that Turkey’s economic growth will sputter out.\(^{197}\) In fact Turkey experienced a net outflow of FDI in 2015 and the lira weakened as conversation about the Federal Reserve ending quantitative easing surfaced.\(^{198}\) Therefore, although economic relations are continuously cited as an area of improvement, they are often sidelined.\(^{199}\)

Nonetheless, the future of trade and economic investment between the two countries remains a point of interest, particularly because of current discussions on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). TTIP would remove customs barriers between the EU and the U.S., putting Turkey in an extremely disadvantageous position because Turkey would be forced to pay fees on U.S. imports without placing a customs duty on U.S. exports.\(^{200}\) Turkey’s current customs union with the EU and its lack of one with the U.S. would force Turkey to comply with trade obligations without benefitting, threatening Turkish industries with duty free imports. Some analysts calculate a 2.5%, or around $20 billion, long-term loss in national income and predict around 100,000 jobs cut.\(^{201}\) Although Vice President Joe Biden says a trade deal with Turkey will be negotiated in order to preserve bilateral relations, no official agreement has occurred.\(^{202}\) TTIP, and the need for Turkey to either have its current European Union Customs Union Agreement modified or have some other amendment made, therefore remains a probable huge point of cooperation or source of tension between the two countries and the EU.\(^{203}\)

The potential recognition of the Armenian Genocide by President Obama and the U.S. Congress poses another aggravation to relations. For decades the U.S. House or Senate has introduced bills to recognize the atrocities committed during World War I and the Turkish War for Independence. Each time, Turkey reacts strongly.\(^{204}\) In March 2010 the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee passed the Armenian Genocide Resolution by one-vote. Turkey recalled its Ambassador to the U.S. and President Obama responded by persuading House leadership not to bring the resolution to a floor vote in order to rectify bilateral relations.\(^{205}\) In 2014 the Senate

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\(^{196}\) Zanotti, “Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations.”
\(^{197}\) Ibid.; “Istanbuls and Bears; Turkey’s Economy,” The Economist, April 2012, [http://go.galegroup.com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA285358199&v=2.1&u=duke_perkins&it=r&p=STND&sw=w&authCount=1](http://go.galegroup.com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA285358199&v=2.1&u=duke_perkins&it=r&p=STND&sw=w&authCount=1).
\(^{199}\) Han, “From ‘Strategic Partnership’ to ‘Model Partnership’: AKP, Turkish-US Relations and the Prospects Under Obama.”
\(^{202}\) Zanotti, “Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations in Brief”; Gardner, “Turkey Presses for TTIP Role.”
\(^{204}\) Larrabee, “The ‘New Turkey’ and American-Turkish Relations”; Carpenter, “Estrangement: The United States and Turkey in a Multipolar Era”; Zanotti, “Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations.”
\(^{205}\) Larrabee, “The ‘New Turkey’ and American-Turkish Relations”; Carpenter, “Estrangement: The United States and Turkey in a Multipolar Era.”
Implications of Evolving Interests on the Future Bilateral Relationship

Oscillations in U.S.-Turkish relations have resulted from a combination of international points of contention and the realization by American policymakers that not only have they misread the nature of U.S-Turkish relations but also inaccurately predicted the future of Turkish domestic politics. Ankara has experienced great internal shifts since 2002 when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) were elected. Ahmet Davutoğlu was appointed foreign policy advisor to the AKP in 2002, promoting his pan-Islamist vision. He believed Turkey could increase its power though expanding its geopolitical influence and is heavily influenced by Islamism and idealism, marked by his belief that the former Ottoman “neighborhood” desires a return to Turkish influence. This “Davutoğlu era” is characterized by: 1) an emphasis on soft power through the image of Turkey as a peaceful democracy in the region, 2) increased balancing of domestic politics with foreign policy concerns through a focus on ending the use of external scapegoats as foreign policy drivers, 3) a “strategic depth” policy in which Turkey seeks to expand spheres of influence, particularly in former Ottoman regions, 4) a pro-active approach to foreign policy in hopes of achieving “zero problems with neighbors,” 5) a more multi-dimensional, long-term approach to foreign policy, and 6) an on-the-ground emphasis on handling politics and crises.

Turkey’s increased assertiveness and decreased dependence on the U.S. therefore poses significant concerns regarding future cooperation between the two countries. Expanding on Turkey’s shift in foreign policy, there are several factors for which Washington worries: 1) the end of the Cold War has weakened Turkey’s solidification in the “West,” removed the overarching threat of Russia, which previously unified the two countries’ goals somewhat consistently, and revealed the sometimes diverging interests of the two countries, 2) the AKP has decreased the political power of the military, which had historically been the U.S.’s main source of influence on the Turkish government despite its often undemocratic behavior, 3) the AKP, fueled by Davutoğlu, has increased Turkey’s emphasis on its Islamic roots and historical ties to old Ottoman lands, 4) Turkey has grown to distrust the U.S. for the asymmetry of power characteristic of their relationship for decades, 5) Turkey wants to increase its role as a regional player in global politics, and 6) Erdoğan appears to have re-taken control over Turkish foreign

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207 Han, “From ‘Strategic Partnership’ to ‘Model Partnership’: AKP, Turkish-US Relations and the Prospects Under Obama.”


policy and is known for sometimes erratic decision-making. Overall Washington is growing increasingly concerned about the impacts of this pivot on U.S.-Turkish relations and cooperation.

The predicted effect of these changes is not fully determined. The result to date has been increasingly diverging interests. However most experts argue that although the rules of the game have changed, the United States and Turkey will remain important, strategic allies, albeit possessing a mix of varying interests. The evolution of relations throughout Obama’s administration illustrates their complicated partnership. At the beginning of his presidency, Obama personally called Erdoğan quite frequently. Obama viewed Turkey as a moderately Islamist country that could act as a “model” for the post-Arab Spring countries. However after the 2013 Gezi Park protests and other internal domestic developments, relations have cooled so severely that Obama rarely calls Erdoğan. The once symbolic relationship where democracy, pluralism, and progress were heralded has been stilted to a relationship almost exclusively determined by regional security interests. The hope of achieving peace and prosperity, promoting principles, while also depending on military and security cooperation has been, at many times, reduced to a predominately power-centered relationship. The aforementioned aspects of U.S.-Turkish relations have been sources of contention; however, they have not been the only foundations for disagreement. Domestic developments in Turkey as well as changes in the Turkish “Kurdish Question” have strained the relationship.

**Turkey’s Domestic Developments: Erdoğan’s Increasing Authoritarianism and its implications on the “Kurdish Question”**

Domestic Turkish politics have been characterized by consolidation of power by the ruling Justice and Development Party, particularly Erdoğan, increasing censorship and corruption charges, and diminishing checks and balances. To understand the overall democratic backslide, or at least halt in democratic progression, it is useful to analyze several developments, including 1) the “defanging” of the military, 2) the rift between the AKP and the Gülenists, 3) the decreasing independence of the judiciary, 4) the Gezi Park protests, 5) censorship and decreased independence of the media, 6) the evolution of the “Kurdish Question,” including the 2009 Kurdish Initiative and the 2013 Kurdish Peace Process, and 7) the 2015 Parliamentary elections. These progressions benchmark the deterioration of Turkey as a “model” and subsequently help explain the above-mentioned divergences in U.S.-Turkish relations.

**The Military’s Waning Influence**

Historically, the military has often been repressive of political opposition, particularly any political ideology that runs counter to Kemalism; however, through active political

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maneuvering Erdoğan and the AKP have reduced the military’s political influence. By framing the military’s involvement in politics as a threat to democracy, the AKP gained political traction and support for EU harmonization reforms that pushed the military inward and away from politics.216 By the beginning of Obama’s administration, the AKP had reformed the National Security Council (MGK) under widespread public support, limiting the power and influence of the military over foreign policy and national decision-making.217 In 2010 the military court’s authority was confined to trying only military personnel except in war times. Furthermore, Article 35 of the Turkish Armed Forces internal service code was changed in 2013 to explicitly define the military’s role as protecting the state from external threats, thereby eliminating a clause that symbolically defended past military coups undertaken ostensibly to “protect” the state from internal threats, such as Islamism.218

In addition to technical and legislative defeats, the military was slammed with embarrassingly politically motivated court cases. In spring 2007, the Turkish Chief of Staff General Yaşar Büyükvan implicitly threatened a military coup if the AKP appointed Abdullah Gül as president. After Gül was appointed president and the military did not act, the AKP realized that the military’s supremacy was over. The AKP joined forces with the religious Gülen Movement to bring judicial charges against the military, accusing the military of planning a coup and claiming to possess evidence of the military’s clandestine activity tracing back over three decades. Throughout 2008 and 2009 the “Ergenekon” case attracted extreme media attention and led to the arrest of over 1,200 people, motivated by pro-Gülen prosecutors who asserted the trials sought truth and justice for human rights abuses committed by the Turkish military. In 2013, 251 defendants were convicted and most received lengthy jail times.219 It has since been proven that there was widespread fabrication of evidence, particularly by the pro-Gülenist prosecutors, against many defendants.220 Overall many view the cases as politically motivated and therefore not credible, similar to the equally controversial and discredited 2003 “Sledgehammer” cases brought against military officials for a separate supposed coup plot. Regardless of the veracity of the Ergenekon trials, they dealt a serious blow to the public image of the Turkish military and armed forces.221 Although many in the public had hoped that the result of the cases would be a weakened military and therefore a more robust democracy, the developments have undermined the military but more importantly further consolidated the AKP’s monopoly of politics.222 The “defanging” of the military also impacts the United States’ relationship with Turkey as the military, although largely responsible for the suppression of the Kurds, had also been an internal ally of the United States. With its political influence limited, the United States can no longer rely on the historical military cooperation to commandeer Turkey’s foreign policy.

The Split Between the Gülenist Movement and the AKP

The Gülenist Movement refers to the conflux of individuals, organizations, and schools influenced and/or sponsored by Fethullah Gülen, a former Turkish state Imam who currently

218 Özpek, “Pseudo-Transformation of Civil-Military Relations in Turkey.”
220 Ibid.
221 Ibid.
222 Ozpek, “Pseudo-Transformation of Civil-Military Relations in Turkey”; Jenkins, interview; Tuğta, interview.
lives in self-imposed exile in Pennsylvania. His influence in Political Islam circles in Turkey is profound as the Gülenist grassroots movement flourished in the 1980s correspondingly with the growth of the Turkish middle class. Individuals from the Gülen Movement increasingly joined the police and judiciary in the late 1990s, while also gaining political clout within the United States and internationally through the building of NGOs, schools and educational establishments, businesses, and media outlets, and even funding trips to Turkey for U.S. members of Congress.

