

U.S.-Turkey Relations Endure Despite Crises

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ABSTRACT *The U.S.-Turkey relationship has been tested through some of the most serious crises in recent years. The continuing strength of the relationship, despite all the tensions which have resulted from some difficult strategic disagreements and diverging interests, requires a closer look. The two NATO allies appear to have learned to 'agree to disagree' and compartmentalize some of the seemingly most deal breaking issues. As Turkey sought to protect its national interests, some in Washington have tried to depict Turkey as a bad actor working against U.S. interests in the region and beyond. The recurring theme of Turkey, somehow leaving the West and aligning itself with the East, has convinced many in the U.S. that Turkey cannot be trusted. However, the U.S.-Turkey relationship has survived despite years of mutual mistrust, strategic divergences, and policy differences. Explaining how this has been possible is not simple by any means, but it is worth exploring.*

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Turkey's Lobbying Power and Leader Diplomacy

One of the most salient features of the U.S.-Turkey relationship is that successive Turkish governments have been dealing with the executive branch with little 'organic' support from the legislative branch or the media. Turkey was supported by pro-Israel lobbying groups in the U.S. for many years as long as these groups saw Turkey as important for Israel's strategic interests in the region. Their support weakened and eventually disappeared as Tur-

key and in the U.S. for its own benefit. When Turkey took action against this organization, as their anti-democratic goals inside Turkey became clearer, their lobbying power was reduced and in fact turned against Turkey. These two 'inorganic' lobbying groups helped Turkey's interests in the U.S. Congress for their own political aims, not only for the sake of Turkey's interests. As Turkey lost these sources of influence over Congress, anti-Turkey resolutions started to have a much better chance of passage in the U.S. legislative bodies.

Another significant source of support for Turkey in Congress has come from the defense industry for years as Turkey was considered both a great 'customer' of U.S. defense systems and a staunch NATO ally. For instance, Turkey had signed up for many Pentagon projects including the F-35 fighter jet production both as a buyer and a manufacturer. Turkey's relationship with major U.S. defense companies has been solid for decades. This support also waned in recent years as Turkey started to consider diversifying its defense purchases while trying to build its own national capacity. The latest straw in this context was the Turkish decision to purchase Russian S-400 air defense systems to protect against potential threats coming from the region. Turkey also lacked 'organic' support in the U.S. political circles largely because the Turkish community is not as politically active and organized as the Armenians or Greeks. The more recent Turkish immigration to the U.S. and their scattered geographic

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key started to raise serious concerns about Israel's heavy-handed policies against the Palestinians. Another lobbying group with significant influence over Congress was the Gülenist network in the U.S., which turned out to be a putschist terrorist organization with the goal of overturning the government of Turkey. Having represented themselves as part of Turkey's soft power around the world, this group leveraged its network in Tur-

distribution contributed to this reality. As a result of the relatively weak political profile of the Turkish community in the U.S., Turkey's influence over Congress has diminished because it lost the support of 'inorganic' lobbying groups as well as the U.S. defense industry. Dealing directly with the successive U.S. administrations (Bush, Obama, and Trump) was not necessarily a choice but the result of these dynamics that reduced the chance of robust Turkish lobbying power over the legislative branch. Thus, Erdoğan's leadership, first as the Prime Minister and then as the President, became crucially important in managing the U.S.-Turkey relationship.

The U.S.-Turkey bilateral relationship has always been somewhat of a hostage to the influence of the U.S. Congress, which yielded its veto power over a variety of foreign policy issues. Those White House administrations that needed to work with Turkey often had to convince Congress about the importance of the bilateral strategic relationship to prevent anti-Turkey legislative efforts such as the Armenian Resolution. Those that were unwilling to meet Turkey's 'asks' or that sought to 'coerce' Turkey into certain positions often cited Congressional opposition as the reason why they could not honor what Turkey asked for. The latter dynamic was particularly relevant during the Turkish efforts to purchase some of the advanced weapons systems (such as Reapers) while the former transpired when the administration needed to prevent the passage of the Armenian

resolution due to the harsh Turkish reaction. Congress could be both a liability and an asset for the White House in its dealings with Turkey but it was not a dynamic that Turkish policymakers did not understand. It was just that the levers they could pull were limited as explained above and they focused their efforts on the administration. President Erdoğan had to reach out directly to his counterpart at the White House to resolve crises and make Turkey's positions clear. Erdoğan's ability to work with and pragmatic approach to deal with several U.S. Presidents of such diverse backgrounds functioned as a prominent dynamic that maintained the U.S.-Turkey relationship despite so many crises and disagreements. 'Leadership diplomacy' emerged as a necessary feature of the bilateral relationship that made up for the decreasing lobbying power over the legislative branch. Centrality of leadership diplomacy in the U.S.-Turkey bilateral relationship must be emphasized as one of the major reasons why the relationship has survived some of the worst crises.

