



# All Azimuth

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We are deeply saddened by  
the loss of our advisory board  
member, Prof. Fuat Keyman.

## In This Issue

We bring together seven articles that analyze the evolving dynamics of the Türkiye–U.S. relationship from multiple perspectives, ranging from contemporary policy questions to societal and historical considerations. Collectively, these contributions offer an in-depth look at the political, security, social, and ideational underpinnings of bilateral ties between Ankara and Washington.

We begin with Lenore G. Martin’s “Challenging Friends: Türkiye-U.S. Relations,” which provides a broad overview of the core points of contention, from differing Syria policies to disputes over defense procurements and extraditions. Martin’s framework - a paradigm built upon capabilities, national security, and threat perceptions - reveals both the sources of friction and possible pathways toward a more durable partnership.

Taking a deeper look at one key sticking point in bilateral relations, Richard Outzen’s “Costly Incrementalism: U.S. PKK Policy and Relations with Türkiye” delves into four decades of fluctuating American approaches to the PKK. Outzen demonstrates how Washington’s evolving counterterrorism priorities, particularly after 9/11, have collided with Turkish concerns to produce fraught cooperation and heightened mistrust.

Turning to the regional dimension, Meliha Altunışık’s “Turkey and the US in the Middle East: A Case for Alliance Change” examines how Ankara’s changing threat perceptions and ontological security concerns in the region, alongside domestic political shifts in both countries, have altered the bilateral relationship in recent years.

On the domestic and societal fronts, Andrew O’Donohue’s “The Deinstitutionalization of U.S. and Turkish Foreign Policy: Why Societal Ties Are an Anchor in Bilateral Relations” challenges existing literature that prioritizes international or individual-level factors to explain U.S.–Türkiye ties. In contrast, O’Donohue highlights the critical role of societal connections as a stabilizing force in the relationship.

Next, Efe Tokdemir, Melike Metintaş, and Seçkin Köstem present “A Multi-Dimensional Evaluation of Turkish Public Opinion towards the United States,” presenting new survey evidence on how Turkish citizens weigh economic, security, and political factors in forming their views of the United States.

Bringing a historical perspective to bear, Ayşe Ömür Atmaca’s “The Alliance in the Storm: Geopolitical Representation of the United States in the Turkish Parliament during Détente” uses critical geopolitical theory to examine the shifting parliamentary discourse surrounding the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s, a period marked by crises such as the Cyprus conflict and the U.S. arms embargo.

Finally, Onur Erpul and Kemal Kirişçi’s “Where Is the Anchor? Explaining the Endurance of the American-Turkish Partnership, 1927–2024” revisits nearly a century of relations to illustrate how geostrategic, ideational, and institutional factors have influenced the cohesiveness of the American-Turkish partnership across various periods, and how bureaucratic actors on both sides have anchored relations even under considerable strain.

Taken together, the articles in this issue provide a rich, multidimensional assessment of one of the most enduring yet often turbulent relationships in international affairs. By combining contemporary policy analyses, empirical public opinion research, and historical inquiry, this issue offers timely insights into the complex forces shaping the Türkiye–U.S. alliance. Ultimately, these studies not only illuminate enduring tensions and points of cooperation

but also offer valuable perspectives on how scholars, policymakers, and practitioners might navigate, or even reshape, this crucial bilateral partnership in an era of rapid global change.

We hope the articles in this issue will prepare the ground for a robust scholarly exchange on Türkiye-U.S. relations for the future.

**İlker Kalın**

Managing Editor

On behalf of Editorial Board

## Challenging Friends: Türkiye-U.S. Relations

Lenore G. Martin  
Harvard University

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### Abstract

*This article analyzes the underlying wellsprings for the major strains that disrupt the U.S. - Türkiye relationship. These strains arise from the U.S. support of the PYD/YPG/YPJ in Northern Syria as boots on the ground against ISIL; Türkiye's purchase of the Russian S400 missile defense system; Türkiye's energy imports from Russia and Iran; the U.S. refusal to extradite Fetullah Gülen; and Washington's complaints about the AKP government's anti-democratic tendencies. This article analyzes why and how some of these issues have evoked strong ire and distrust on both sides and others much less so by employing a paradigm based on five integrated variables: Türkiye's military and economic capabilities; the availability of its natural resources, particularly energy; as well as threats to the legitimacy of the AKP regime and to the society's ethnic and religious cohesion. Utilizing the paradigm, the article proposes measures that will increase the opportunities to build a firmer partnership between the U.S. and Türkiye.*

**Keywords:** Türkiye-U.S. Relations, national security, terrorism, NATO


### 1. Introduction

In analyzing Türkiye-U.S. Relations in the decade of the 2020s this paper poses two essential questions: How do we explain the ongoing relations between the two nations despite the multiplicity of issues over which they disagree that might otherwise rupture the relationship? In the light of the explanations for the persistence of their relations, what possibility exists for the two nations to resolve most, if not all, of their disputes to achieve a more harmonious relationship?

### 2. The Prominent Türkiye – U.S. Disputes

The persistent U.S.-Türkiye disputes have been well noted within Washington, including for example in a catalogue of the US “problems” with Türkiye reported by the Senate’s Committee on Foreign Relations.<sup>1</sup> The disputes may be summarized as follows. I list them in the descending order of their risks to the disruption of the relationship, the highest risk first.

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<sup>1</sup> See, United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *U.S. Policy on Turkey: Hearing Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, One Hundred Seventeenth Congress, First Session, July 21, 2021* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2021). A more balanced and academic view can be found in Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas, *Turkey (Türkiye): Major Issues and U.S. Relations* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2024). <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/R44000.pdf>

1. The most intractable dispute involves their opposing policies concerning Syria. The U.S. maintains a small contingent of about 900 ground troops in the area of Syria's oil production and a small contingent at the Al Tanf base on the border with Iraq. The troops support the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition of militias led by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG)/Women's Protection Units (YPJ) under the direction of its political wing, the Democratic Union Party (PYD). The U.S. uses the SDF to counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Ankara also maintains forces in northeast Syria to contain the PYD and push the YPG back from the Turkish border. The Turkish forces and their Arab allies clash from time to time with the SDF.<sup>2</sup> The risk of these clashing military operations for US-Türkiye relations was illustrated when the US on October 5, 2023 shot down a Turkish drone flying too close to US troops.<sup>3</sup> The underlying problem is that Türkiye views the PYD and YPG as terrorist affiliates of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), while the US, which also recognizes the PKK as terrorists, remains silent on classifying the PYD/YPG as a terrorist organization. Neither side appears to agree on how to resolve this issue short of an overarching resolution of the Syrian civil war, which is problematic in and of itself.
2. Ankara's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile defense system has met with loud outcries from the US and its NATO partners. They stress the S-400's lack of interoperability with NATO's air defense systems and the risk that the S-400s would undermine the stealth effectiveness of F-35 jets, to Russia's benefit.<sup>4</sup> The US retaliated by canceling Türkiye's membership in the F-35 program and imposing sanctions on Türkiye's defense procurement agency under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). However, the Biden Administration has since softened the harshness of this response, presumably because of the value of Türkiye's role in opposing Russia's war with Ukraine. The Administration has been negotiating with President Erdoğan to apply Türkiye's F-35 deposit to purchase more F-16s and upgrading Türkiye's aging F-16 fleet in exchange for unblocking Sweden's membership in NATO.<sup>5</sup> Congressional opposition held up the F-16 deal, to which Erdoğan responded by requiring Turkish parliamentary approval for acceptance of Sweden into NATO.<sup>6</sup> With Turkey's approval of Sweden's membership in NATO, the President, Congress and the State Department all approved the sale of 40 new F16s and upgrade kits for Türkiye's 79 existing F16s.
3. Apart from incentivizing negotiations with NATO over air defenses, the S-400 acquisition has been viewed as another illustration of Türkiye's "balancing act" with Russia. As part of Erdoğan's promotion of "strategic autonomy," i.e., an independent foreign policy,

<sup>2</sup> Gregory Aftandilian, "Syrian Kurds in an Increasingly Precarious Position," *Arab Center Washington DC*, October 18, 2023, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/syrian-kurds-in-an-increasingly-precious-position/>