Despite tensions between the AKP and the Gülen Movement, the two Political Islamist groups formed an alliance when the AKP was founded in 2001. In return for allowing the Gülen Movement to deepen their presence in the police and military, the AKP received support from the Gülenists as they mobilized the movement’s network within Turkey and worldwide. The Gülen Movement lobbied Washington and Brussels to convince the U.S. and the EU that the AKP and Erdoğan were democratic forces within Turkey. The number of Gülenist-sympathizers in the Judiciary rapidly increased starting in 2007, with the number of judges and prosecutors who support Gülen estimated to fall between 2,500 to 5,000 of a total of around 15,000 Turkish judges and prosecutors.

However, the resulting power struggle between the AKP and the Gülen Movement has highlighted corruption, raising doubts within the international community and the Obama administration about the state of democracy in Turkey. Cracks in the relationship began to show in 2010 and tensions have since continued to escalate. Gülen disagreed with Erdoğan’s outspoken policy against Israel and support of the Mavi Marmara’s declared humanitarian mission. Gülen viewed the breakdown of Turkish-Israeli relations, which he believes is fueled by Erdoğan’s policy of supporting Sunni Muslims regionally, as well as Erdoğan’s stance towards Syria as problematic and detrimental to Turkey. Tensions increased in February 2012 when Gülenist prosecutors accused Hakan Fidan, the head of the National Intelligence Organization (MiT) and a close advisor to Erdoğan, of aiding the PKK. Erdoğan was outraged and blocked the subpoena. In November 2013, Erdoğan announced a plan to close all dershane schools, or college preparatory centers, in a distinct attack on Gülen sympathizers in the Justice and Development (AKP) party.

In response, pro-Gülenist prosecutors issued arrest warrants for 41 businesspeople close to Erdoğan on corruption scandals. Erdoğan and other members of the AKP referred to this development as a “dirty plot” carried out by a “parallel state,” referring to the Gülenists. Erdoğan began purging the judiciary and police, firing 15 of 81 provincial police chiefs, dismissing or reshuffling over 2,500 police officers, and reassigning hundreds of judges,

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223 Zanotti, “Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations.”
225 Zanotti, “Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations.”
226 Jenkins, “Rebalancing the Scales: The Forthcoming HSYK Elections.”
227 Jenkins, “Remaking the Turkey: The Forthcoming HSYK Elections.”
228 Jenkins, “Narrative Veils: Erdoğan, the AKP and the Gülenist Arrests”; Zanotti, “Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations.”
and prosecutors. Since then, the Turkish police have conducted raids and issued arrest warrants for Gülenists founded on alleged ties to terrorism. Meanwhile Gülenists have released audio tapes and video recordings of Erdoğan discussing and admitting his involvement in corruption. It has become a tit-for-tat between the two groups, with Erdoğan attempting to reign in control of the judiciary and police from Gülen and Gülen trying to expose corruption within the AKP.  

The Judiciary as an Arena for Power

Historically, Turkey’s judiciary has been heavily influenced by the ruling political party and therefore subject to competing political interests. Although Kemalists traditionally dominated it, the election of the AKP in 2002 brought Gülenists and other Islamist-leaning judges and prosecutors into the ranks. Numerous UN and EU reports have highlighted the lack of judicial independence and subsequent human rights violations, namely the politically motivated arrests and convictions, carried out by government-sponsored prosecutors and judges. A 2010 report by the Turkish think-tank TESEV and a 2012 report by the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe found that a significant number of judges and prosecutors at all levels of the Turkish judiciary believe that protecting the state takes precedence over protecting human rights. This attitude fuels the usage of the judiciary by political factions to arrest individuals without evidence, prolong pre-trial detention, dismiss cases against individuals close with the government, and other judicial abuses.

Throughout the Obama administration, the Turkish judiciary has repeatedly arrested individuals in order to stifle political opposition and eliminate threats to the governing party, the AKP. The Ergenekon and Sledgehammer cases discussed above were but one of the first examples of the judiciary as an arena for power, as pro-Gülenist prosecutors arrested military officials for supposed coup charges and linkages to terrorist groups, particularly the PKK. In 2009 these same prosecutors began arresting pro-Kurdish activists and individuals on charges of membership in the Group Communities in Kurdistan (KCK), which is an umbrella organization heavily populated by members of the PKK. Thousands of individuals were arrested throughout the proceeding years and convicted in unfair trials for unusually long prison terms. Many of those arrested were known Kurdish activists or simply individuals critical of the state. Mean-while Gülenists have become a tit-for-tat between the two groups, with Erdoğan attempting to reign in control of the Gülen movement.

In 2012 prosecutors even began arresting officials from the National Intelligence Organization (MIT) for dealing with the PKK; however Erdoğan pushed forward law that blocked these arrests. The Turkish judiciary appears to becoming even less independent and progressively a part of Erdoğan’s increasingly authoritarian rule, with the Constitutional Court providing the only judicial check to his power.

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233 Jenkins, “Narrative Veils: Erdoğan, the AKP and the Gülenist Arrests”; Sinclair-Webb, “For Judges Who Defy Turkey’s Leaders, Short Road to Jail.”
234 Zanotti, “Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations.”
The Gezi Park Protests

In the summer of 2013 protests culminated to include around 3.5 million individuals in 67 of Turkey’s 81 provinces. The “Gezi Park” protests started when the government announced plans to build a mall and a mosque to replace Gezi Park in the middle of Taksim Square in Istanbul. The open area was a frequent spot for protests and represented the country’s historic tie to the secular military, with the Atatürk Cultural Center on one side and the army barracks on the other. Although the protests began in May with a group of environmentalists, by June a diverse group of Turkish citizens were peacefully gathered in Istanbul and other cities, protesting a vast array of issues. Protesters included: young activists, older individuals, religious groups, secular groups, soccer fans, anarchists, communists, ultra-nationalists, Kurds, LGBTQ groups, feminists, and students. Their grievances centered on the growing authoritarianism of Erdoğan, who had been prime minister for 10 years and had increasingly pushed an Islamist agenda on the country. Concerns over restrictions on the sale and consumption of alcohol, Erdoğan’s comments against abortion and working women, government warnings against “immodest” public displays of affection, gentrification of the city, and “undemocratic” practices of Prime Minister Erdoğan were just some of the complaints.

Prime Minister Erdoğan at first ignored the protesters, dismissing them as hooligans involved with international groups who wished to cause domestic unrest. The violent dispersal of the protests, with police barricading the protesters and using tear gas and pressurized water cannons, attracted international attention. Foreign governments and human rights organizations criticized the Turkish government for endorsing police brutality. Overall eight individuals died, including a 15-year-old Alevi boy and one police officer, and injuries are estimated to be in the thousands.

In the post-Arab spring world, Turkey had been considered a model of a modern, Muslim country with a successful democracy; however, Gezi ended this image. The treatment of the protesters, impunity given police officers, censorship of social media and news coverage of the protests, and overall violations of the freedom of speech and of assembly highlighted the problems within Turkey’s democracy. Since the protests, at least 5,500 individuals associated with the protests have been put on trial for resisting police, damaging public property, participating in “unauthorized demonstrations,” and terrorism. The football fan group Çarşı was put on trial for alleged coup attempts. Conversely, only a handful of police officers have been

brought to trial for brutality or killing protesters.\textsuperscript{242} The Gezi Park protests significantly hurt Turkey’s image, raising doubts about Turkey’s EU negotiations, and straining relations between Turkey and the United States.\textsuperscript{243}

The Increasing Censorship within Turkey

The Gezi Park protests highlighted the chronic restriction of free speech and assembly within Turkey. The United Nations has already highlighted the need for enhancing freedom of speech and freedom of the media in Turkey; nonetheless, Turkey continues to jail and intimidate journalists.\textsuperscript{244} The Committee to Protect Journalists documented that in 2012 alone, Turkey imprisoned around 49 journalists, making Turkey one of the “worst jailers of the press” alongside Iran and China.\textsuperscript{245} During the Gezi protests, journalists were targeted and media outlets were pressured to show documentaries or news unrelated to the protests.\textsuperscript{246} Following the protests, Erdoğan banned Twitter and YouTube; however the Constitutional Courts overturned the ban as unconstitutional. Regardless, all dissenters in Turkey, whether they are Gülenists or Kurds, have faced targeting by Erdoğan and AKP-affiliated individuals.\textsuperscript{247} These attacks on the media have elicited international criticism, as 89 House Representatives signed a joint letter to Secretary of State John Kerry in February 2015 protesting censorship and media repression in Turkey. This letter was followed in March 2015 by one signed by 74 U.S. Senators.\textsuperscript{248} The United States and the international community has been more vocal about its displeasure with media censorship compared to other domestic issues in Turkey.

The Evolution of the “Kurdish Question”

The above-mentioned negative domestic developments have significantly impacted the country’s Kurdish population. Kurds have long been targeted by the military, particularly when the PKK and the Turkish state were exchanging tit-for-tat violence.\textsuperscript{249} The Kurdish population was further repressed through the KCK trials, where thousands of Kurdish political activists, lawyers, journalists, and demonstrators were arrested and imprisoned because of supposed links to the KCK and/or PKK. These cases represent egregious violations of freedom of speech and assembly as they criminalize legitimate activity and often rely on flawed evidence for convictions. Corrupt trials of Kurdish individuals not only represent the politicized nature of the Turkish judiciary but also illustrate the lengths to which the Turkish government is willing to take in order to censor opposition.\textsuperscript{250} Additionally, Kurdish groups, particularly the HDP’s predecessor the BDP, were extremely active in the Gezi Park protests.\textsuperscript{251} Indeed many of the HDP’s current voter base comes from the disenfranchised citizens who protested against Erdoğan’s authoritarianism during Gezi Park.\textsuperscript{252} In addition to the aforementioned democratic

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{244} Sinclair-Webb, “Turkey’s Human Rights Rollback.”
\textsuperscript{245} Jenkins, “Narrative Veils: Erdoğan, the AKP and the Gülenist Arrests”; Sinclair-Webb, “Turkey’s Human Rights Rollback.”
\textsuperscript{246} Zanotti, “Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations in Brief.”
\textsuperscript{247} Jenkins, “The Ergenekon Releases and Prospects for the Rule of Law in Turkey.”
\textsuperscript{248} Sinclair-Webb, “Turkey’s Human Rights Rollback.”
\textsuperscript{249} Jenkins, “The Ergenekon Releases and Prospects for the Rule of Law in Turkey.”
\textsuperscript{250} Sinclair-Webb, “Turkey’s Human Rights Rollback.”
\textsuperscript{251} “Timeline of Gezi Park Protests.”
\textsuperscript{252} Matthews, “Turkey’s Hidden War Is Spilling Onto City Streets.” Ibid.
\end{footnotesize}
backslides, there has been a particular “Kurdish Question” evolution throughout Obama’s administration.