Syria: A Major Thorn in the Relationship

The Arab spring's most consequential impact on the U.S.-Turkey relationship has been the increasing divergence between the two NATO allies over their Syria policies. The policy differences eventually brought the two countries' troops to the brink of shooting at each other on the ground. The U.S. support for the PKK's Syrian

The United States continues sending military and logistical equipment to the YPG/PKK occupied area, East of the Euphrates River, August 10, 2019.

AA Photo



branch, the YPG, directly threatened Turkey's national security and the two allies came to support directly opposing forces on the ground. At the beginning of the Syrian conflict, the policies of the U.S. and Turkey were largely aligned as both countries saw the uprising as a demand for representative government and democracy. Both countries urged the Assad regime to listen to the demands of the demonstrators in the streets and eventually cut their ties to the regime in the wake of the killing of peaceful demonstrators. In fact, while Turkey was trying to find a peaceful resolution to the uprisings by lobbying the Assad regime to heed the call of the people, the Obama Administration was urging Turkey to distance itself from the Assad regime. The continued violence against demonstrators during the holy month of Ramadan in the summer of 2014 became the last straw for Turkey. Once Turkey

joined the U.S. and others in calling for an end to the Assad regime, the Syria policies of the two NATO allies seemed in sync. Once the demonstrations turned into armed resistance against the Assad regime, the U.S. and Turkey appeared to be on the side of the opposition giving political and diplomatic support.

The U.S.-Turkey broad alignment behind the opposition continued until 2013 when President Obama refused to arm the opposition as part of a plan developed by his own Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton in coordination with Turkey. This came as somewhat of a surprise given President Obama's rhetoric about supporting people's power movements in the Middle East in the wake of the Arab Spring. Even though Obama had arrived as a president who promised to pull the U.S. out of the Middle East, his Libya intervention made many analysts con-

clude that he would support the Syrian opposition as well. Surely, Libya's dynamics were vastly different than Syria's but there was an expectation from the Turkish side that the U.S. would support the opposition. It was a particularly eye-opening moment for many when the Obama Administration refused to punish the Assad regime for the use of chemical gas in multiple instances starting in 2013 despite undeniable evidence. Russia's diplomatic intervention in the form of a deal with the Assad regime to end its chemical weapons program gave the already hesitant and unwilling Obama Administration a way out of having to exact a price on the regime. Russia's critical diplomatic intervention ensured that the Assad regime could continue its violence against its own people with impunity as long as weapons of mass destruction were not used in a brazen fashion.

The next critical turning point for the U.S. policy that widened the policy gap with Turkey was that the Obama Administration started focusing on terrorism both in its rhetoric and its strategy in dealing with the conflict. We cannot know, for sure, whether terrorist networks could still find space for themselves in Syria if the opposition was militarily supported, armed in a robust fashion, and unified. However, al-Qaeda and its affiliates found a divided opposition and the Assad regime enabled them in their strategy to keep the opposition weak. For a long time, these groups did not target the regime but worked to take away territory from the opposition. By emphasizing international

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terrorism and the divided nature of the opposition, the Obama Administration was able to make a case that there were no 'reliable partners' to support in Syria. This was not exactly the case for Turkey's policy that saw the Assad regime as the main generator of terrorism both for its unspeakable violence against civilians and for inviting international terrorism into the country. While recognizing that the Syrian opposition was divided both geographically and militarily, this could be remedied to a large extent with serious support from the international community, particularly with the legitimacy afforded by American leadership on the issue. The emergence of negative news pieces and analyses in the U.S. media about the Turkish partners reflected the U.S. argument that they could not trust these local forces and that they could defect to extremist groups. Again, the Turkish argument was that supporting and unifying them would create a center of gravity and keep terrorists out. In the end, the U.S. and Turkey views on the sources, nature, and the capabilities of the Syrian opposition could not be reconciled.