<sup>3</sup> Tara Copp, Matthew Lee, and Lolita C. Baldor, "US shoots down Turkish drone in Syria; came close to troops," *AP News*, October 05, 2023, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/syria-turkey-shot-down-06b5b407e91ffb3d41096bbfe51fe7f5>

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Greece owns a Russian S-300 system, a source of embarrassment for Türkiye's S-400 debacle with the US. After refusing to ship the system to Ukraine, Greece promised to work with the US to replace the system with US weapons. See, Vassilis Nedos, "No transfer of S-300s to Ukraine," *ekathimerini.com*, February 22, 2023, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/1205258/no-transfer-of-s-300s-to-ukraine/>

<sup>5</sup> Rich Outzen and Pinar Dost, "A looming US-Turkey F-16 deal is about much more than Sweden's NATO bid," *The Atlantic Council*, July 8, 2023, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysource/a-looming-us-turkey-f-16-deal-is-about-much-more-than-swedens-nato-bid/>

<sup>6</sup> Hüseyin Hayatsever, "Sweden's NATO accession and Turkey's bid to buy F-16 jets should be kept separate, Erdogan says," *Reuters*, September 10, 2023, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/swedens-nato-accession-turkeys-bid-buy-f-16-jets-should-be-kept-separate-erdogan-2023-09-10/>

his balancing act creates a modus vivendi with Russia in Syria and assures the flow of Russian oil and gas into Türkiye. The Republic also helps Russia to evade sanctions by cooperating in transiting Russian oil and gas into Europe. Nevertheless, the US has not raised Türkiye's violation of sanctions to obtain Russian energy to the level of an intractable rupture of the US – Türkiye relationship.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, there appear to be built-in limitations to how much weight Ankara is willing to put on the scale favoring Putin. Türkiye has opposed Russian intervention in Libya and backs Azerbaijan in the conflict with Armenia, which gets Russian support.

4. It is also not clear to what extent Washington remains chagrined over Türkiye's relations with Iran, which occasionally lead to breaches of the US sanctions against the Islamic Republic. Ankara's balancing act with Tehran benefits Türkiye when the neighbors cooperate on military actions against their respective Kurdish terrorist groups, the PKK for Türkiye, the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) in Iran's case.<sup>8</sup> Türkiye also purchases gas from Iran. However, there are also built-in limitations to how much Ankara is willing to cooperate with Tehran, including rivalries in Syria, Iraq, and Azerbaijan.<sup>9</sup>
5. Similarly, there are threats of disruption in the relationship from time to time over incidents between Türkiye and other US allies over Cyprus, Greek control over Aegean Islands, and Eastern Mediterranean gas production. For example, the Turkish Cypriot government took steps to develop the abandoned seaside town of Varosha/Maraş, igniting another controversy and highlighting the need for a final resolution concerning the divided island.<sup>10</sup> There also remains risks of conflict between Greece and Türkiye over the Greek claim to a 12-mile maritime boundary and Türkiye's claim that Greece is militarizing offshore islands in violation of treaty obligations.<sup>11</sup> Into this tinderbox Erdoğan has poured more rhetorical fuel by his tacit support for the concept of the *Mavi Vatan* (Blue Homeland), which vastly expands the maritime boundary for Türkiye in the Mediterranean.<sup>12</sup>

Competition over Eastern Mediterranean gas production pits Türkiye against US allies Israel and Egypt, as well as Greece and Cyprus.<sup>13</sup> The US response has been to adjust

<sup>7</sup> Sanctions against Türkiye for Russian violations target companies and individuals. For example, Turkish companies with ties to Russian intelligence. See, Fatima Hussein, "The US sanctions more foreign firms in a bid to choke off Russia's supplies for its war in Ukraine," *AP News*, November 2, 2023, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/treasury-russia-ukraine-sanctions-turkey-97a291245b211ef20f412c82d6128db8>. Sanctions also target companies with military production that hurts Ukraine. See, Alexandra Sharp, "U.S. Imposes Landmark Sanctions on Turkey," *Foreign Policy*, September 14, 2023, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/14/us-turkey-sanctions-russia-ukraine-shipping-nato/>

<sup>8</sup> Paul Iddon, "The significance of Turkey and Iran's military cooperation against the PKK," *Ahval*, September 17, 2020, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/turkeys-anti-pkk-operation-and-development-road-iraq-are-two-sides-same-coin>

<sup>9</sup> Alex Vatanka, "Erdoğan in Tehran, but Turkey and Iran have plenty of mistrust to overcome," *Middle East Eye*, August 3, 2022, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/erdogan-tehran-turkey-and-iran-have-plenty-mistrust-overcome>; Mustafa Gürbüz, "Turkey's Evolving Policy toward Iran," *Arab Center Washington DC*, February 16, 2022, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/turkeys-evolving-policy-toward-iran/>

<sup>10</sup> "An Island Divided: Next Steps for Troubled Cyprus," *International Crisis Group Report 268*, April 17, 2023, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/cyprus/268-island-divided-next-steps-troubled-cyprus>

<sup>11</sup> Ryan Gingeras, "Dogfight Over The Aegean: Turkish-Greek Relations In Light of Ukraine," *War On The Rocks*, June 8, 2022, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://warontherocks.com/2022/06/dogfight-over-the-aegean-turkish-greek-relations-in-light-of-ukraine/>

<sup>12</sup> Ryan Gingeras, "Blue Homeland: The Heated Politics Behind Turkey's New Maritime Strategy," *War On The Rocks*, June 2, 2022, accessed date May 17, 2024. <http://warontherocks.com/2020/06/blue-homeland-the-heated-politics-behind-turkeys-new-maritime-strategy/>

<sup>13</sup> Joshua Krasna, "A Long, Hot Summer for Eastern Mediterranean Gas Politics," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, September 26, 2023, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/09/a-long-hot-summer-for-eastern-mediterranean-gas-politics/>

its previous neutrality towards Cyprus and the Aegean issues and to increase military cooperation in favor of Greece and the Republic of Cyprus. It signaled its support of Greece and Greek Cyprus by lifting the arms embargo on Southern Cyprus and entering into a Bilateral Defense Cooperation Agreement with it.<sup>14</sup> Washington has also built up a military base in the northern Greek port of Alexandroupoli, 11 miles from the border with Türkiye.<sup>15</sup> It is part of what Alan Makovsky has called hedging bets against Turkish equivocation.<sup>16</sup>

6. Another potential locus for a dispute between the US and Türkiye has been Ankara's occasional threats to restrict and even deny the US/NATO use of the Incirlik air base. In 2020, the Trump Administration responded by publicizing its exploration of relocating base operations to Souda Bay in Crete.<sup>17</sup>
7. Another issue causing stress for both Washington and Ankara arose immediately following the attempted coup against the AKP regime on July 15, 2016. It resulted in the demand by the Erdoğan government for the extradition of Fetullah Gülen, whom it accused of fomenting the failed coup. The U.S. refusal to extradite Gülen reinforced the AKP government's suspicions that America had a role in the coup.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, this issue appears to have lost much of the heat that it once generated.
8. A similar set of issues that generate heat when expressed but have not led to any hostile reactions on either side are Washington's complaints from time to time about the authoritarian direction into which various US spokespeople believe the Erdoğan regime is heading, as well as the AKP government's human rights abuses. One quotable statement by Senator Menendez that encapsulated this complaint was, "To say that more lawyers and journalists are arrested and in jail in Turkey than in any other place in the world is saying something, considering some of those other places in the world."<sup>19</sup>

In return, the AKP has promoted its own brand of anti-American rhetoric that it believes has helped it get re-elected. Examples of anti-American rhetoric regularly crop up with each Middle East crisis. This includes the crisis involving the Hamas attack on Israel of October 7, 2023 and the Israeli forceful invasion of Gaza that followed. Erdoğan, who is supportive of Hamas based on his affinity for the Muslim Brotherhood, turned the event into an anti-American remonstrance by complaining about the US sending a carrier strike force into the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Sevinç İrem Balcı, "Defence Cooperation Agreement Between US-GASC and the Future of the Relations," *Ankara Center for Crisis and Policy Studies*, February 1, 2023, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.ankasam.org/anka-analizler/defence-cooperation-agreement-between-us-gasc-and-the-future-of-the-relations/?lang=en>

<sup>15</sup> Niki Kitsantonis and Anatoly Kurmanav, "Sleepy Greek Port Becomes U.S. Arms Hub, as Ukraine War Reshapes Region," *The New York Times*, August 18, 2022, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/18/world/europe/greece-port-russia-ukraine-weapons.html>

<sup>16</sup> Alan Makovsky, "Opportunities and Challenges in the Eastern Mediterranean: Examining U.S. Interests and Regional Cooperation: Testimony Before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa and Global Counterterrorism and Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment and Cyber," *Center for American Progress*, May 02, 2022, accessed date 17, 2024. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/opportunities-and-challenges-in-the-eastern-mediterranean-examining-u-s-interests-and-regional-cooperation/>

<sup>17</sup> John C. K. Daly, "Amid Turkey's Deteriorating Relations with the U.S. the Future of Incirlik airbase is Unclear," *Turkey Analyst*, October 21, 2020, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/653-amid-turkey%E2%80%99s-deteriorating-relations-with-the-us-the-future-of-incirlik-airbase-is-unclear.html>

<sup>18</sup> Ionnis N. Grigoriadis and Ümit Erol Aras, "Distrusted Partnership: Unpacking Anti-Americanism in Turkey," *Middle East Policy* 30, no. 1 (2023): 124-125.