Before these developments, the international community was initially very hopeful that the AKP would solve the “Kurdish Question”. When the AKP first came to power in 2002, it was the only credible rival to the Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) in the country’s predominantly Kurdish Southeast. The AKP’s popularity with conservative Kurds was strengthened through Prime Minister Erdoğan’s admittance in a 2005 speech that Turkey does have a Kurdish Problem and that solving this issue benefits all of Turkey. These statements boosted Kurdish support of the AKP and in the 2007 elections, the AKP won a majority of the vote in the Kurdish Southeast.253 The generally positive relationship between Prime Minister Erdoğan’s AKP party and the Kurds set the stage when Obama was elected. With the initial importance Obama placed on strengthening U.S.-Turkish relations, experts were optimistic that the Obama administration would push the Turkish government to solve the “Kurdish Question” once and for all.254 However, a deeper investigation into the development of the “Kurdish Question” over the Obama administration elucidate the complicated relationship between the AKP and the Kurds, as well as the complexities that have contributed to the Obama administrations failure to push for a solution. The progression of the “Kurdish Question” can be benchmarked by the failed “Kurdish Initiative,” the renewed Kurdish “peace process” starting in 2012, the re-situating of the “Kurdish Question” through the June 2015 and November 2015 elections, and the entrance of Turkey into the anti-ISIL coalition.

The Rise and Fall of the “Kurdish Initiative”

Throughout 2008 through 2010, Prime Minister Erdoğan (currently President as of 2014) and the AKP government took a few steps forward and a few steps backwards regarding the “Kurdish Question”. In March 2008, the AKP launched a “new Kurdish plan,” including the possibility of a constitutional expansion of the definition of a Turk to include the Kurdish ethnicity. However, the plan never really amounted to anything, particularly because of the attempt made by the Turkish government and influenced by the military to shut down the AKP. Although the Constitutional Court voted against closing the AKP, Prime Minister Erdoğan and the rest of the party went on the defensive. In an attempt to appease the military, Prime Minister Erdoğan went to a southeastern province and delivered a highly nationalistic speech that squashed any recognition of the “Kurdish Question”. This damaged relations between the AKP and the Kurds. Nevertheless in January 2009, the first Kurdish TV channel—the TRT—was opened. Its introduction was met with mixed reviews.255 Its creation symbolized a profound cultural progression, as Kurdish was previously banned from the TV; but, the channel was criticized as providing yet another avenue for the AKP to promote its Kurdish policy and garner more political support. The March 2009 elections revealed the waning popularity of the AKP in


255 Güzeldere, “Kurdish Opening - How Far, How Sincere?”; Unver, “Turkey’s ‘Kurdish Initiative’: What Went Wrong? (Or Did It?)”
comparison to previous elections as the Kurdish DTP received 37.4% and the AKP won 38.34% of the vote in the municipal councils.\textsuperscript{256}

In summer 2009, the AKP launched the “Kurdish Initiative,” which was a road map outlining a path towards a peaceful resolution to the “Kurdish Question” and demonstrated a concerted effort by the government to rollback the renewed Kurdish movement.\textsuperscript{257} The exact plan was ambiguous, but it included the intention to meet with various groups throughout Turkey to understand the best way to diffuse the social, legal, political, and economic tensions. Another implicit goal was disarming and disbanding the PKK.\textsuperscript{258} Surveys in the Southeast illustrated widespread support for the initiative and many Turks believed that this was a sincere attempt to finally put the violence of the previous three decades in the past. Reports indicated that the six “goals” of the initiative included: founding Kurdish institutes, overriding previous restrictions on Kurdish TV and radio stations, allowing the Kurdish language to be taught in schools as an elective, allowing the original Kurdish names of villages that had been banned after the 1980 coup’s “Turkification” to be reinstated, active recruiting of Kurdish civil servants, and legalizing the use of Kurdish in prisons and the use of Kurdish names for children.\textsuperscript{259}

Throughout the process, U.S. government officials consistently stated their support for Turkey’s fight against the terrorist organization the PKK, but commended the government for undertaking the Initiative. Senior administration and State Department officials applauded the “courageous” step by the government to bring the PKK “into the fold and into the political process,” in order to end violence and reach some sort of reconciliation of the “Kurdish Question.”\textsuperscript{260} The U.S. government also offered explicit support of cultural rights, including language rights and integration of the PKK back in to Turkish society.\textsuperscript{261} Some of these goals, including the ones the U.S. government supported, were undertaken. Diyarbakır, a predominantly Kurdish village, added Kurdish names to its village signs with support from the government. The first Kurdish language center at a higher educational institution was opened in September 2009. Overall the initiative seemed positive and was garnering traction from within the country too. Kurdish individuals expressed widespread support through a petition signed by 162 Kurdish and Turkish intellectuals in September 2009. A similar petition signed by 282 artists in October of the same year conveyed the same sentiment.\textsuperscript{262}

Unfortunately, the Kurdish Initiative ultimately failed. In October 2009 a group of PKK members came down from the Iraqi Kandil Mountains, taking a symbolic step away from violence. A group of cheering individuals in Diyarbakır met the PKK members at the border, and the event was televised widely throughout the country. The decision for the 17 members to come down was determined after extensive negotiations between the DTP and AKP.\textsuperscript{263} The PKK members believed that they would not be penalized due to protection from article 221 of the

\textsuperscript{256} Güzeldere, “Kurdish Opening - How Far, How Sincere?”
\textsuperscript{258} Unver, “Turkey’s ‘Kurdish Initiative’: What Went Wrong? (Or Did It?)”
\textsuperscript{259} Unver, “Turkey’s ‘Kurdish Initiative’: What Went Wrong? (Or Did It?)”
\textsuperscript{260} “Background Briefing by Senior Administration Officials on Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan’s Trip to D.C.”
\textsuperscript{261} “Daily Press Briefing, Department Spokesman Ian Kelly,” October 20, 2009; “Daily Press Briefing, Department Spokesman Ian Kelly,” October 21, 2009; “Background Briefing by Senior Administration Officials on Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan’s Trip to D.C.”
\textsuperscript{262} Güzeldere, “Kurdish Opening - How Far, How Sincere?”
\textsuperscript{263} Unver, “Turkey’s ‘Kurdish Initiative’: What Went Wrong? (Or Did It?)”; Güzeldere, “Kurdish Opening - How Far, How Sincere?”
Penal Code, which grants impunity to those who voluntarily disassociate from an organization. This event would come to mark the turning point of the initiative. Although it was supposed to rally public support for the peace process, the impact was the opposite. The AKP did not properly convey the goals of the event to the public. Therefore, when the PKK members voluntarily disassociated and were met by cheering crowds holding pictures of Ocalan, the general Turkish public was unhappy and felt as though the government was giving in to terrorists. Symbolically, the Turkish public viewed the publicized event as a failure of the government and a win for the PKK.

The public’s reaction to the October PKK surrendering launched a host of other events that eventually led to the dissolution of the Kurdish Initiative. In December the Kurdish DTP party was shut down by a unanimous vote of the Constitutional Court. The KCK trials started to intensify with many members of the former DTP accused of ties to terrorism. Around the same time, the DTP and Kurdish public began to realize a horrifying trend within the country: the Turkish government, starting in 2008, was arresting thousands of Kurdish minors and had convicted around 2,500. Kurdish protests broke out throughout the country, largely due to the disbanding of the DTP and poor prison conditions for Abdullah Ocalan, who inspires a cult following for his “sacrifice” to the Kurdish cause.

The Kurdish Initiative, at least publicly, ended and violence ensued. However, negotiations between high level government officials and PKK officials continued in secret. This “Oslo Process,” named so because the meetings took place in Oslo, had begun in 2008 and did not end until 2011 when they became public. The termination of these talks corresponded with the largest amount of violence between the PKK and the Turkish military since before the arrest of Ocalan. In December 2011, the Uludere massacre left 34 Kurdish civilians dead. Ocalan, who remains the leader of the PKK even behind bars, responded by ending all meetings with his lawyers and visitors. The poor planning of the Kurdish Initiative and substantial failures in its implementation have given support to the belief held by some that the AKP only embarked on the initiative to garner political support from Kurdish citizens; however, others believe the government was sincere in its undertaking but unequipped in its application.

The Renewed Kurdish Peace Process

Following the failure of the Kurdish Initiative, Prime Minister Erdoğan began peace negotiations with Abdullah Ocalan in 2012. The negotiations led to a cease-fire brokered with the PKK in 2013. Turkish Parliament formally adopted the peace process in 2014. The process

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265 Unver, “Turkey’s ‘Kurdish Initiative’: What Went Wrong? (Or Did It?).”
266 Güzeldere, “Kurdish Opening - How Far, How Sincere?”
267 Unver, “Turkey’s ‘Kurdish Initiative’: What Went Wrong? (Or Did It?).”
270 Tas, “What Kind of Peace? The Case of the Turkish and Kurdish Peace Process.”
271 Casier, Jongerden, and Walker, “Fruitless Attempts? The Kurdish Initiative and Containment of the Kurdish Movement in Turkey.”
received widespread support from Europe and the United States and was viewed as a welcome and earnest step in the “right” direction.  

Despite the Turkish Parliament’s adoption, by 2014 the peace process was starting to stale as it had produced no real legislative progress and instead fostered frustration on both ends. The PKK was upset because they had disarmed while the military continued to build up and remain present in the Southeast. For many Kurds, there was a perceived lack of goodwill on the government’s end. Conversely, the government did not believe that the PKK was serious about disarmament because the PKK refused to dissolve. In addition to the lack of credible commitment on both sides, the stakes and political demands had been raised. Whereas a few years prior during the Oslo Process, cultural concessions might have been enough to appease the Kurds, it would not be enough now. The PKK and the country’s Kurds sought decentralization and more local autonomy, education and cultural rights, increased infrastructure and economic improvements in the Southeast, the freeing of Ocalan, and guarantees that the PKK members who voluntarily dissociated would not only receive legal impunity but also receive employment opportunities and government assistance for re-integration into society.

With the conflict in Syria and Iraq, the peace negotiations became even more strained. Erdoğan’s call to overthrow Syrian President Bashar al-Assad caused tension between the United States and Turkey because the United States was not willing, at least initially, to take such a hard stance against Assad. Frustrated by what Erdoğan, the now President, perceived was a poor strategy by the international community to deal with Syria’s civil war, the Turkish government began, at the very least implicitly, supporting radical Syrian opposition. The Turkish judiciary even found evidence in 2014 that the Turkish intelligence community was directly providing arms to Syrian opposition groups. Many believe that the Turkish government even supported ISIL and other extremist groups, particularly through lax border security that enabled extremists to enter Iraq and Syria.