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With the sudden takeover by ISIS of large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria in the summer of 2014, the U.S. focus on international terrorism appeared justified. The U.S. policy turned into an anti-terrorism mission in Syria and the Obama Administration implemented a working 'by, with, and through local partners' strategy. In the fall of 2014, the U.S. partnered on the ground with the YPG in the tiny northern Syrian town of Kobani, on the Turkish border. The U.S. tried to reassure Turkey that this partnership was 'tactical, transactional, and temporary' but it proved to be the beginning of a major break between the two allies. Thanks to the unified command and control within the PKK, their Syrian branch, the YPG seemed to be the 'partners' the U.S. was looking for against ISIS terrorism. Turkey continued to support the fight against ISIS by supporting the Syrian opposition as well as non-PKK affiliated Kurdish groups but the U.S. continued to deepen its relationship with the YPG and enabled the cre-

ation of various 'cantons' in northern Syria during the rest of the Obama Administration. Turkey continued to express its opposition to the U.S. policy in very strong terms but to no avail. As it became clear to Turkey that the U.S. was not going to give up the relationship as long as there was the counter-terrorism narrative, Turkey conducted its first unilateral military operation (Euphrates Shield) in northern Syria in the summer of 2016 to enforce its 'red line' of preventing the YPG from crossing west of the Euphrates River. The following military operations such as Operation Olive Branch (Afrin) and Operation Peace Spring (northeastern Syria) ensured that the PKK/YPG would no longer control any territory along the Turkish border and they could not cross to the west of the Euphrates. The U.S. support for the YPG became the most significant crisis in the U.S.-Turkey relationship from 2016 to 2019 when President Trump came to office.

Once in office, President Trump tried to manage the U.S.' conflicting policy goals of defeating ISIS as well as pulling troops out of the Middle East. No U.S. president could look weak on terrorism and both Obama and Trump had promised to bring American soldiers home. As a result of these political imperatives, President Trump continued Obama's policy of supporting the 'local partners' except when he talked about leaving Syria in much more urgent terms. He announced leaving the country several times and was criticized by the national security expert community for his hastiness. Turkey's ask was not

necessarily for the U.S. to leave Syria but change its policy of supporting a terror group (YPG/PKK) against another one (ISIS), all the while endangering Turkish national security in the process. As Trump was intent on declaring the end of the so-called caliphate, as ISIS no longer controlled territory in northern Syria, Turkey emerged as the natural candidate for both conducting counter-terrorism and stabilizing the region. Trump believed Erdoğan's ability to prevent a resurgence of ISIS if the U.S. troops left but the Washington establishment and the U.S. Congress reacted harshly against the multiple pullout decisions, as they charged that Trump was 'abandoning Kurds' to be 'slaughtered by Turkey.' In the end, the U.S. has not left Syria but Turkey was able to conduct operations to contain the PKK and achieve its national security goals on the ground. The two countries' conflicting Syria policies resulted in exacerbating the mutual mistrust and heightened tensions between them. The U.S. Congress threatened to impose sanctions on Turkey, a NATO ally, for its intervention in Syria to protect itself against the PKK. This state of affairs will not be easy to repair in the short term but nevertheless the fact that Turkey was able to hinder the U.S. support for the PKK is a serious win for the bilateral relationship.

The U.S. Has Few Alternatives in the Middle East

During the height of the U.S.-Turkey tensions in the fall of 2019, many in the U.S. called for severe punishments

against Turkey and lobbying power against such measures was virtually non-existent. President Trump ended up being the biggest supporter of the relationship with Turkey, as he resisted congressional efforts to punish Turkey, sought to pull out of Syria after President Erdoğan assured him that Turkey could handle the situation on the ground, and warned Russia against turning Idlib into a new front of humanitarian disasters. He has realigned the U.S. policy in Syria in such a way that Turkey became an important partner in ensuring U.S.' military involvement remained minimal. As it sought to confront Iran and its allies in Syria and elsewhere, the Trump Administration has seen Turkey as a significant player to count on. Turkey responded by largely aligning with the administration's sanctions policy on petroleum exports. For the Obama Administration, the PKK/YPG were the 'most effective partners' on the ground in the fight against ISIS. For the Trump Administration, Turkey emerged as one of the most important partners in its regional goals, as the counter-ISIS mission wound down. Turkey had argued for several years that the only way for the U.S. to effectively fight terrorism was to work with Turkey not with non-state actors, and certainly not a terror group like the PKK. This argument found a much more willing audience in the Trump Administration, which was intent on moving away from counter-terrorism missions toward confronting Iran in the region.

When it comes to U.S. tensions with Iran in the region, Turkey has advo-

In the last few years of the Obama Administration, every conversation between the leaderships of the two countries started with Syria and ended with a lack of mutual understanding and necessary coordination

cated for diplomacy as opposed to sanctions that could lead to war. This was the Turkish leadership's preference in their effort to find a solution to the nuclear standoff in 2010. Turkey's Iran policy has been a regional stabilizer in many ways since the political, diplomatic, and economic relationship (especially energy imports by Turkey) continued even during the height of U.S.-Iran tensions. At the same time, Turkey and Iran are regional competitors and this plays out in the region, in Iraq and Syria and beyond. Both countries are careful in their management of their relationship, which is often tried by regional developments as well as the U.S. policy. Turkey and Iran supported opposing sides in Syria but they continued their relationship and diplomatic efforts to find a resolution to the conflict out of necessity. Whenever the U.S. increased the pressure on Iran, Turkey has tried to play the role of a mediator but has been careful not to appear to be supporting Iran (which is what happened in June 2010 when, as a non-permanent member of the UN