<sup>19</sup> United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, "U.S. Policy on Turkey," *Foreign Relations Committee*, July 21, 2021, accessed date May 20, 2024. <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/hearings/us-policy-on-turkey-071421>

<sup>20</sup> Henry J. Barkey, "Turkey, the United States and the Israel-Hamas War," *Council on Foreign Relations*, October 25, 2023, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.cfr.org/article/turkey-united-states-and-israel-hamas-war>



9. Another one of Ankara's balancing policies that may quietly rankle Washington without generating adverse actions is Türkiye's relations with China. Erdoğan has gone so far with his balancing strategy as to suggest Türkiye may join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the anti-West alliance led by Beijing.<sup>21</sup> There have been some infrastructure benefits to Türkiye from participating in Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative. However, the Republic's balance of trade with China has been negative despite its currency swaps with Beijing.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Ankara's sympathy with the Uyghurs creates built-in limits to expanding the relationship.<sup>23</sup>

### 3. Türkiye – U.S. Partnering In NATO

On the other hand, the central issue that cements the strategic partnership between the two nations is Türkiye's membership in NATO. Türkiye's geostrategic value to the US and the Western alliance has become more apparent since Putin's invasion of Ukraine, which exploded in February 2022. Türkiye has demonstrated its agreement with NATO's support of Ukraine by providing Ukraine with Bayraktar drones and mine-resistant armored vehicles. It has also cooperated with Kyiv in the co-production of stealth drones.<sup>24</sup> NATO has further benefited from Türkiye's control of the Bosphorus by virtue of the Montreux Convention and Ankara's restrictions on Russia's naval access from the Black Sea through the Straits to the Mediterranean, hampering its supply line to Syria and restricting its ability to bring in more warships to the Black Sea. Though Russia is purportedly using commercial ships to supply its troops in Syria.<sup>25</sup> NATO also benefited from Erdoğan's balancing policy with Russia that enabled the mediation of a deal allowing Ukrainian (and Russian) grain shipments out of the Black Sea in 2022, thereby helping to save Ukraine's wartime economy from collapsing.

Washington also views Ankara's hosting of some 4 million Syrian refugees as a mission critical to preventing wholesale attempts by these refugees to enter Europe, which the State Department views as "threatening European political unity,"<sup>26</sup> one of the underpinnings of NATO cohesion. Hence Türkiye's support for Syrian refugees makes an indirect contribution to NATO stability as an alliance.

### 4. Pessimism and Optimism on The Türkiye – U.S. Disputes

Commentators on the various disputes between Türkiye and the U.S. and their probable outcomes have expressed a variety of sentiments ranging from pessimism to optimism. For examples of a pessimistic outlook from a US perspective, see Howard Eissenstat and Alex Vatanka.<sup>27</sup> For an example of a pessimistic outlook based upon entrenched Turkish

<sup>21</sup> Christopher S. Chivvis, Alper Coşkun, and Beatrix Geaghan-Breiner, "Türkiye in the Emerging World Order," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 31, 2023, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/10/turkiye-in-the-emerging-world-order>

<sup>22</sup> Ragıp Soylu, "Turkey's love affair with currency swaps explained," *Middle East Eye*, June 16, 2021, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-central-bank-swap-deals-love-explained>

<sup>23</sup> Lenore G. Martin, "The Prospects for Turkish-Chinese Bilateral and Multilateral Security Cooperation," *Sociology of Islam* 4, no. 1-2 (2016): 113-128.

<sup>24</sup> Tacan İldem, "A balancing act: Turkey's misunderstood position on Ukraine," *European Leadership Network*, November 9, 2022, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/a-balancing-act-turkeys-misunderstood-position-on-ukraine/>

<sup>25</sup> Yörük Işık, "Russia is violating the spirit of Montreux by using civilian ships for war," *Middle East Institute*, May 18, 2022, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2023/september/russia-violating-montreux-convention-civilian-ships>

<sup>26</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Integrated Country Strategy: Turkey* (Washington, DC: US Department of State, 2022).

<sup>27</sup> Howard Eissenstat, "A Rocky Outlook for Turkey-US Unhappy Marriage," *Middle East Institute*, October 24, 2023, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/rocky-outlook-turkey-us-unhappy-marriage>; Vatanka, "Erdoğan in Tehran."

public hostility, see Ionnis N. Grigoriadis and Ümit Erol Aras.<sup>28</sup> For examples of a middling assessment of stability in Turkish-US relations see James Jay Carafano or the crisis management approach advocated by Galip Dalay.<sup>29</sup> For an example of a more optimistic academic perspective, see Kadir Üstün.<sup>30</sup>

From my brief overview of these comments it would appear that the pessimists outnumber the optimists. Interestingly, and perhaps as part of his negotiating style, President Erdoğan has expressed optimism. He is quoted as saying: “There is no problem between Türkiye and the U.S. that they as two strategic partners cannot resolve.”<sup>31</sup> A similar sentiment was echoed by the White House when describing President Biden’s congratulations on Erdoğan’s re-election with the statement that the two Presidents “expressed their shared commitment to continue working together as close partners to deepen cooperation between our countries and people.”<sup>32</sup>

Many of the solutions the commentators offer are transactional, or more generally propose that the two sides engage in a transactional approach to improve their relations. Dalay, for example, proposes that the two nations discard their concepts of a strategic alliance, engage in crisis management for handling their contentious disputes, and focus their energies on areas of common interest such as in the Black Sea region.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Carafano identifies specific regions in which the US should seek common ground with Türkiye, such as in the Black Sea, the “Middle Corridor” of the Caucasus and Central Asia, Greece, Armenia, the Middle East and Africa.<sup>34</sup> Whereas, Robert A. Manning urges the two sides to take a “business-like relationship” to resolving the disputes.<sup>35</sup>

Many of these solutions require government level negotiations between the leadership of Türkiye and the U.S., for example over the S-400 impasse and the US support for the YPG. Kökmen, for example, sees the way forward to strengthening the strategic partnership by mutual recognition of each side’s security concerns: the US should end its support of Syrian Kurds and Türkiye should keep its S-400 in storage.<sup>36</sup> To some extent these suggested solutions rely upon the leadership personalities in Washington and Ankara.<sup>37</sup> Other transactional solutions require the cooperation of third parties, for example multi-party resolution of the Syrian civil war<sup>38</sup> or the conclusion of peace between Ankara and the PKK. There are also

<sup>28</sup> Grigoriadis and Aras, “Distrusted Partnership,” 122-136.

<sup>29</sup> James Jay Carafano, “The future of U.S.-Turkey relations,” *Geopolitical Intelligence Services AG*, July 3, 2023, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/u-s-turkey-relations/>; Galip Dalay, “US-Turkey relations will remain crisis-ridden for a long time to come,” *Brookings*, January 29, 2021, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/us-turkey-relations-will-remain-crisis-ridden-for-a-long-time-to-come/>

<sup>30</sup> Kadir Üstün, “U.S.-Turkey Relations Endure Despite Crises,” *Insight Turkey* 22, no. 2 (2022): 23-32.