The Turkish government’s role in strengthening ISIL angered the Kurds, threatening to disintegrate the peace process. In October 2014 the Islamic State attacked Kobane, a Kurdish town in Syria right on the border with Turkey. Turkish Kurds called on the government to stop ISIL and aid their Kurdish brethren. The Turkish government refused and even blocked Kurds from crossing the border to fight ISIL. Erdoğan and the AKP feared that allowing the Kurds in to Syria would eventually lead to renewed violence within the Turkish border. Protests throughout the country ensued and symbolically Kurds throughout the region united in support of the Kurds in Kobane, as sthousands of Kurds died at the hands of ISIL. Eventually the United States sent air strikes to attack the Islamic State and defend the town. In January 2015 Kobane was re-captured by the Kurds and the United States relationship with the Kurds was strengthened while the Kurds grew increasingly distrustful of the Turkish government’s intentions.

274 Jenkins, interview.
277 Jenkins, “Rebalancing the Scales: The Forthcoming HSYK Elections”; Amitay, interview; Tuğtán, interview.
278 “Turkey and Its Kurds: Dreams of Self-Rule.”
Re-Situating the “Kurdish Question” in the Summer of 2015

The summer of 2015 internationalized the “Kurdish Question”. During the run-up to the June 7th Parliamentary elections, Erdoğan and the AKP became increasingly nationalistic in their rhetoric. They feared that they would lose the Kurdish vote in the Southeast to the People’s Democratic Party (HDP). The HDP, which was the successor to the DTP by means of the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), was the first pro-Kurdish party that decided to run as a party, as opposed to running individual candidates as independents, in a parliamentary election. The HDP’s charismatic leader Selahattin Demirtaş had won 9.76% of the vote in the 2014 presidential elections. This astounding success for a Kurdish individual motivated the party to attempt to overcome the 10% threshold needed to gain representation within the parliament.  

The HDP’s voting base is made up of a combination of pro-Kurdish individuals, conservative Kurdish voters who have become disillusioned with Erdoğan and the AKP, and extreme leftists who will do anything to cut the AKP’s support. The AKP’s attempted to weaken the HDP’s support. An illustrative example was Erdoğan’s April speech where he stated Turkey does not have a Kurdish problem and anyone who stated Turkey did would be partaking in a form of discrimination. Despite these attempts, the HDP was elected as part of the Parliament. The HDP won 13.1% of the vote, while the AKP won 40.9%, the Republican People’s Party (CHP) won 25%, and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) won 16.3%.

The election results set Erdoğan and the AKP on the defensive because it was the first time they did not receive a majority vote. Erdoğan felt betrayed by the Kurdish voting bloc as the peace process was to some degree a tactic to gain Kurdish electoral support. Many Turkish citizens and international observers hoped that the more pluralistic Parliament would further democratic gains through a strengthening of the peace process and re-evaluation of other oppressive aspects of Turkey, including media censorship and the lack of checks and balances. Without a majority the AKP had to create a coalition with either the MHP or the CHP. The hope was that a coalition government would weaken Erdoğan’s authoritarianism, squash Erdoğan’s hope of reforming the Constitution to increase the President’s powers, and strengthen the likelihood of a successful peace process. However, this hope was eliminated when the AKP failed to form a coalition and Erdoğan called snap elections to take place on November 1, 2015.

The elections highlighted the important role of minority representation, particularly for the Kurds, and the state of democracy in Turkey; however, the instability across Turkey’s border has been the real driver in intensifying the tradeoff between U.S. cooperation with Turkey or the Kurds. The United States, along with 60 other coalition partners, are committed to eliminating the threat posed by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. To achieve this goal, the United


283 Canda, “What’s Next for Turkey?”


States has been lobbying Turkey to join in the fight and open up its air base in Incirlik to the coalition. On July 7th, a U.S. anti-terror team met with Turkish officials to discuss possible collaboration with NATO and on July 25th, Turkey announced it would allow U.S. planes to use Incirlik. The following week, Turkish fighter jets targeted the Islamic State in Syria and Kurdish targets in northern Iraq. Simultaneously, security forces conducted raids, arresting around 140 individuals with suspected links to ISIL and around 850 with suspected links to the PKK.

Turkey’s decision to join the coalition and open the base was predicated on three major goals or realizations: 1) Erdoğan’s displeasure with the June 7th elections spurred him to follow a diversionary war against the PKK in hopes that it would bolster AKP votes in the November 1st election, 2) Turkey’s fear that the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds were gaining leverage within the international community, which threatens Turkey’s internal stability, and 3) the realization that the Islamic State does pose a serious threat to regional security, including Turkey’s security, particularly because of the resulting refugee crisis and ISIL-sponsored terrorist attacks within the country. Although the international community is pleased with the strategic-enhancing abilities the Incirlik base provides, the potential backlash from renewed violence with the PKK is significant. The raids have ended the cease-fire, completely halted the peace process, and led to increased violence and protests throughout the country.

Erdoğan’s “diversionary war” was successful in achieving more AKP electoral support. In the November 1st elections, the AKP gained back its majority in Parliament. The AKP won 49.4% of votes, while both the nationalist MHP and pro-Kurdish HDP garnered fewer votes—12% and 10.8% respectively. The leftist CHP hovered around its previous number, gaining around 25% of the vote. Although the election surprised analysts, as polls predicted a similar result to the June election, it did not surprise many of the AKP’s supporters. Analysts argue that the AKP was awarded with increased support for a number of reasons. The turmoil that followed the June elections, as well as the plummeting lira, led many Turkish citizens to vote for the AKP out of fear of instability and continued violence. Fighting between the PKK, three bombings conducted by ISIL in Turkey, and a general spillover of conflict from Syria, fostered a sense of fear that the AKP capitalized on. Considering a January poll showed that Turkish citizens consider the economy (33%) as the biggest issue facing Turkey, followed by terrorism at 13.9%, the November election’s results seem a bit less surprising.

288 Cook, interview; Amitay, interview; Barkey, interview; Ciddi, interview.
289 Barkey, interview.
290 Almukhtar and Wallace, “Why Turkey Is Fighting the Kurds Who Are Fighting ISIS”; Beauchamp, “Why Turkey’s Election Results Shocked All the Experts”; Matthews, “Turkey’s Hidden War Is Spilling Onto City Streets”; Cook, interview; Amitay, interview.
291 Uras, “Turkish President Urges Respect for AK Party’s Poll Win.”
After the election, Erdoğan’s stance on many issues facing the country, including the PKK, constitutional changes, and the conflict in Syria and Iraq, has not seemed to change. Erdoğan declared that the victory of the AKP in the November elections should signal to the PKK that “oppression and bloodshed cannot coexist with democracy.” Furthermore Erdoğan stated he will keep up his fight against the PKK until they are “eliminated,” insisting that “the period ahead is not for talks or discussions. I say this clear: it is a period for getting results.”

Regarding the constitution, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu stressed the importance of writing a completely new constitution. They have stated that the current constitution, written in 1980, needs to be refocused on the political system and turn Turkey’s government into a Presidential system. This would further centralize power into Erdoğan’s hands. Regarding foreign policy and the conflict in Syria and Iraq, analysts do not predict any change in Turkey’s course. Turkey will continue to pursue a “multi-dimensional, values-based” foreign policy—confirmed by their revised election manifesto released in October. However experts disagree on whether this will be beneficial or detrimental to Turkey’s regional and international influence. As the election outcomes mean the AKP and Erdoğan will be in power at least until 2019, the impact of the elections on U.S.-Turkish relations, particularly as related to the fight against ISIL and the Kurds remains to be seen. The United States must delicately balance its relationship with Turkey and its long-held support of the fight against terrorism, including the PKK, with its needed Kurdish ally in the fight against ISIL.

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295 Uras, “Turkish President Urges Respect for AK Party’s Poll Win.”
### U.S. National Interest Priorities over Three Time Periods

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Since the Cold War, the U.S. and Turkey have cooperated (and disagreed) on a wide array of issues. The Cold War predominantly focused on security, power, and containment, and achieving these goals meant supporting violent suppression of Kurdish identity. However, in the post-Cold War era, other considerations such as prosperity and human rights were increasingly considered. Although the international community, including the United States, became more critical of human rights abuses against the Kurds, ultimately security concerns were deemed more valuable. At the beginning of the Obama administration, President Obama hoped to achieve Model 4. His 2009 speech illustrated the multitude of national interests he believed Turkey’s cooperation was needed to achieve: security, stability, democracy in the region, a resolution to the “Kurdish Question,” and economic prosperity. As cracks in relations between the two countries widened and the justifiably diverging goals, interests, and policy opinions
revealed themselves, President Obama’s ability to achieve Model 4 became harder. Balancing competing interests requires real tradeoffs and determining the best course of action, or the optimal prioritization of the 4 P’s, is challenging. As Erdoğan’s authoritarianism worsens, the United States finds it more difficult to avoid certain democratic backslides. At the same time, the rise of ISIL and the refugee crisis in the region supports a power-centered, Model 1 approach towards Turkey. Moving forward the United States will need to determine if the decades-long oppression of the Kurds poses more than a principle-based concern for Turkey and the region, and if so, what is the optimal balancing of the 4 P’s to achieve Model 4?
Chapter 5: Policy Recommendations for the U.S. Government

The June 7th and November 1st Parliamentary elections, as well as the rising violence within Turkey, inflamed the Turkish “Kurdish Question”. Although Turkey finally agreed in July to join the anti-ISIL coalition and allow the U.S.-led coalition to utilize the mission-enhancing Incirlik air base, Turkey’s entrance into the fight against ISIL also brought corresponding Turkish air strikes against Kurdish targets in northern Iraq and Syria.299 The Turkish targeting of the PKK in Iraq and the YPG in Syria, Turkish round-ups of individuals “supposedly” linked to the PKK, and the PKK’s renewal of violence against the Turkish military and security forces has led to a resumption of tit-for-tat violence and the breakdown of the Kurdish Peace Process.300

The spillover of conflict in Syria and Iraq into Turkey, as well as the fear that the Turkish-Kurdish fighting will rise to levels reminiscent of the 1990s, has re-situated and further internationalized the Turkish “Kurdish Question”. As part of Turkey’s decision to join the coalition, Turkey has demanded that cooperation with the Kurds, particularly the Syrian YPG, is diminished.301 This largely stems from a fear that an emboldened YPG will embolden the PKK’s claims for territory and increased rights in Turkey.302 However, the Syrian YPG and the Iraqi Peshmerga have been, arguably, the most effective forces against ISIL, providing the coalition intelligence for air strikes and acting as the needed boots on the ground.303 The United States is therefore faced with tough policy choices for determining whether or not to prioritize the precious Turkish cooperation it has been lobbying to gain for at least a year.