Security Council, Turkey voted no against U.S. sanctions). As the Trump Administration declared a policy of maximum pressure on Iran, Turkey again called for dialogue and diplomacy but also reduced its oil imports to near zero to avoid potential sanctions. This dynamic showed that Turkey evolved from voting against sanctions to complying with them, partly as a result of what happened in Syria and partly because the Trump Administration showed a level of clarity on Iran that seemed missing. Surely, the Trump Administration's Iran policy was not a comprehensive one with carrots and sticks as well as a final end state well-explained to the outside world. That is why Turkey did not declare support for it but it was clear that the maximum pressure of the campaign's impact on the U.S.-Turkey relationship had to be minimized.

The Trump Administration's regional strategy has been, in many ways, going back to the basics, working with 'traditional allies' such as Saudi Arabia, Israel, Egypt, and Turkey against terrorism and Iran's influence in the region. The difference this time around has been that the U.S. under Trump was not necessarily seeking unity or coherence among these allies. By opposing the embargo against Qatar and calling out the killing of the Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Turkey found itself at odds with the Saudis and the bilateral ties have not been particularly strong. Turkish-Egyptian ties have been severely strained due to Sisi's coup administration, most notably his treatment of the opposition parties



including the Muslim Brotherhood, and the effective execution of the first and only democratically elected president of the country, Mohamed Morsi. The Turkish-Israeli relations have not been back on track and the continued Israeli occupation prevents any chance of a robust normalization. Turkey also strongly opposed the U.S. recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Despite all these intra-regional problems and rivalries, Turkey has been able to maintain its relationship with the U.S. in such a way that the Trump Administration sees Turkey as a critically important partner in the region. Unlike previous U.S. presidents, President Trump has not laid out a comprehensive policy toward the Middle East and he appears to prefer dealing with countries bilaterally. His relationship with President Erdoğan is solid and it helps maintain the relationship at the leadership

level. But when we look at the region, we also see that the U.S. does not have many alternatives to Turkey that can help or hinder U.S. policy. Turkey is relevant for the U.S. policy toward Iran, Iraq, Syria and Russia among others. There is no doubt that this has been true for decades but there seems to be a renewed recognition of this reality especially among the members of the Trump Administration. Despite past as well as potential future tensions and problem areas, the diversity and the wide-ranging menu of items in the U.S.-Turkey relationship make it an indispensable one, which bodes well for the future of the partnership.

Conclusion

In this commentary, I have tried to identify some of the current dynamics at play that are shaping the nature

U.S. President Donald Trump and President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan hold a joint press conference following their meeting in Washington, May 16, 2017.

KAYHAN ÖZER / AA Photo

of the U.S.-Turkey relationship. I discuss some of the changes in Turkey's profile in Washington's influence game in recent years. There have not been many systematic studies devoted to this very important subject that can have an outsized impact on the U.S.-Turkey relationship. I argue that Turkey's influence in Washington has been diminished in recent years but this has gone on hand in hand with an increasing shift toward 'organic' influence and leader diplomacy. Although Turkey's influence in Washington has waned, there is an argument to be made as to the 'healthier' dynamics this may have brought about, such as the end of 'outsourcing' of lobbying to various groups that have their own interests as their priority not Turkey's.

The discussion on the impact of the Syrian conflict on the evolution of the Turkish-American relationship shows us that the differences in seemingly small divergences at the beginning can have serious consequences for allies. Some of these policy differences can arguably be tolerated but simmering tensions and mutual mistrust can reach levels that are toxic for the entire relationship. In the last few

years of the Obama Administration, every conversation between the leaderships of the two countries started with Syria and ended with a lack of mutual understanding and necessary coordination. The two countries were not able to align their counter-terrorism strategies which resulted in dire consequences, bringing the relationship to the brink of collapse.

I finally make a case that the U.S. has few alternatives to Turkey in the region. This insight is not a new one but it has been neglected for several years now. Many foreign policy experts as well as the U.S. Congress utilized rhetoric during the height of tensions between the two countries in such a way to suggest that Turkey could be simply taken out of the U.S. foreign policy considerations and from having any say in the region itself. We certainly need to be open-eyed about the potential of the relationship, as problem areas remain and more tensions will occur in the future. But we also need to be cognizant of the fact that there are enduring features of the U.S.-Turkey relationship that will punctuate it regardless of which administration might be in power. ■