<sup>31</sup> Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, “There is no problem between Türkiye and the U.S. that they as two strategic partners cannot resolve,” September 9, 2022, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/139678/-there-is-no-problem-between-turkiye-and-the-u-s-that-they-as-two-strategic-partners-cannot-resolve->

<sup>32</sup> “Readout of President Biden’s Call with President Erdogan of Türkiye,” *White House Briefing*, May 29, 2023, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/05/29/readout-of-president-bidens-call-with-president-erdogan-of-turkiye-2>. The sentiment was previously echoed in the US State Department’s “Integrated Country Strategy: Turkey” with the statement concerning Chief of Mission Priorities that “Turkey is an essential U.S. partner” and that improving diplomatic facilities “will be a powerful, visible reminder of the United States’ strong and enduring relationship with Turkey.” See, U.S. Department of State, *Integrated Country Strategy*, 1, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Dalay, “US-Turkey relations.”

<sup>34</sup> Carafano, “The future of U.S.-Turkey relations.”

<sup>35</sup> Robert A. Manning, “The Turkey dilemma and the limits of US power,” *The Hill*, January 18, 2023, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/3817873-the-turkey-dilemma-and-the-limits-of-us-power/>

<sup>36</sup> Nihat Kökmen, “Prospects for US-Turkish strategic relationship,” *Atlantic Council*, June 23, 2023, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/ac-turkey-defense-journal/prospects-for-an-improved-us-turkish-strategic-relationship/>

<sup>37</sup> See, Üstün, “U.S.-Turkey Relations Endure.” Üstün compares the Obama Administration approach to Trump’s.

<sup>38</sup> See, Stephen J. Flanagan and Peter A. Wilson, “Implications for the U.S.-Turkish Partnership and the U.S. Army,” in *Turkey’s*

proposals for half measures such as the “quick wins” proposed by Jeffrey. These include “F-16 sales” and a “ceasefire with the PKK (or at least continued Turkish restraint in Northeast Syria).”<sup>39</sup>

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with these transactional solutions. Their problem, however, is that they address only discrete disputes or may only work for the short-term. They hold no promise for resetting the relationship between Türkiye and the U.S. to resolve the multiplicity of issues. Furthermore, in the context of Erdoğan’s pursuit of an independent global and regional role for Türkiye or for Ankara’s balancing foreign policy, they offer no prospects for the avoidance of future and unanticipated disputes. For example, the unexpected eruption of the Gaza War between Israel and Hamas has once again put the US and Türkiye on opposite sides of a conflict.<sup>40</sup>

There are, nevertheless, a number of analysts who have advocated more permanent solutions for the US and Türkiye policy divide. They propose ways to reduce incidents of hostility between the two nations by moderation of their behavior and their rhetoric. Oya Dursun-Özkanca, for example, wants to restore fundamental trust between the two nations and advocates greater military and diplomatic exchanges between them as a means to achieving it.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Alper Coşkun looks to the high level bilateral bureaucratic exchanges of the “Strategic Mechanism” to build increased trust between the two countries more effectively than did the diplomatic and military working groups created in 2018, which failed.<sup>42</sup> Özgür Özdamar advocates each side reducing its role expectations as a step towards behavioral modification and foresees a fundamental link between the two sides at the societal level because “American and Turkish people want to live in democratic societies with free market economies, a goal that ties these two countries together.”<sup>43</sup> Robert Manning’s similar solution is for the two sides to reduce their role expectations in a multipolar world where US power is limited.<sup>44</sup> Behavioral modification by changing fundamental attitudes was also a theme in the 2017 resolution proposed by Kirişçi, who stated: “Both nations should demonstrate greater sensitivity to each other’s concerns: Turkey needs the United States to show a more nuanced appreciation of its security concerns; the United States needs Turkey to show a strict commitment to governance by the rule of law.”<sup>45</sup>

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*Nationalist Course Implications for the U.S.-Turkish Strategic Partnership and the U.S. Army*, eds. Stephen J. Flanagan et al., (Santa Monica: RAND Cooperation, 2020), 202.

<sup>39</sup> James F. Jeffrey, “Handling Turkey-West Relations After Erdogan’s Election Victory: Engage, Understand, Overcome,” *Wilson Center*, June 9, 2023, accessed date May 17, 2023. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/handling-turkey-west-relations-after-erdogans-election-victory-engage-understand-overcome>

<sup>40</sup> See, Eissenstat, “A Rocky Outlook.”

<sup>41</sup> Oya Dursun-Özkanca, “US-Turkey Relations: How To Avoid A Complete Breakdown,” *IstanPol*, February 4, 2020, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://istanpol.org/en/post-us-turkey-relations-how-to-avoid-a-complete-breakdown>

<sup>42</sup> Alper Coşkun, “Making the New U.S.-Turkey Strategic Mechanism Meaningful,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 12, 2022, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/05/12/making-new-u.s.-turkey-strategic-mechanism-meaningful-pub-87117>; Office of the State Department Spokesperson, “The United States and Türkiye: A Key NATO Ally and Critical Regional Partner,” February 19, 2023, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.state.gov/the-united-states-and-turkiye-a-key-nato-ally-and-critical-regional-partner/>.

<sup>43</sup> Özgür Özdamar, “Role Theory in Practice: US-Turkey Relations in Their Worst Decade,” *International Studies Perspectives* 25, no. 1 (2024): 41-59.

<sup>44</sup> Manning, “The Turkey dilemma.”

<sup>45</sup> Kemal Kirişçi, “How to Fix U.S.-Turkey Relations,” *The New York Times*, October 19, 2017, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/19/opinion/how-to-fix-us-turkey-relations.html>

## 5. Analyzing Turkish-US Relations from the Perspective of their National Security Interests

The proposals for both the transactional and more permanent solutions to the multiplicity of persisting disputes between the US and Türkiye have much to be commended. However, I suggest that they will not provide convincing answers to the questions posed by this paper unless we analyze why these solutions will or will not work. For that purpose, we need a more fundamental understanding of the perception of each nation as to its own national interests and the differences in their perceptions of the other's national interests. In short, both the cooperative and non-cooperative relations between Türkiye and the US result from the pursuit of their respective national interests. Of these, their primary interest is in bolstering their national security.

That should lead us first to delve into the concept of "national security" as postulated in International Relations theory. IR theories of "national security" have undergone a substantial transformation since Arnold Wolfers challenged the discipline to provide specifications for this ambiguous and often contested concept.<sup>46</sup> The various paradigms for national security that have developed to operationalize the concept<sup>47</sup> have one thing in common: "national security" is no longer defined narrowly in terms of a nation's military capabilities to deter or defend against extra-territorial or internal military threats. Depending on the scholars involved and the threats under examination, it now encompasses economic security, political security, societal security, environmental security, energy security, food and water security, and cyber security, in addition to military security.

Interestingly, this expansive definition has even spilled over from the academy to bureaucratic and diplomatic discourse. Examples range from the definition used for "Homeland Security" by the US Environmental Protection Agency and the "Total National Security Paradigm" promoted by President Xi Jinping. For example the EPA declares: "Originally conceived as protection against military attack, national security is now widely understood to included non-military dimensions, such as security from terrorism, minimization of crime, economic security, energy security, environmental security, food security, and cyber-security."<sup>48</sup> For his part, President Xi Jinping told his Communist Party cadres in 2014 to "build a national security system that integrates such elements as political, military, economic, cultural, social, science and technology, information, ecological, resource, and nuclear security."<sup>49</sup>

Conceptually, national security depends on a nation's ability to deter or counter threats to its three components: territory, society and regime. The problem with the expansive definitions of national security above is that they include too many elements, factors, or variables to produce a coherent theory.<sup>50</sup> A paradigm with a limited and integrated set of independent variables would be more-effective for analyzing national security.<sup>51</sup> The limited

<sup>46</sup> David A. Baldwin, "The Concept of Security," *Review of International Studies* 23 (1997): 5-26.

<sup>47</sup> Murat Şengöz, "An Examination of the National Security Paradigms Within the International Relations Discipline As On And Post-Cold War," *Mecmua* 14 (2022): 182-198.

<sup>48</sup> "Homeland Security," *United States Environmental Protection Agency*, July 24, 2024, accessed August 01, 2024. <https://www.epa.gov/national-security>

<sup>49</sup> Zongti Guojia Anquan Guan, "Total National Security Paradigm," *The Center for Strategic Translation*, 2022, accessed May 17, 2024. <https://www.strategictranslation.org/glossary/total-national-security-paradigm>.