In shaping the path forward, the United States will need to consider more than the violence in Syria and Iraq as the domestic components of the Turkish “Kurdish Question” have the potential to destabilize Turkey. United States’ policy towards Turkey considering the “Kurdish Question” therefore requires a decision to address (or avoid) both 1) the regional security interests, including the rise of the Islamic State, an impending refugee crisis, and the rising international positions of the Iraqi KRG and the Syrian PYD, as well as 2) the internal dimension related to the political, social, cultural, and economic grievances of Turkey’s Kurdish population. Addressing both aspects requires short-term and long-term analysis and action with the goal of sustainable stability and democratic gains.

The November 1st snap elections demonstrated the interconnectedness of the regional and domestic dimensions of the Turkish “Kurdish Question,” carrying significant implications for the future of the “Kurdish Question” and the possibility of resurrecting the Kurdish Peace Process. Erdoğan and the AKP utilized the escalating terrorist attacks by ISIL, rising instability in the Southeast regions of Turkey, and deep-seeded fear among the population of a return to dysfunctional coalition governments similar to the 1990s to market a vote for the AKP as a vote for stability, security, and a strong economy.304 Overall the AKP was able to increase its votes by

302 Pamuk, “Turkey Struck Kurdish Militia in Syria Twice: PM Davutoglu.”
303 De Luce, “Has the U.S. Just Sold Out the Kurds?”
304 Kilic Bugra Kanat, “Turkey and the U.S.: The Longest Two Years of the Relations,” Seta 16 (June 2015), http://file.setav.org/Files/Pdf/20150630180110_turkey-and-the-u.s.-the-longest-two-years-of-the-relations-pdf.pdf; Murat Yulek,
over 7 million from the June 7th elections, bringing in new voters and taking votes away from the nationalistic MHP and pro-Kurdish HDP. The November elections saw the electorate returning to the center.\footnote{Kanat, “Turkey and the U.S.: The Longest Two Years of the Relations”; Dalay, “AK Party Is Back on Stage With Force and Responsibility.”}

To many analysts, Erdoğan’s targeting of the Kurds in Syria and Iraq and increasing nationalistic rhetoric was an attempt to create a diversionary war in hopes of achieving the exact outcome observed in the November elections.\footnote{Almukhtar and Wallace, “Why Turkey Is Fighting the Kurds Who Are Fighting ISIS”; Ciddi, interview; Cook, interview; Amitay, interview; Matthews, “Turkey’s Hidden War Is Spilling Onto City Streets.”} The question is whether or not a secured AKP majority in Parliament will bolster Erdoğan to continue a campaign against the Kurds or return to the negotiating table particularly because the developments between the two elections further polarized the country and the “Kurdish Question.”\footnote{Ibid.} Some believe that Erdoğan and Davutoğlu’s speeches indicate a genuine desire to reduce political polarization in the country. Ahmet Davutoğlu in a speech to his hometown of Konya on November 1st stated, “We are here to plant seeds of love. There is no rival or enemy on this land. There is only affection.”\footnote{Dalay, “AK Party Is Back on Stage With Force and Responsibility.”} This conciliatory language, some argue, indicates that the AKP will address the Kurdish Peace Process but in a different form. The AKP, these experts believe, will likely hold off on direct negotiations with the PKK until an agreement regarding their involvement in Syria is determined. Meanwhile, the AKP will address Kurdish grievances through a broader democratization package.\footnote{Ibid.}

Conversely, other comments made by the AKP as well as the recent actions taken by the government against the PKK support the assumption that the November elections emboldened Erdoğan to abandon the Kurdish Peace Process. Before the elections Erdoğan and the AKP began equating ISIL with the PKK. Davutoğlu even stated that it was “highly probable” that the two worked together in the Ankara bombing that killed over a 100 pro-Kurdish activists.\footnote{Uras, “HDP: Party of Turkey’s Oppressed?”} After the November election, Erdoğan said that the electoral outcome signaled that Turkey could act with more authority in the region and also sent a message to Kurdish fighters that violence does not coexist with democracy.\footnote{Toksa\textsuperscript{bay}, “Turkey’s Erdogan Puts Syria, Iraq on G20 Leaders’s Agenda,” Reuters, November 11, 2015, http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/11/11/us-turkey-politics-erdogan-idUSKCN0T00W820151111#1pYdm1quiJUYPCZ.97; Uras, “Turkey’s AK Party Wins Back Majority in Snap Elections.”} Warnings to the Syrian PYD continued with Erdoğan stating on November 11\textsuperscript{th} that “anyone ferrying wood to the Syrian fire will find themselves burning,” threatening military action against the Syrian PYD.\footnote{Toksabay, “Turkey’s Erdogan Puts Syria, Iraq on G20 Leaders’s Agenda.”} President Erdoğan’s historical usage of various Kurdish peace processes to garner support from the conservative Kurds coupled with the Turkish government’s recent actions against the PKK and statements morally equivocating ISIL and the PKK lend support to the presumption that President Erdoğan and the AKP will not willingly resume the Kurdish Peace Process or provide political, cultural, or social concessions to the country’s Kurdish population.

Regardless of the direction President Erdoğan and the AKP decide to take the country after securing AKP rule for at least another five years, the United States will need to determine a policy, or lack of a policy, towards Turkey regarding the Kurds. After determining the policy

306 Almukhtar and Wallace, “Why Turkey Is Fighting the Kurds Who Are Fighting ISIS”; Ciddi, interview; Cook, interview; Amitay, interview; Matthews, “Turkey’s Hidden War Is Spilling Onto City Streets.”  
307 Uras, “HDP: Party of Turkey’s Oppressed?”  
309 ibid.  
310 Uras, “HDP: Party of Turkey’s Oppressed?”  
312 Toksabay, “Turkey’s Erdogan Puts Syria, Iraq on G20 Leaders’s Agenda.”
goals in Turkey, the United States will need to adjust its approach accordingly to Erdoğan and the AKP’s actions. The historical analysis laid out in the preceding chapters on U.S.-Turkish relations from the Cold War to the present illustrate that the U.S. has usually followed Model 1:

If the United States defines the national interest as prioritizing power, then United States’ foreign policy towards Turkey, considering the “Kurdish Question,” will always side with Turkey over the Kurds.

Although during the 1990s some members of Congress considered restricting military aid based on human rights violations committed against the Kurds, the United States’ ultimately decided to prioritize the geostrategically important relationship with Turkey. More recently, the United States has increased its cooperation with the Syrian YPG and Iraqi Peshmerga while simultaneously standing by the NATO ally in its fight against terrorism (read: the PKK). As the threat of ISIL and global terrorism increases and the Turkish “Kurdish Question” continues to polarize the region, the United States will need to re-examine the decision to predominately follow Model 1 as it will increasingly lead to more opposition with Turkey as security and power interests between Turkey and the United States are beginning to diverge more frequently.

In defining the policy towards Turkey and the Turkish Kurds, the United States will need to determine where it stands on certain debates. In general, the review of relevant literature and interviews conducted by the researcher illustrated four policy assumptions where experts disagree. They are 1) whether the Turkish “Kurdish Question” can or should be solved, 2) whether the U.S. should or can influence the domestic elements of the Turkish “Kurdish Question,” 3) whether the U.S. should possibly threaten the U.S.-Turkish relationship in attempt to influence the “Kurdish Question,” and 4) whether the U.S. has the ability to leverage or influence Turkey’s policies or actions more broadly. One's analysis on these four outlooks informs the policy perceived to be optimal.

With these four considerations framing U.S. policy, U.S. experts and policymakers differ in their opinion of what role the United States should play in reaching a solution to the Turkish “Kurdish Question”. On one end of the spectrum, policymakers and experts believe that Turkey’s cooperation is vital for defeating ISIL in addition to ensuring future security and power-centered objectives are achieved. The Turkish “Kurdish Question” is either not solvable, at least by the United States, or not necessary to resolve in order to ensure stability within our NATO ally. On the other end of the spectrum are individuals who believe that the United States and the international community must prioritize a solution before strengthening relations with President Erdoğan and the AKP. The “Kurdish Question” needs to be solved in order for democracy, justice, and equality to prosper in Turkey; ignoring the problem bolsters the wrongs that both sides have committed. Policy suggestions range from mediating the peace process to requiring democratic concessions and reforms before continuing military and economic cooperation. However, most policy recommendations fall somewhere in between these two extremes. Because each policy decision requires considerable analysis, the United States’

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313 De Luce, “Has the U.S. Just Sold Out the Kurds?”
involvement will vary. What follows is a more detailed analysis of the policy spectrum regarding U.S. policy towards Turkey considering the “Kurdish Question”.

Prioritize Security Concerns with an Emphasis on Turkey’s Importance

Experts who argue that the United States should prioritize security relations with our NATO ally often believe that the “Kurdish Question” cannot be influenced by the United States and continued United States’ cooperation with the Kurds does not provide enough of a payback to warrant threatening bilateral relations with Turkey. For some who doubt the likelihood of solving the “Kurdish Question,” the existential nature of the problem, grounded in Turkish guilt of the historical oppression of the Kurds, combined with the fear many Turks hold of losing territory or blemishing the Turkish civic identity, makes the problem unsolvable through political, cultural, and/or legal means. Furthermore, many experts argue that the United States cannot positively influence any peace process in the current political climate, with some even arguing that the United States’ involvement would exacerbate the already highly politicized problem. Because of the strained relationship between President Obama and President Erdoğan, coupled with President Erdoğan’s supposed erratic behavior and resistance to outside influence, the United States is simply unable to influence the Turkish “Kurdish Question.”

Turkey historically rebuffs American recommendations on internal affairs, stating that the United States and the international community writ large have no business endorsing certain domestic policies. Furthermore there exists a large segment of the population, supported by AKP propaganda, which believes Operation Iraqi Freedom and the U.S. involvement in Iraq during the Gulf War were part of a larger Western conspiracy to develop a Kurdish state (grounded in fears dating back to the formation of the Republic). Any U.S. involvement will therefore further polarize the “Kurdish Question,” increasing the gap between Turkish citizens, already distrustful of the United States, and the Turkish Kurds.

Even if the United States could influence Turkey’s internal policies, many believe that Turkey’s geopolitical importance and the high likelihood of Turkey pursuing retributive foreign policy bolster arguments against straining U.S.-Turkish relations in an attempt to solve the “Kurdish Question”. Turkey’s historic position as a buffer between the former Soviet Union and western democracies and current position in a region with extreme unrest due to violence and refugee flows, makes prioritizing the security aspect of utmost significance. Furthermore, Turkey’s geostrategic importance, particularly in the fight against ISIL, countering human trafficking and smuggling, and transporting energy and natural gas to our European allies are grounds for avoiding sensitive topics in order to secure a strong U.S.-Turkish relationship.

