

## U.S.-Turkish Relations: Re-Situating the “Kurdish Question”: Executive Summary

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 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 relations between the Kurds, Turkey, and the U.S., examination of U.S. national interests, and 24 elite interviews, this thesis seeks to answer the question: What should be U.S. foreign policy towards Turkey, considering the Turkish “Kurdish Question”? 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.

The development of the “Kurdish Question” has its roots in the breakdown of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I and the territorial splitting of the Kurds across Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria. However, the “Kurdish Question” has evolved into a complicated set of questions concerning not only territorial integrity and autonomy, but also strategic underdevelopment, political manipulation, and social and cultural rights. Following political unrest and strategic underdevelopment of Kurdish regions, Abdullah Ocalan and a group of leftist students of Kurdish descent established the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK) in 1978. 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 1984 PKK attack of Turkish army posts in Erbus and Semdinli, Turkey began an armed conflict against the PKK. 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. The historical legacy of violence and mistrust, coupled with the current demographic realities of the country (the Sunni Muslim Kurds are the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East and comprise 18% of Turkey’s population) ensure that the Turkish “Kurdish Question” will remain one of the biggest policy problems in Turkey if not the whole region.

In determining what policy to pursue, American policymakers must determine how to define the U.S. national interest and what foreign policy best achieves that goal. As Bruce Jentleson’s 4P’s approach illustrates, 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 like human rights. Because the 4P’s approach provides a useful framework to analyze both the tradeoffs and overlap between

different foreign policy goals, this thesis utilized 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 derived four descriptive models of U.S. policy towards Turkey considering the "Kurdish Question". In Model 1, U.S. foreign policymaking would center on power, military cooperation, and other security-based policies. Model 2 described U.S. foreign policy towards Turkey, considering the "Kurdish Question," as prioritizing economic interests. If the United States followed Model 3 and defined the national interest as prioritizing principles, then U.S. foreign policy would center on advancing ideals and human rights regardless of its effect on bilateral relations. Finally in Model 4, power, prosperity, principles, and peace would be balanced in American foreign policymaking. These four models drove this thesis' historical analysis of U.S.-Turkish and U.S.-Turkish Kurdish and the conclusion proposed policies aimed at achieving Model 4.

During the first two periods analyzed by this thesis, the United States predominantly followed power-centered policy as described in Model 1. During the Cold War, the United States' policy of containment and Turkey's geostrategic importance as an anchor against communism meant that the United States for the most part turned a blind eye to the military coups and numerous crackdowns on the Kurds. Although the United States' imposition of a military embargo on Turkey for the 1974 intervention of Cyprus illustrated foreign policy considerations other power, U.S.-Turkish relations centered on stability, military and defense cooperation, and security. With the end of the Cold War, Turkey's strategic importance remained but the nature of its importance shifted. Its membership in NATO, coupled with its ability to act as a bridge between Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia heightened its regional importance. From the Cold War through President George W. Bush's administration, hard power and security concerns were dominant, but U.S. policymakers did begin considering prosperity and principled interests.

However, a strong criticism came from human rights activists regarding the \$15 billion worth of weapons the U.S. sold Turkey between 1980 and 1991. Critics claimed that these weapons were used to fight the Kurds in an inhumane manner, resulting in tens of thousands of Kurds killed and millions relocated. Although the U.S. State Department acknowledged Turkey's use of U.S. weapons to commit human rights abuses, the Clinton Administration remained largely determined to ignore the internal conflict and 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. Furthermore after the "soft-coup"<sup>1</sup> 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. Generally, the post-Cold War period saw an increasing presence of economic relations but an overall dominance of power and security, particularly after 9/11.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

Throughout the Obama administration, U.S.-Turkish relations have oscillated, starting optimistically and devolving into the current tenuous relationship. Obama's "New Strategic Plan" at the start of his presidency was designed to reset strained relations in the Middle East and cement the U.S.-Turkish "model partnership," centered on security, political, and economic relations. Although President Obama has brought up principle-based concerns, particularly related to censorship, the 2013 Gezi Park protests, and the Kurdish Peace Process, the "Kurdish Question" has been 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. Changing political dynamics within Turkey, including those during the summer of 2015, which saw both the historic win of a pro-Kurdish political party, the breakdown of the Turkish –PKK peace process, and intensifying violence and antagonistic rhetoric by both the PKK and the Turkish government.

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. 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. In order to best achieve Model 4 and balance power, prosperity, peace and principles, the United States should follow the following policy recommendations further discussed in this thesis.

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