<sup>50</sup> This is similar to the criticism of Neo-classical realism for being too *ad hoc* in its selection of variables to explain patterns of international political behavior. See, Kevin Narizny, "Neoclassical Realism and its Critics," *International Security* 43, no. 2 (2018): 199-203.

<sup>51</sup> Lenore G. Martin, "Towards an Integrated Approach to National Security in the Middle East," in *New Frontiers in Middle*

set of five variables I propose consist of a state's overall military and economic capabilities; the availability of its natural resources such as energy, food and water; the political legitimacy of its regime; and the degree of ethnic and religious tolerance and cohesion of its society.<sup>52</sup>

Applying the paradigm to answer the first question posed in this paper leads us to the following conclusion. We can best explain the persistence of the so-called "strategic partnership" of the US and Türkiye because there is sufficient convergence of their perceptions of the threats to their respective national security. We also conclude from application of the paradigm that to create a more harmonious relationship each side will need to take actions to overcome their divergent perceptions of threats to the other side's national security. That can be operationalized with respect to the five variables in the paradigm as follows.

## 6. Converging Perceptions of Threats: Achieving Greater National Security - Boosting Military Capabilities

The Syrian impasse and S-400 issue are symptomatic of the problematic divergence of the U.S. and Türkiye over threats to their respective states and territories from essentially the MENA region. In particular, this encompasses perceived threats from Türkiye's potentially hostile neighbors: Syria, Iraq and Iran. The S-400 issue is easier to resolve than the Syrian situation because it involves finding other ways to boost Türkiye's military and economic capabilities. The S-400 acquisition resulted from a failed attempt by the AKP government to negotiate a better deal for US patriot missile systems and defense technology transfers.<sup>53</sup> As noted, this backfired with the US and NATO fearing that the system would undermine the effectiveness of the new generation of F-35 fighters.

The US Administration has more recently demonstrated a willingness to reconcile with Türkiye by agreeing to supply advanced F-16 fighters and technology to improve Türkiye's air defense capabilities.<sup>54</sup> However, Ankara has still not decommissioned its S-400 system. Nevertheless, better prospects for sidelining the S-400 in Türkiye appear likely from the Republic's development of its own multi-layered surface to air missile defense system, including the longer range SIPER missile defense.<sup>55</sup> The US could therefore facilitate the obsolescence of the S-400 by offering technology assistance for the development of Türkiye's home-grown missile defense. Moreover, the S-400 system itself has not performed well to protect Russian military assets against Ukrainian air strikes. This would provide another reason for Türkiye to mothball its S-400 system.

For deterring and defending against existential threats from inside and beyond MENA, particularly nuclear threats, Türkiye has little choice but to remain committed to the NATO

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*East Security*, ed. Lenore G. Martin, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 3-22.

<sup>52</sup> In this selection of a limited set of variables, my approach fits within but is at the same time distinguishable from the co-located Copenhagen School, popularized by Barry Buzan. See, Şengöz, "An examination of the national security," 182-198; Marianne Stone, "Security According to Buzan: A Comprehensive Security Analysis," *Security Discussion Papers Series* 1, no. 1 (2009): 1-11.

<sup>53</sup> Jill Townsend and Rachel Ellehuus, "The Tale of Turkey and the Patriots," *War on the Rocks*, July 22, 2019, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://warontherocks.com/2019/07/the-tale-of-turkey-and-the-patriots/>; Özgür Ünlühisarcıklı, "Now Is the Time to Resolve the Turkey-US S-400 Dispute," *German Marshall Fund*, April 27, 2022, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.gmfus.org/news/now-time-resolve-turkey-us-s-400-dispute>. Ünlühisarcıklı sees the patriot systems as no longer available for Türkiye.

<sup>54</sup> Türkiye is also developing its own version of the F-16, the TF-X, but still needs US cooperation for the project as this stealth fighter uses engines provided by the US. See, Burak Ege Bekdil, "Turkey seeks partners for TF-X fighter program amid fiscal uncertainty," *Defense News*, August 31, 2023, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.defensenews.com/air/2023/08/31/turkey-seeks-partners-for-tf-x-fighter-program-amid-fiscal-uncertainty/>

<sup>55</sup> Agnes Helou, "As interest in Russia's S-400 wanes, Turkey pushes its own air defense systems," *Breaking Defense*, March 24, 2023, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://breakingdefense.com/2023/03/as-interest-in-russias-s-400-wanes-turkey-pushes-its-own-air-defense-systems/>; Paul Iddon, "The Siper Solution: Could Turkey undo the S-400 debacle," *GERCEK News*, February 3, 2023, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.gerceknews.com/article/the-siper-solution-could-turkey-undo-the-s-400-debacle-218623>



alliance. Ankara and Washington both realize that NATO is the only source for the nuclear umbrella the Republic needs against potential nuclear blackmail from Russia and in future from Iran. Still, as part of his policy of strategic independence, President Erdoğan has ignited speculation as to Türkiye's interest in development of its own nuclear capabilities.<sup>56</sup> Türkiye's peaceful nuclear reactor program could fuel that speculation. Washington, therefore, has an incentive to encourage Ankara to abide by its commitments in the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons by assuring Türkiye of the nuclear deterrence protection it receives as a NATO member. To some extent the latest Russian invasion of Ukraine and Putin's threats to use tactical nuclear weapons will facilitate that assurance.

As noted, the most difficult challenge for reducing the stresses built into the US – Türkiye strategic partnership arises from the ongoing Syrian civil war and the US support for the PYD/PYG affiliate of the PKK. The US continues to maintain small contingents of ground troops in Syria (900) and Iraq (2,500), ostensibly to assist in countering ISIS. As such they become targets of attacks by Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and their allies.<sup>57</sup> However, from the perspective of America's national security interests, it will be difficult to remove these forces as they also serve a larger purpose of interrupting the flow of arms from Iran to its proxies and as a deterrent to more aggressive moves by Iran and its proxies in Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen against US Middle East allies, Israel and the Gulf monarchies. Furthermore, they promise the US a seat at the table for negotiating an end to the Syrian civil war.

Ankara, on the other hand, views the US protected Kurdish forces at the Turkish border as much a threat to the peace of Türkiye as they do the PKK forces over the Iraqi border in the Qandil Mountains. From the Turkish perspective it makes no sense for the U.S. to classify the PKK as a terrorist organization, conceding that the PKK remains a threat to the Turkish state, while at the same time remaining silent as to the status of the YPG/YPJ and the Syrian-Kurdish dominated SDF, which Ankara views as another potential threat to the Turkish state. To some extent, the PKK's threats to the territorial integrity of Türkiye may have diminished with the prospects that Ankara's cross-border military campaigns against the PKK may be succeeding.<sup>58</sup> Ankara has also been signaling that it is willing to make peace with the Assad regime.<sup>59</sup> This may take time, but ultimately any such peace agreement is likely to require the removal of all foreign forces from Syria. This would include those of the U.S., Türkiye, Russia, and Iran, as well as ISIL and other foreign and militant Islamist forces. Washington should seek to align with Ankara in proposing terms for such a peace agreement. In conjunction with coordinating positions for a Syrian peace agreement, Washington should negotiate with Ankara over the fate of the PYD/YPG.

<sup>56</sup> Assa Ophir, "Turkey's Nuclear Future," *Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies*, December 15, 2021, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://dayan.org/content/turkeys-nuclear-future>.

<sup>57</sup> Chris Gordon, "Attacks on US Forces in Iraq and Syria Continue After American Airstrikes," *Air and Space Forces Magazine*, October 30, 2023, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/attacks-us-forces-iraq-syria-american-airstrikes/>.

<sup>58</sup> Amberin Zaman, "Does Ankara attack mark strategy shift for Turkey's PKK?," *Al-Monitor*, October 2, 2023, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/10/does-ankara-attack-mark-strategy-shift-turkeys-pkk>.

<sup>59</sup> Umut Aras, "Erdoğan says he may meet Syria's Assad for 'peace' in the region," *Al Jazeera*, January 5, 2023, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/5/syria-348>.