Those who believe the United States does not have much or any leverage over Turkey cite

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317 Burak Bilgehan Özbek, May 21, 2015; Ciddi, interview; Ekrem Eddy Güzeldere, May 16, 2015; Cook, interview.
318 Stafford, interview.
320 Bacik, interview; Uzer, interview; Güzeldere, interview; Genç, interview.
President Erdoğan’s general disinterest in cooperating with the United States, Turkey’s history with threatening to recall its Ambassador or threaten bilateral relations in response to the United States’ attempts to act on principles or otherwise (e.g. Cyprus, the “Kurdish Question” in the 1990s, the Armenian genocide), and the United States’ need for Turkey in the fight against ISIL. Although President Erdoğan is known for his increasing authoritarianism and desire for power, he is also associated with stability and a strong economy. Historically speaking, the United States has prioritized its relationship with Turkey over non-state actors and changing this position now will not be fruitful, in the minds of some experts. If the United States wants to be more proactive about addressing the Turkish “Kurdish Question,” then Turkey’s leadership will first have to change.

With these viewpoints in mind, experts who believe the United States will have minimal positive impact on the state of democracy in Turkey, generally prioritize the United States’ relationship with Turkey. Actions that have previously destabilized this relationship, such as threatening or implying to publicly recognize an Armenian genocide or declassify the PKK as a foreign terrorist organization, should be avoided. Therefore, when dealing with the current crisis in Syria and Iraq and the chronic tensions between Turkey and the Kurds, policymakers and experts tend to focus on ways to fix the strained relationship between Obama and Erdoğan in order to determine the best policy for addressing the conflict.

Those who caution against the United States actively applying pressure on Turkey to ameliorate the “Kurdish Question,” tend to focus on achieving security in the region, particularly in the immediate future. Stopping the instability, loss of life, and ideological threat posed by ISIL should be the top priority. Therefore, the United States should appease Turkey in hopes of solidifying their involvement in the anti-ISIL campaign. The operation-enhancing capabilities of Turkey’s entrance into the anti-ISIL coalition, including the opening of the Incirlik air base, outweigh the benefits of a strong relationship with the Turkish Kurds, and even the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds. In order to secure Turkey’s commitment to the coalition, recommendations range from a strong stance against Assad, distancing—at least publicly—from the Syrian YPG and Iraqi Peshmerga, and the creation of the buffer zone Turkey continuously demands. Such actions would likely embolden Turkey and its attempts to squash the PKK. Turkey’s perceived existential threat of an independent Kurdistan would be minimized and Turkey would likely increase both its targeting of the Kurds and the Islamic State. If the U.S. pacified Turkey in the aforementioned regards, U.S. policymakers might be able to leverage Turkey to increase its targeting of the Islamic State and even put boots on the ground. However, it is the opinion of the researcher that the most likely outcome would be the continuation of Turkey’s targeting of

323 Stafford, interview; Güzeldere, interview; Cook, interview.
324 Güzeldere, interview; Genç, interview.
325 Ciddi, interview.
Kurds, undercutting of the anti-ISIL coalition, and a generally dissatisfactory outcome for the United States.  

Toe the Line: Balance Security with Principles

Recommendations for the United States to avoid risking bilateral relations rest upon an assumption of Turkey’s internal stability; however, recommendations change when the possibly destabilizing impact of the “Kurdish Question” is considered. The rise of violence and the threat of this trend continuing have brought back memories of the bloody 1990s, causing some worry that the violence and instability will worsen. If the Turkish “Kurdish Question” results in a further destabilization in the Southeast of the country and the Turkish targeting of PKK in northern Iraq and YPG in Syria negatively impacts the Syrian YPG’s ability to fight ISIL, then unwaveringly prioritization of bilateral relations may be a mistake. Generally, arguments that support the United States defining more short-term, mid-term, and long-term policy regarding the Kurds and the Turkish “Kurdish Question” often claim that Turkey needs the U.S. more than the U.S. needs an unstable, authoritarian Turkey.

Therefore, most policy recommendations argue for the United States to perform a balancing act between the Kurds and Turkey. These suggestions are founded on the importance of a traditional NATO ally and the current importance of Kurdish on-the-ground fighters. Additionally, experts who believe the United States must “toe the line” often consider the current trends towards violence, authoritarianism, and democratic backsliding as well as the above mentioned negative consequences of ignoring the “Kurdish Question”. The United States should then determine a policy that seeks to shift Turkey’s internal trends and regional policy, at the very least urging the U.S. to not remain silent and speak out against perceived disproportionate attacks on the Kurds and the PKK. Indeed some experts point to the United States’ relative silence during the 1990s as an example of the United States bolstering inhumane and counterproductive activities. In general these “toe the line” suggestions center on rhetorical shifts, both public and private, and leveraging actions.

The specific policy recommendations, however, vary considerably as experts disagree on the amount of influence the United States has over Turkish foreign and domestic policy. Some experts believe that as a superpower the United States has influence everywhere. While other experts believe that the United States has influence but are unclear as to the degree of this influence. To some, United States’ influence is almost automatic, as Turkey desires United States’ approval, publicly and privately, and would be upset without support from the historic ally. Other experts point towards a very transactional relationship between Turkey and the U.S. and therefore suggest economic cooperation and other tangible outcomes be used to leverage Turkey.

331 Barkey, interview; Tuğtan, interview; Özpek, interview; Jenkins, interview.
332 Barkey, interview; Tuğtan, interview; Özpek, interview.
333 Gurol Baba, May 19, 2015.
334 Jenkins, interview; Tuğtan, interview; Bacık, interview; Özpek, interview.
335 Jenkins, interview.
337 Akkaya, interview; İşçi, interview.
338 Baba, interview; Bacık, interview; Barkey, interview.
339 Stafford, interview; Cook, interview; Ciddi, interview.
With the opening of the Incirlik air base and Turkey’s entrance into the anti-ISIL coalition, Turkey has pushed for a strategically placed “ISIL-free zone,” aka a buffer zone, between the Syrian Kurdish towns of Kobane and Afrin. Turkey argues that this area will serve as a safe zone for refugees. However, it seems more likely that such a zone will really function to prevent a strengthening of relations between the YPG and the PKK. Additionally, Turkey wants the anti-ISIL coalition to distance itself from the Syrian YPG in hopes that a weakened YPG will also weaken the Turkish PKK. Publicly, the United States supports Turkey’s entrance in to the conflict, as well as its fight against ISIL, but the United States has, up to the date of writing, avoided publicly deciding one way or another regarding the creation of the buffer zone and Turkey’s urges for the U.S. to distance itself from the Syrian YPG. By countering Turkey through the current support of the Kurds, this policy keeps both the Kurds and Turkey as partners. However, it is unlikely to be sustainable and provides no sticks or carrots to prompt a stronger Turkish fight against ISIL.

Public expressions of concern would be a slightly stronger approach. Although behind closed doors the United States may be pushing Turkey to re-think its renewed violence with the PKK, public statements tend to elicit greater reactions. The United States has generally steered away from criticizing Turkey, making sure, even in its calls for increased Turkish air support, not to use language that could be construed as too harsh (ex. U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter’s avoidance of accusing Turkey of “dragging their feet”). However, a tougher public stance may pressure Turkey to make a more genuine effort against the Islamic State, but rhetoric by itself most likely will not achieve the level of engagement the United States wants from Turkey. Furthermore, the Kurds and the general Kurdish populations will not be satisfied by rhetoric alone.

The United States could increase its support of the Kurds, including directly arming the YPG and Iraqi Peshmerga as opposed to arming them vis-à-vis Baghdad. Over the summer before Turkey joined the coalition, there had been talks on the Hill of doing directly arming these groups. Such a decision now would likely anger Turkey, possibly to the point of no return. Furthermore, it is unclear how much arming the Kurds directly would strengthen their fight against ISIL. There is also the concern that directly arming the Kurds could cause extreme human rights concerns later down the line if those weapons do end up being used against Turkey or even the anti-ISIL coalition.

Another countering strategy suggested has been the restructuring of U.S. internal foreign policy decision-making bodies to properly address Kurdish concerns and policy issues. Currently the U.S. State Department splits the Kurds across two geographic offices, with experts working on Iraq, Syria, and Iran in one office and experts working on Turkey in the Europe office.

342 Özpek, interview; Jenkins, interview; Tuğtan, interview; Stafford, interview.
Practically speaking this can lead to disjointed analysis of the Kurds, as well as the treatment of the “Kurdish Question” as an afterthought. Some experts have suggested that a more comprehensive position be created to address the “Kurdish Question” not only in Turkey but also in Iraq, Syria, and Iran. Although this suggestion appears pragmatic on the surface level, it is unclear if a presumably long bureaucratic shuffle will lead to the crucial push needed to achieve the desired changes in the United States’ approach to determining policy regarding the Kurds. Furthermore, such an institutional change would very likely anger Turkey, as Erdoğan and other Turkish diplomats would interpret the change as an affront to “Turkey’s valued relationship. A more pragmatic solution is an internal push within foreign policymaking bodies to intentionally consider the Kurdish element of the current crisis more holistically and contextually, rather than create a new office specifically for Kurdish relations.

Prioritize the “Kurdish Question” and Leverage Turkish Policies

The third grouping of policy recommendations center on firmer, more coercive approaches to prioritize the Turkish “Kurdish Question” and re-align Turkish and American interests in Syria and Iraq. In general experts that support such recommendations believe not only that the Turkish “Kurdish Question” can be solved, or at least significant progress on the problem can be made, but also that doing so is necessary for a stable, democratic Turkey and future U.S.-Turkish relations. As mentioned previously, this view is predicated on the conjecture that allowing Turkey to continue to target the PKK will increase instability. Domestically, a growing population of uncontrollable dissatisfied Kurdish youth in many Turkish cities, such as Adana and Istanbul, may increase protesting and clashes with the police. Regionally, targeting PKK and Syrian YPG may threaten the effectiveness of the Syrian Kurdish fighters working with the U.S.-led coalition or at the very least weaken the cooperation between the U.S. and the Kurdish fighters. Therefore solving the Turkish “Kurdish Question” becomes a question not only of principles but also of power and security. The recommendations on how to realign U.S.-Turkish interests, secure both the Kurds’ and Turkey’s cooperation in the fight against ISIL, and solve the “Kurdish Question” vary.

Some Kurdish activists support reassessing the United States’ stance on the PKK. A pillar of the U.S.-Turkish relationship has been cooperation on Turkey’s fight against the PKK. As the United States classifies the PKK as a foreign terrorist organization, the United States has publicly and privately supported Turkey’s fight against the organization. However, some Kurdish activists support the declassification of the PKK as a foreign terrorist organization citing ethical and practical reasoning. On a logistical level as the United States supports the YPG and the Iraqi Peshmerga in the fight against ISIL, questions have arisen regarding how future history books will read an implicit support of a terrorist group, particularly if either groups

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346 Amitay, interview; Edelman, “America’s Dangerous Bargain with Turkey.”
347 Stafford, interview; Edelman, “America’s Dangerous Bargain with Turkey.”
348 Cook, interview; Jenkins, interview; Özpek, interview; Amitay, interview; Barkey, interview; Işıci, interview.
349 Mustafa Gurbuz, August 5, 2015; Barkey, interview; Barkey, “Turkey’s Turmoil: Why Erdoğan and the Kurds Are Both to Blame”; Jenkins, interview; Güzeldere, interview.
transfer or share weapons with the PKK. Conversely as the PKK remains on the FTO list, U.S. policymakers are unable to communicate with PKK leadership, stripping the United States of further intelligence for the fight against ISIL as well as relationship building that could allow the U.S. to influence the PKK’s behavior.352

Separately, there are many who question why the PKK was ever classified as a terrorist organization in 1997, considering they do not target Americans, avoid targeting civilians as much as possible, and instead opt to attack military officials. This has led some to believe that PKK members are freedom fighters, not terrorists.353 However, the recent return to violence has illustrated that although the PKK tends to target the military, their use of violence renders them more than innocent activists struggling for freedom.354 Declassifying the PKK would also certainly create a huge backlash from the Turkish government as U.S.-Turkish relations have often centered on the understanding that the PKK is a terrorist organization that the United States must work, through intelligence sharing and rhetorical and tactical support, to defeat.355 The question for the U.S. is then does the PKK offer a tactical advantage for the fight against ISIL that would justify angering Turkey and likely leading to a breakdown of bilateral relations.

Another common suggestion is supporting democratic processes in Turkey, including the recent election of the HDP, constitutional and legal reforms to lower the election threshold, plans for decentralization, and the Kurdish Peace Process.356 In order for Turkey to flourish, democracy to progress, and stability to be achieved, democratization must occur. Political reforms that increase political plurality, such as the representation of minority groups through the lowering of the 10% electoral threshold, decrease censorship and stifling of political dissent, and increase local government autonomy will therefore strengthen Turkey.357 These policies, many believe, will also help alleviate the “Kurdish Question.”358

The June 7th and November 1st elections were a positive step, albeit the violence that ensued between the two elections and the centralization of power the AKP received in the November elections. Regardless, the first pro-Kurdish political party—the HDP—was elected, enabling, at least theoretically, the possibility for a peaceful, political solution to the “Kurdish Question”. However, attempts to cut the HDP out of the political process or any possible Kurdish Peace Process will weaken democracy and increase instability. Furthermore, if the HDP fails to bring results, the party will lose legitimacy and the PKK will likely gain support from Kurds frustrated with the HDP. To promote a political solution to the “Kurdish Question,” the U.S.

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352 Champion and Duenwalk, “Kurdish Fighters Aren’t Terrorists”; “PEN Vice President Calls for Removal of PKK From Terrorist List”; Stafford, interview; Ciddi, interview.
358 Ayşe Betul Çelik, May 18, 2015; Genç, interview; Jenkins, interview; Güzeldere, interview; İşçi, interview; Özpek, interview.
could consider supporting the party, publicly or privately, and promote political inclusion of the HDP within a Kurdish Peace Process.  

Regarding the actual Kurdish Peace Process, some experts believe the United States should take a more active role. Some find value in the United States acting as a mediator to a peace process, similar to the role President Bill Clinton played during Northern Ireland’s negotiations with the IRA, arguing that without a third party mediator or observer both sides of the “Kurdish Question” will never remain genuine and progress will not follow. However, other experts believe that the United States cannot force this role upon itself: the United States can only act as a mediator or a third eye if the Turkish government requests the U.S. plays this role, otherwise the Turkish public is likely to view U.S. involvement with intense skepticism and distrust. However the failure of the Oslo Process and the general suspicion towards the United States that both the Turkish government and the Turkish public possesses weakens the argument that U.S. direct involvement in the peace process will be beneficial in any context. Nonetheless some believe that with the complete breakdown of the 2013 peace process and the entrance of Turkey into the anti-ISIL coalition, the United States is in a better position than other countries to at least persuade Turkey to revisit the negotiations.

Policy Recommendations to the United States’ Government

With this spectrum of recommendations and positions in mind, I take the position that the United States should formulate foreign policy towards Turkey that considers the Turkish “Kurdish Question” with the goal of an internal domestic resolution and a regional policy that prevents continued Turkish targeting of our Kurdish allies in Syria and Iraq. After reviewing relevant literature and conducting interviews, I believe that 1) the Turkish “Kurdish Question” can and should be solved, 2) the United States should attempt to positively influence the “Kurdish Question,” 3) because the threat of a worsening relationship between Turkey and the Kurds risks further destabilizing the country, the United States must promote policies that do risk a destabilizing of the bilateral relations in the short-term, and 4) the United States has some, albeit limited, ability to influence Turkey’s foreign and domestic policies. The break-down of the peace process and return to violence between the Turkish state and the PKK, Turkish entrance into the anti-ISIL coalition and targeting of Kurdish fighters in Syria and Iraq, June Parliamentary elections followed by snap elections that strengthened the AKP but failed to oust the HDP from Parliament, and the general dismissal by President Erdoğan and Prime Minister Davutoğlu of Kurdish grievances as legitimate all raise significant security and stability concerns. The Turkish “Kurdish Question” and Turkey’s treatment of the Kurds, therefore, garners power, peace, and principle-based considerations for the U.S. government. A policy towards Turkey, considering the Turkish “Kurdish Question,” must then analyze the tradeoffs between all policy options and attempt to achieve Model 4:

If the United States prioritizes the “Kurdish Question”, it will carefully weigh the tradeoffs to formulate foreign policy that defines the national interest as a combination of power, peace, prosperity, and principles.

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359 Çanda, “What’s Next for Turkey?”; Çelik, interview; Bacik, interview.
360 Baba, interview; Chris Kilford, May 5, 2015; Çelik, interview; Özpek, interview.
361 Genç, interview; Işçi, interview.
In order to achieve Model 4, the United States needs to continue its relationship with the strategically important Kurds, but it also needs to strengthen its relations with the geopolitically important NATO ally. Additionally, the United States must persuade Turkey, through public rhetoric, private discussions, and leveraging actions, that targeting Kurds in Syria and Iraq is not beneficial for the fight against ISIL or for the long-term stability of the region. The United States should instead compel Turkey into a genuine fight against the Islamic State and a resolution to the “Kurdish Question”. Absent a solution, instability caused by the “Kurdish Question” will only increase due to the changing geopolitics of the region as well as the evolving demographics—the Kurdish population is growing and some predictions place the Kurds as a majority by 2038—in Turkey. In order to do so, the United States must not only think about the current conflict in Syria and Iraq but also take a long-term approach towards the “Kurdish Question” and consider the impact of an increasingly authoritarian Turkey on the problem. This requires a frank internalization of the reality that the United States can no longer avoid Turkey’s geopolitical goals that may differ from the United States’ interests. With the aforementioned in mind, this thesis’s policy recommendations are as follows:

1. Raise concerns of Turkish targeting of Kurdish fighters in Iraq and Syria and counter Turkey’s attacks on Kurdish fighters by continuing to support the Syrian YPG and the Iraqi Peshmerga.

When Turkey joined the fight against the Islamic State and opened up the Incirlik base to the coalition, it also asked (whether implicitly or explicitly is unknown) for the green light to target the terrorist organization the PKK as well as for the creation of a safe haven (a.k.a. ISIL-free zone, buffer zone, safe zone, no-fly zone) in Syria. Turkey also urged that the U.S.-led coalition distance itself from the Syrian Kurdish fighters, fearing the recently strengthened relations and the possibility of the creation of an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria.

Turkey’s fears are to a degree well founded, as the Kurdish YPG by January 2014 had secured 200+ kilometers of territory on the Turkish border and proclaimed this land as part of the Kurdish autonomous region of Rojova. Furthermore during October a Syrian Kurdish leadership council proclaimed Tel Abyad as part of the autonomous self-governing region. Somewhat predictably, Turkey has targeted the PKK based in northern Iraq as well as the Syrian YPG. In July Turkish tanks bombarded Zor Maghar, a village west of Kobane used by the Syrian YPG as a base. Furthermore in October, Turkey conducted air strikes twice against the Syrian YPG after they crossed to the west side of the Euphrates River. These attacks support Former U.S. Ambassador to the Special Envoy in Syria Robert Ford’s argument that American cooperation with the Syrian YPG raises Syrian Kurdish hopes of a future autonomous Kurdish region, further angering Turkey and straining U.S.-Turkish relations.

365 De Luce, “Has the U.S. Just Sold Out the Kurds?”; Cook, interview; Stafford, interview.
367 Pamuk, “Turkey Struck Kurdish Militia in Syria Twice: PM Davutoglu.”
Furthermore the United States supports Turkey’s targeting of the PKK, finding little fault in our NATO ally attempting to eradicate terrorism.370 Brett McGurk, President Obama’s envoy to the coalition fighting ISIL, has argued that Turkey’s attacks against the PKK are not linked to Turkey’s entrance in to the anti-ISIL coalition and tweeted support of Turkey’s “right to self-defense.”371 However, Pentagon Spokesman Jeff Davis has stated that the U.S. was urging Turkey to “act with restraint in pursing the PKK to avoid undermining the broader objective of defeating the Islamic State.” He further stated that the United States understood the value of the Kurdish partners in the fight against ISIL and declared that the U.S. had not provided any intelligence or logistical support in Turkey’s strikes against the PKK.372

Davis’ statements highlight the importance of the Syrian and Kurdish fighters in combating ISIL. The Syrian YPG has arguably been the most important ally in the fight against ISIL, afflicting the most damage to the Islamic State and offering extremely important intelligence for coalition air strikes.373 Although the United States generally prioritizes its relations with a country over a non-state actor, full support of Turkey’s actions and abandonment of the Kurdish allies (as has been up to date) is not likely to lead to a defeat of ISIL. Instead it will very probably anger the Kurds, causing extreme tension in America’s cooperation with them and also increasing violence within Turkey.374 Furthermore, the Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish forces may turn to Iran to balance out the relationship with America if they believe America has abandoned them.375 The Syrian YPG and Iraqi Peshmerga are already showing signs of skepticism. In October after being targeted by Turkey, the Syrian Kurdish YPG asked the U.S.-led coalition against ISIL to clarify its positions regarding Turkey’s targeting of Kurds.376 The Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government expressed dissatisfaction at being excluded from the 20-country negotiation team created to determine a peaceful solution to Syria. The KRG’s Foreign Minister Falah Mustafa Bakir stated that the Iraqi Peshmerga have lost over 1,350 fighters to ISIL and believe its involvement in the frontline against ISIL warrants them a position at the negotiating table.377

The United States therefore needs to be careful to balance its relations with Turkey and the Kurds. To do so the United States needs to be more explicit about its disapproval of Turkish targeting of Kurdish groups. Additionally, the United States must continue to publicly express its support of the Kurdish groups by continuing the military cooperation, least the Kurdish groups turn to Iran or begin to lose momentum against ISIL. The United States should also privately assure the Syrian YPG and PYD and Iraqi Peshmerga that they value their relationship and are seeking a solution to the Turkish targeting of the Kurds. Because Turkey is largely transactional in its foreign policy, the United States may use the creation of a buffer zone as a carrot to influence Turkey’s actions, namely to convince Turkey to avoid targeting of the Kurds and contribute a more concerted effort against ISIL.