## 7. Converging Perceptions of Threats: Achieving Greater National Security - Boosting Economic Capabilities and Essential Natural Resources

One of the reasons for Türkiye's concern over its economic security is that it lacks most of the energy resources required to drive its economy.<sup>60</sup> Türkiye imports 74% of its energy needs.<sup>61</sup> A large portion of the oil and gas imports come from Russia. Therefore, Türkiye refuses to join in the Western sanctions regime against Russia to protect its economic security.<sup>62</sup> Washington has not retaliated and imposed sanctions to cut off these Russian energy sources, although, the US does impose targeted sanctions against Turkish companies providing goods to Russia that have military applications.<sup>63</sup> Türkiye also imports natural gas from Iran. Of Türkiye's gas imports in 2022, Russia provided 39%, Iran 17% and the remainder came from a combination of sources of which Azerbaijan was 16%, and the US and Algeria each had 10%.<sup>64</sup>

Compared to its defiance of the sanctions regime against Russia, Türkiye appears to have been more respectful of the US sanctions against Iran. This has resulted in significant declines in Türkiye's trade with Iran. This is not just because of sanctions but also because of cheaper energy imports from Russia.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, in the future Türkiye will be looking to the Black Sea as an alternative source for natural gas and an additional way to reduce dependency on imports from Iran (and Russia). Ankara's efforts to diversify its energy sources also incentivize its willingness to cooperate with US allies developing natural gas sources in the Eastern Mediterranean. It would appear that successive US administrations do not link Türkiye's dependency on Russian and Iranian energy imports with an intolerable threat to US security or as an actionable threat to the security of its NATO and MENA allies. On the contrary, we may conclude that there is already some convergence of the perceptions by Washington and Ankara of the need to avoid Turkish economic insecurity.

## 8. Non-Converging Perceptions of Threats to the Erdoğan Regime

It is difficult to draw the same conclusions concerning the threats to the AKP regime by Washington and Ankara, at least from their respective rhetoric concerning each other's government. The Biden regime has expressed negative reactions to Erdoğan's authoritarian proclivities and Türkiye's human rights abuses. Symptomatic of this was Biden's pointed exclusion of Türkiye from his 2023 Summit for Democracy.<sup>66</sup> It is not clear, however, to what extent the US administrations use their disappointment concerning Erdoğan's anti-

<sup>60</sup> Expressed another way, Türkiye's current account deficits (imports vs. exports) suffer from a dependency on the import of 99% of its gas and 93% of its oil in a high volatility energy environment. See, "Türkiye: Country Note (2023)," *OECD*, June 30, 2023, accessed May 17, 2024. [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2023/06/government-at-a-glance-2023-country-notes\\_a95d10b5/turkiye\\_29f3e2d2.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2023/06/government-at-a-glance-2023-country-notes_a95d10b5/turkiye_29f3e2d2.html).

<sup>61</sup> "Türkiye's International Energy Strategy," *Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 2023, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkeys-energy-strategy.en.mfa>.

<sup>62</sup> Natalia Konarzewska, "Turkey will not give up on its Lucrative Trade with Russia," *Turkey Analyst Articles*, June 26, 2023, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/709-turkey-will-not-give-up-on-its-lucrative-trade-with-russia.html>. Türkiye became Russia's top source of imports in 2022, doubling Türkiye's exports to Russia from 2021.

<sup>63</sup> Alexandra Sharp, "U.S. Imposes Landmark Sanctions on Turkey," *Foreign Policy*, September 14, 2023, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/14/us-turkey-sanctions-russia-ukraine-shipping-nato/>. These are in addition to the CAATSA sanctions imposed because of Türkiye's S-400.

<sup>64</sup> "Country Analysis Brief: Türkiye," *U.S. Energy Information Administration*, July 11, 2023, accessed date May 17, 2024. [https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries\\_long/Turkiye/turkiye.pdf](https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries_long/Turkiye/turkiye.pdf)

<sup>65</sup> Vatanka, "Erdoğan in Tehran."

<sup>66</sup> Elizabeth Hagedorn, "Turkey left off guest list for Biden's 2<sup>nd</sup> democracy summit," *Al-Monitor*, March 24, 2023, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/03/turkey-left-guest-list-bidens-2nd-democracy-summit>

democratic actions to counter other demands that Ankara makes on Washington in their other disputes. Perhaps this is an avoidance of diplomatic hypocrisy. It could be noted that Washington tolerates anti-democratic behavior and human rights abuses from other autocratic governments allied with the U.S., such as the Gulf monarchies. On the other hand, branding the AKP regime as anti-democratic and abusive of human rights does enhance the anti-Turkish lobby groups in Congress in their efforts to persuade key legislator gatekeepers to block military appropriations for Türkiye and argue for sanctions.<sup>67</sup>

From the AKP government's perspective, the suspected Gülenist movement's involvement in the attempted coup of July 15, 2016, was a clear challenge to the legitimacy of the regime. It has branded the movement (FETO) as a terrorist organization. Ankara has gone further and views the US refusal to extradite Gülen as implicating Washington in the coup attempt.<sup>68</sup> The AKP government's abuse of the Turkish legal system to punish the regime's opponents and critics may factor into the reluctance by US officials to push for the extradition of Fethullah Gülen. However, the legal process itself is a sufficient obstacle for the extradition without any political interference – one way or the other.<sup>69</sup> On the other hand, the lengthy and complex extradition process appears to have tamped down the frequency of the antagonistic rhetoric over this issue.

One obvious solution to the lack of convergence of perceptions of threats to the AKP regime is to encourage Washington administrations to lower the volume of the rhetoric and reduce the repetition of these claims – while working quietly with Ankara to push for democratic reforms and release of regime opponents from jail. This should have an ameliorative effect on the AKP regime's promotion of anti-Americanism among the larger Turkish population. Washington can also help to reduce the widespread perception of the U.S. as a threat to the Republic by increasing the amount of people-to-people exchanges between the two nations. For example, in promoting a societal level “charm offensive” the US could increase the opportunities for Turkish students and academics to study and research in the U.S.<sup>70</sup> As noted by commentators, it would also be important for this effort to increase diplomatic and military exchanges between the two countries.

## 9. Non-Converging Perceptions of Threats to Turkish Society: The lack of Tolerance for Ethnic and Religious Minorities

The one national security variable that remains a significant perception of threat for Türkiye and not equally appreciated by the U.S. is Türkiye's “Kurdish issue.” The lack of convergence on this issue is due to Türkiye defining the PKK as a separatist terrorist organization. Since the end of the Peace Process in 2015 it has been concentrating on military means to address the conflict. The U.S. also recognizes the PKK as a terrorist organization, however, from the US perspective, the Kurdish issue arises from the continued denial by the Republic of cultural and linguistic rights to Türkiye's Kurds.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, Türkiye's denial of political

<sup>67</sup> See, “Full Committee Hearing: U.S. Policy on Turkey – Victoria Nuland: Witness Testimony,” *Foreign Relations Committee*, July 21, 2021, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/hearings/us-policy-on-turkey-071421>

<sup>68</sup> Grigoriadis and Aras, “Distrusted Partnership,” 125.

<sup>69</sup> Michael Werz and Max Hoffman, “The Process Behind Turkey's Proposed Extradition of Fethullah Gülen,” *Center for American Progress*, September 7, 2016, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-process-behind-turkeys-proposed-extradition-of-fethullah-gulen/>

<sup>70</sup> Türkiye's student enrollment was a paltry 0.9% of the 2021/22 948,519 international student population in the U.S. See, “U.S. Embassy Ankara Media Note – IIE Open Doors Report,” *U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Türkiye*, November 16, 2022, accessed date May 17, 2024. <https://tr.usembassy.gov/turkish-students-choose-to-study-in-the-united-states>.

<sup>71</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Integrated Country Strategy*, 13.



rights is evidenced by the closing of Kurdish dominated political parties and imprisoning their elected leaders, hampering the possibility of negotiations.<sup>72</sup> While these minority rights are denied, the risk will remain of the PKK using violence to protest against their denial. The AKP government, however, needs its nationalist MHP member coalition to maintain a Parliamentary majority, and therefore has little incentive to resume peace talks with the PKK.<sup>73</sup>

Nonetheless, Washington's encouraging Ankara to resume the peace process with the PKK would, if successful, have major ripple effects on Türkiye's perception of its national security. Among other things, the Republic would preserve its military capabilities for reactions to threats in its dangerous neighborhood, where its potential adversaries, Syria, Iran, and Russia, would be denied the ability to "play the PKK card." Making peace with the PKK would boost Türkiye's economic security by adjusting the guns vs butter balance in favor of butter. And AKP success at the negotiating table would enhance the legitimacy of the regime while increasing societal tolerance for ethnic diversity.

How to gain these benefits, however, remains a challenge. Negotiating with the PKK can nevertheless be encouraged using Track II diplomacy that can ultimately persuade governmental leaders to embark on reviving peace talks. Civil society groups on both sides could engage in such Track II diplomacy using the process that led to the Oslo accords.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, implementing Kurdish minority rights does not need to reform the current Türkiye Constitution. It requires only a willingness to operationalize the principles for the minority rights that are already embedded in the Constitution.<sup>75</sup>

## 10. Conclusions

This article has analyzed a finite set of issues that disrupt the strategic partnership between the U.S. and Türkiye and the reasons for the persistence of the relationship in terms of the convergence and divergence of their perceived threats to national security. For the analytical framework the paper applied the paradigm for the concept of national security consisting of five integrated variables: the nation's military and economic capabilities; the availability of essential natural resources, especially in this case, energy supplies; the legitimacy of the regime and the tolerance within its society for religious and ethnic diversity, and in Türkiye's case, particularly the Kurds. Application of the paradigm has also pointed us towards seeking solutions that bring about greater convergence of their national security interests.

Türkiye and the U.S. can cooperate to design better alternatives to the S400 program, making it obsolete and less of a source of friction between the two states, though the distrust this situation has created will admittedly take time to recede. On the issue of cooperation between Türkiye and Russia and Türkiye and Iran, the U.S. has been more tolerant of Türkiye's need for energy imports to support its economy, while Türkiye has been reducing its reliance upon both Russia and Iran as a source of energy. Both governments have also reduced their criticism of each other, the U.S. with respect to Türkiye's anti-democratic policies and Türkiye with respect to the extradition of Fetullah Gülen.

<sup>72</sup> Lenore G. Martin, "The Plight of Turkey's Minorities: What Obstacles and Opportunities Exist for Equal Citizenship beyond the Republic's Centennial?" *Turkish Studies* 24, no. 3-4 (2023): 550-569.

<sup>73</sup> Oya Dursun-Özkanca, "US-Turkey Relations,"

<sup>74</sup> Lenore G. Martin, "A New Track Towards Resolving Turkey's Kurdish Issue," *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 11, no. 2 (2017): 8-13.

<sup>75</sup> Martin, "The Plight of Turkey's Minorities," 563.

The most divisive of these of all the issues straining the relationship proves to be the divergence of perceptions concerning the threats to Türkiye from the Kurds, particularly Syrian Kurds, which the US uses to counter ISIL and deter Iranian aggression. A revival of the peace process between the AKP regime and the PKK as discussed above would, if successful, help to resolve that issue. To encourage a revival of peace negotiations with the PKK, civil society leaders in both Türkiye and the US should engage in Track II diplomacy. While this offers no quick resolution, like other worthwhile endeavors, as the optimists that comment on the challenging relations between Türkiye and America might say: better to light a candle (yea, even a thousand candles) than to curse the darkness.

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## Costly Incrementalism: U.S. PKK Policy and Relations with Türkiye

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### Abstract

*U.S. policy towards the PKK, a designated Foreign Terror Organization, has varied significantly over four decades, reflecting a clear periodization based on pragmatic policy interests and the interplay of U.S. actions and Turkish responses. Washington has over time supported Turkish counter-PKK actions without direct involvement; actively supported Turkish counter-PKK efforts; tolerated or tacitly supported PKK activities; and directly instrumentalized and supported the PKK in Syria and regionally. Washington's evolving stance toward the PKK coincided with the rise of Al Qaeda (AQ) and its offshoot, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as the focus of U.S. Middle East policy. The evolution reflected an incremental approach that subordinated U.S.-Turkish relations and other regional problems to the campaign against AQ/IS. Bilateral cooperation suffered as incrementalism, low trust, and transactionalism came to characterize the relationship. This paper examines the history, current dynamics, and possible future trajectory of U.S. PKK policy as a problem in U.S.-Turkish bilateral relations.*

**Keywords:** U.S. Foreign Policy, terrorism, U.S.-Turkish relations, national security, NATO

### 1. Introduction

U.S. policy towards the *Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan* (PKK or Kurdistan Workers' Party), and the impact of that policy upon U.S.-Turkish relations, have undergone notable transformations across several distinct periods from 1997 through 2023. These transformations have been reflected in very public milestones, such as formal American designation of the PKK as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) in October 1997, assistance in the apprehension of PKK founder and leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999, and commencement of military assistance to the PKK's Syrian franchise, the YPG, in 2014. More subtle milestones have been embedded in the context of broader U.S. policy, such as the launching of wars to dislodge Saddam Hussein (1990-2003) and to punish Sunni terror groups spawned by the Iraq War (2003-current day). The evolutionary policy process of gradually softening towards, then instrumentalizing the PKK marked the ascendancy of counterterrorism over regional policy in Washington, and provides an important case study in U.S. counterterrorism thinking and practice. That policy evolution provides a lens to understand the degradation in U.S.-Turkish bilateral relations since the end of the Cold War, and sheds light on its probable course in the coming years. The contradiction between the geopolitical value of Turkish alignment with the West and



persistent Western support to Türkiye's number one security threat virtually guarantees continued military and diplomatic friction.

Close examination of the periods in this policy evolution shows a consistent privileging of convenience over principle for U.S. policymakers. First, U.S. opposition to PKK terrorism in the early stages was pragmatic rather than principled, and tepid. Second, the increased efforts against PKK terrorism in the second Clinton term greatly strengthened Turkish counter-PKK efforts, contributed to greater bilateral cooperation in the Balkans and elsewhere, and led to a significant decrease in PKK-related violence that lasted for several years. Third, Operation Iraqi Freedom dramatically revised the context of counter-PKK efforts by creating a power vacuum in northern Iraq and adjacent regions while diminishing military cooperation between the US and Türkiye. Finally, decisions taken from 2011 onwards introduced unprecedented contradictions and tensions into U.S. regional policy and the bilateral US-Türkiye relationship that have yet to be resolved, and have created a security dilemma in northern Syria and northern Iraq that has few prospects for near-term resolution.

The primary policy implication of this periodization and privileging of pragmatism over principle in bilateral and alliance relations has been low trust. Low trust in international relations<sup>1</sup> leads to a high degree of transactionalism, with occasional forays into mutual recrimination and, alternatively, aspirational *bonhomie*. Transactionalism constrains the scope of potential bilateral and multilateral cooperation.<sup>2</sup> Given the consensus perception in Türkiye - both opposition and ruling party - that the PKK is the paramount threat, this trajectory of U.S. PKK policy severely constrains cooperation in regional and geopolitical affairs. As long as the U.S. oscillates between indifference towards the PKK and tacit support for it, the Turkish security and political establishment will be compelled to hedge and align against U.S. regional primacy. This article describes the stages in evolving U.S. policy towards the PKK, the current regional and bilateral dynamics that have grown from that policy, and trends that seem likely to emerge or continue over the next several years. Assessment of periodization and policy shifts over time requires a framing of historical context, presented in the next section.

## 2. Stages in an Evolution

Empirical study yields a fairly clear periodization of U.S. policy and actions toward the PKK. From the first terror attacks in southeast Türkiye in 1984 through the end of the first term of the Clinton Presidency (1996), the U.S. adopted a sort of neutrality towards the conflict. While rhetorically supporting the Turkish right of self-defense against armed attack, Washington also avoided direct engagement in counter-PKK efforts. During a brief second period (1997-2003), the U.S. provided direct and substantive support to Türkiye against the PKK. From the invasion of Iraq through the metastasis of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as a terror threat (2003-2014), a cooling in U.S.-Turkish relations and de-emphasis of Iraq in U.S. strategic planning led to an ambivalent position on the PKK, in which the U.S. formally opposed, but tactically tolerated, PKK operations in northern Iraq. This third phase included a spike in U.S. counter-PKK support following a bilateral crisis in 2007-

<sup>1</sup> Christer Pursiainen and Tuomas Forsberg, "Relations of Trust and Mistrust," in *The Psychology of Foreign Policy* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021), 299-336.

<sup>2</sup> Galib Bashirov and Ihsan Yılmaz, "The Rise of Transactionalism in International Relations: Evidence from Türkiye's Relations with the European Union," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 74, no. 2 (2020): 165-184.