370 Toosi, “ISIL Fight Forces U.S. to Choose Between Allies.”
371 Almukhtar and Wallace, “Why Turkey Is Fighting the Kurds Who Are Fighting ISIS.”
372 De Luce, “Has the U.S. Just Sold Out the Kurds?”
374 Edelman, “America’s Dangerous Bargain with Turkey”; Cockburn, “War With ISIS in Iraq and Syria: Turkey Joins West as a Reluctant Ally, But What Took It So Long?”; Barkey, “Turkey’s Turmoil: Why Erdogan and the Kurds Are Both to Blame”; Ciddi, interview; Cook, interview.
375 Bacik, interview; Gurbuz, interview; Cook, interview; Barkey, interview.
376 “Syrian Kurds Accuse Turkey of Attacks, Ask U.S. For Explanation.”
Although past attempts in the 1990s to restrict military aid because of human rights violations against Kurdish populations seriously strained relations, the United States may find threatening to restrict the current $5.2 million in total military assistance useful. The Leahy Law constrains U.S. military assistance when there is credible evidence of human rights violations and could foreseeably be evoked against Turkey.\textsuperscript{378} Conversely the United States may decide to suggest increasing military and security assistance as leverage, reminiscing back to the 1990s when the United States gave on average $400 million in military and assistance aid to Turkey.\textsuperscript{379} The same approach may be applied to economic aid or economic bilateral relations. Although U.S.-Turkish trade has increased from $10.8 billion in 2009 to $19.1 billion in 2014, the trade relations are much less than they could be, particularly in comparison with Turkey-EU trade.\textsuperscript{380}

2. Publicly and privately address the breakdown of the peace process and domestic clashes with the PKK.

Since the breakdown of the Kurdish Peace Process and resumption of violence, Turkey has experienced tit-for-tat violence between the PKK and the Turkish security forces. In the ten weeks following the breakdown of the cease-fire in July, over 120 members of Turkey’s security forces have died and 350 Kurdish militants—as defined by the Turkish state—have been killed. Additionally the Turkish government has started to lose control of towns in the Southeast of the country, with the pro-Kurdish Dicle News Agency (DIHA) claiming that the state has lost control of at least 17 towns across the Southeast.\textsuperscript{381} Many experts have also raised concerns about Kurdish youth who are uncontrollable even by the PKK.\textsuperscript{382} Unlike the 1990s, the violence today is taking place not in the hills but in the towns. There exists a fear that the bloody conflict of the 1990s may return to the country, bringing with it instability in the already underdeveloped Southeast that has taken the bulk of the Syrian refugees.\textsuperscript{383} The deterioration of the security situation in Turkey is worrying experts and even the European Union. A November Human Rights Report by the European Union stated that the security situation in Turkey was raising serious concerns over human rights violations, particularly regarding anti-terrorism measures used by the Turkish security forces. They urged Turkey to take proportionate measures and resume peace talks with the PKK.\textsuperscript{384} The United States, similar to Europe, must be more vocal publicly and privately about the possible human rights violations and need for the Turkish government to not use “anti-terror measures” as an excuse to commit violations against the country’s Kurdish population. In doing so the United


\textsuperscript{381} Matthews, “Turkey’s Hidden War Is Spilling Onto City Streets.”

\textsuperscript{382} Jenkins, “Revolution and Counter-Revolution”; Barkey, “Turkey’s Turmoil: Why Erdoğan and the Kurds Are Both to Blame.”

\textsuperscript{383} Matthews, “Turkey’s Hidden War Is Spilling Onto City Streets.”

\textsuperscript{384} “EU Criticises Turkey over Human Rights and Democracy.”

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States should stress the need for Turkey to be a “modern” country that embraces its diversity. As previously mentioned, Turkey seeks U.S. approval and the United States should therefore link the breakdown of the peace process and resumption of violence to the fostering of a negative international and American perception of Turkey. These talking points should be linked to a decrease in Turkey’s regional power and international soft power, attraction to foreign investors, the stability of the lira, and the possibility of European Union accession. More coercive measures may include restricting Turkey’s access to high-level meetings and threatening to discontinue military assistance under the Leahy Law, similar to actions the U.S. could take to persuade Turkey to stop targeting of Kurds in Syria and Iraq.

3. Hold out TTIP negotiations as leverage for the Kurdish Peace Process. Offer other economic incentives such as foreign direct investment, particularly in the Southeast, as further motivation.

An innovative suggestion for bringing Turkey to the table involves the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). Turkey previously made a customs union agreement with the United States, but with the entrance of TTIP, Turkey would be put in an extremely disadvantageous position as it will remove (when implemented) trade barriers between the EU and the U.S. Turkey would be unable to impose a customs duty on the U.S., while having to pay fees on imports from the U.S. Furthermore, Turkey’s industries would be threatened by duty free imports, likely leading to industries shutting down and rising unemployment. This would, to say in the least, severely hinder Turkey’s ability to reach its goal of economic growth and continuous integration in to the world economy. Turkey wants to be let in to TTIP, specifically through the modification of its European Union Customs Union Agreement, but so far no conclusion has been met.385

As relations between the United States and Turkey have recently been very transactional, the TTIP negotiations offer a tangible leverage point for the United States.386 The U.S. could hold out this economic agreement to influence Turkey’s behavior towards and treatment of the Kurds, both in the conflict and internally.387 Although Turkish politicians would grumble, their fear of an economic crisis would likely override their apprehensions, or at the very least force them to think twice before striking Kurdish targets or continuing to avoid a Kurdish Peace Process.

4. Publicly and privately support political, economic, legal, and cultural concessions, to address Kurdish grievances and promote the resumption of a genuine Kurdish Peace Process.

In order to address Kurdish grievances and solve the “Kurdish Question,” there are many changes that need to be made including amending Article 66 of the Constitution to change the definition of a Turk to include ethnic minorities, allow the teaching of Kurdish in schools, lower the Parliament electoral threshold (currently at 10%), undertake judicial reforms to promote checks and balances on the executive branch, and reform the recent anti-terror law that violates

387 Cook, interview.
freedom of assembly and disproportionately negatively impacts Kurds. Another possible solution is decentralizing Turkey to provide more autonomy to the local governments. Although Turkish citizens are rhetorically averse to federalism, many experts believe that if the Turkish government promotes the process and looks to other case studies of decentralizations, such as Spain, then many of the underdevelopment problems in the Southeast may be addressed. All of these reforms, and more, will address Kurdish grievances and strengthen Turkey’s democracy, enabling stability and stronger U.S.-Turkish cooperation in the future.

The United States should raise the idea of a roadmap to peace with the PKK and include many of these concessions. Some experts including Michael Werz form the Center for American Progress even suggest proposing taking the PKK off of the FTO list many years from now if the peace process is achieved. Furthermore the peace process should include the HDP as the official negotiator as they are the elected pro-Kurdish Party. Whether or not the United States is the official mediator will largely depend on the Turkish government’s decision to allow the U.S. to act in this role; however, the United States should observe the negotiations and apply pressure both on the Turkish government and the Kurds to remain genuine and committed to a peace process. The “Kobane psychology,” characterized by Gökhan Bacık, refers to the PKK’s resistance to lay down arms after the perceived betrayal of the Turkish government to protect the Kurds in Kobane and casts doubt on the PKK’s desire to go to the negotiating table. This further reinforces the need for the United States to pressure not only Erdoğan but also Ocalan. The United States should therefore take several actions: make public statements calling for a return to the peace process and raising concerns over President Erdoğan’s increasing authoritarianism, undertake private discussions with Turkey and all actors necessary for a successful process, allow for the possibility of restricting Turkey’s access to high-level meetings if needed, and tie military and economic aid to progress on the process.

Final Thoughts

The Turkish “Kurdish Question” and the fight against ISIL has only intensified and become further complicated since I began this thesis in September 2014. The refugee crisis has heightened the urgency through which Europe is treating the conflict in Syria and Iraq and boosting Turkey’s importance as one of the largest recipients of Syrian refugees. Russia’s entrance into the mix and the subsequent aggression between Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan add another layer to the complexity of the current foreign policy issues. As the conflict continues, there will be more avenues of research and analysis needed to inform what should be U.S. foreign policy towards Turkey, considering the “Kurdish Question”. Quantitative analysis of UN voting patterns and military and economic aid may elucidate other avenues to influence Turkey, while interviews with Kurdish experts or members of the PKK may bolster a dissimilar, but needed, perspective on the United States’ involvement in Turkey and the “Kurdish Question”.

388 Jenkins, interview; Bacık, “Turkey’s Prolonged Missile Issue”; Güzeldere, “Kurdish Opening - How Far, How Sincere?”; İşçi, interview; Özpek, interview; Çağlar, interview.
389 Toosi, “ISIL Fight Forces U.S. to Choose Between Allies.”
390 Tuğtan, interview.
391 Bacık, interview.
It is my hope that this thesis, built off of a year’s worth of research and conversations, provides useful policy recommendations for the United States government. However more importantly, I hope the analysis of U.S.-Turkish relations, Turkish-Kurdish relations, and U.S.-Turkish Kurdish relations laid out in this thesis illustrate the saliency and complexity of the Turkish “Kurdish Question”. If the United States aspires to continue to have strong relations with Turkey, then expending careful analysis and foresight into the possible destabilizing impact of the current policies and actions, undertaken by all actors in the region, will be fruitful. It is my belief, based on the analysis presented above, that the United States must be more active in promoting a Kurdish Peace Process and be more critical of human rights abuses committed by all parties. Turning a blind eye to the problem now will lead to worse problems down the line. Solving the “Kurdish Question” is not only a question of principles, but also of peace, prosperity, and power.
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