2008, which may have contributed to a period of extended negotiation. A fourth phase began after the U.S. intervention in Syria in 2014 against (ISIS), during which it decided to rely upon the PKK-affiliated YPG as a ground force to confront ISIS in lieu of a larger U.S. force deployment. As of early 2024, the U.S. remains committed in terms of financial and operational support to a group disavowed by its top-level counter-terror policy commitments - through the expedient ignoring of extensive evidence of close ties between the YPG and senior PKK leadership. This contradiction will only be resolved when U.S. forces exit Syria, where they are entirely dependent upon the YPG for local security. In the meantime, the strain caused in U.S.-Turkish bilateral relations by support for an FTO affiliate will remain a policy challenge.

### 2.1. 1984-1996

Washington avoided clear commitment or engagement regarding the PKK. Washington focused more policy attention on the conflict between Kurds in Iraq and Saddam Hussein's regime than on the PKK's campaign against Türkiye in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which is to say the PKK's first decade of active terror and guerilla operations. During this period Washington continued close defense industrial cooperation with Ankara, and publicly supported the Turkish right to self-defense against PKK attacks. Yet, the U.S.-led Operation Provide Comfort (OPC) provided PKK forces the ability to establish bases in Iraqi Kurdistan near the Turkish border, by virtue of preventing Iraqi military forces from operating in the north of the country. This would lead to a series of Turkish incursions targeting PKK bases, beginning in 1991.<sup>3</sup> After initially tacitly accepting the 1995 Turkish military operation against PKK bases in northern Iraq, senior U.S. officials called on the Turks to withdraw, and hinted at neutrality in the Türkiye-PKK conflict.<sup>4</sup> Operation Provide Comfort generated increasing sympathy for Kurds in the U.S., and suspicions of Turkish intentions involving Iraqi Kurdistan contributed to American reticence to unambiguously support Turkish efforts there against the PKK.<sup>5</sup> In 1994, Congress withheld military loans to Türkiye until the Executive Branch submitted a report on alleged human rights violations by the Turkish government in its campaign against the group.<sup>6</sup>

### 2.2. 1996-2003

The U.S. provided direct and active support to Turkish actions against PKK. The Clinton Administration shifted during its second term to a less ambiguous and more supportive position on Turkish security concerns. During this period, the U.S. continued its role as the major supplier of arms and equipment to the Turkish military.<sup>7</sup> In 1997, the State Department complied with Turkish requests to formally designate the PKK a Foreign Terror Organization.<sup>8</sup> The Clinton Administration declined to criticize cross-border operations by Turkish forces into northern Iraq on several occasions between 1995 and 1998, and participated in a

<sup>3</sup> Anil Karaca, "Disrupting Terrorist Networks: An Analysis of the PKK Terrorist Organization," M.A. thesis, (U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, 2010), 38-39. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA536525>

<sup>4</sup> Lally Weymouth, "We Can't Be Neutral on Türkiye," *Washington Post*, April 2, 1995. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1995/04/02/we-cant-be-neutral-on-turkey/ca7bc20b-b38d-4d2a-8b21-b0a91a8225fc/>

<sup>5</sup> George D. Kramlinger, "Chapter 3: Operation Provide Comfort," in *Sustained Coercive Air Presence*, (Maxwell, AL: Air University Press, 2001), 19-39.

<sup>6</sup> Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas, *Türkiye, the PKK, and U.S. Involvement: A Chronology* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2019). <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnmnkibpcepjgclcfefindmkaj/https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11380>.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Zunes, "The United States and the Kurds: A Short History," *Common Dreams*, October 26, 2007. <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2007/10/26/united-states-and-kurds-brief-history>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*



diplomatic process with the Turks to achieve a ceasefire between the two major Kurdish groups (KDP and PUK) and pledge both to resist encroachments by the PKK.<sup>9</sup>

With strong backing from the U.S., Ankara pressed neighboring governments to restrict PKK activities in their countries. In addition to military operations in Iraq, the Turkish government pressed Syria to expel PKK leader Abdulla Öcalan and PKK training camps, threatening military action if no progress was made.<sup>10</sup> This led to the signing of the 1998 Adana protocol, under which Hafez al-Assad agreed to expel Öcalan, shut down PKK camps, and allow Turkish forces to conduct cross-border counter-PKK operations to a depth of ten kilometers. Iran gave a nod to Turkish concerns by formally cutting ties with the group the day U.S. forces invaded Iraq in 2003.<sup>11</sup> In 1999, the U.S. pressured Athens<sup>12</sup> and other governments that had harbored PKK leadership to stop doing so, and provided intelligence that led to the capture of Öcalan in Kenya - and his subsequent trial and imprisonment in Türkiye.<sup>13</sup>

In essence, the U.S. decided to stop the cycle of PKK provocations and Turkish ground incursions into Iraq by providing targeted counterterror assistance - which worked right up until the invasion of Iraq in 2003. In 1999 the PKK declared a unilateral ceasefire, elevated more moderate leadership, and indicated a willingness to pursue Kurdish nationalist aims in Türkiye through political means rather than armed violence. In return, Ankara initiated a series of cultural and political steps that raised hope for a sustained end to terror in the Turkish southeast.<sup>14</sup>

U.S. designation of the PKK as an FTO in 1997<sup>15</sup> was based on its attacks on Turkish security forces, diplomatic and commercial targets, tourists and other civilians.<sup>16</sup> While some observers have argued for delisting the group,<sup>17</sup> the case for doing so has not been persuasive and the designation has been confirmed numerous times.<sup>18</sup> Washington has maintained a consistent official line that it supports the fight against the PKK, despite growing tensions over U.S. partnership with that group's Syrian affiliate, the YPG.<sup>19</sup> Due at least in part to U.S. support of Turkish counter-PKK operations and staunch political backing during this

<sup>9</sup> Brigitte Hugh, "Perpetuating Peace: Context Versus Contents of Power-Sharing Agreements Between the KDP and PUK of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in 1992 and 1998," M.S. thesis, (Utah State University, 2020), 49-55. <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=8964&context=etd>.

<sup>10</sup> Alan Makovsky, "Defusing the Turkish-Syrian Crisis: Whose Triumph?" *Washington Institute*, February 1, 1999. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/defusing-turkish-syrian-crisis-whose-triumph>.

<sup>11</sup> Soner Cagaptay and Tyler Evans, "The End of Pax Adana," *Washington Institute*, August 25, 2012. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/end-pax-adana>.

<sup>12</sup> Miron Varouhakis, "Greek Intelligence and the Capture of PKK Leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999," *Studies in Intelligence* 53, no. 1 (2009): 1-7.

<sup>13</sup> Tim Weiner, "U.S. Helped Türkiye Find and Capture Kurdish Rebel," *New York Times*, February 20, 1999. <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/20/world/us-helped-türkiye-find-and-capture-kurd-rebel.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Soner Cagaptay, "The PKK's New Offensive: Implications for Türkiye, Iraqi Kurds, and the United States," *Washington Institute*, June 25, 2004 <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/pkks-new-offensive-implications-türkiye-iraqi-kurds-and-united-states>.

<sup>15</sup> John Rollins, *Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO)* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2023). <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10613>.

<sup>16</sup> Office of Counterterrorism, "Background Information on Foreign Terrorist Organizations," *U.S. Department of State*, October 8, 1999. [https://1997-2001.state.gov/global/terrorism/fto\\_info\\_1999.html#pkk](https://1997-2001.state.gov/global/terrorism/fto_info_1999.html#pkk).

<sup>17</sup> David Phillips and Kelly Berkell, "The Case for Delisting the PKK as a Foreign Terrorist Organization," *Lawfare*, February 11, 2016. <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/case-delisting-pkk-foreign-terrorist-organization>.

<sup>18</sup> Office of the Spokesperson, "State Department Maintains FTO Designation of the PKK," *U.S. Department of State*, March 1, 2019. <https://tr.usembassy.gov/state-department-maintains-foreign-terrorist-organization-fto-designation-of-the-kurdistan-workers-party-pkk/>; Bureau of Counterterrorism, "Executive Order 13224," *U.S. Department of State*, September 23, 2001 (November 2023). <https://www.state.gov/executive-order-13224/#state>.

<sup>19</sup> Phil Stewart, "U.S. Tells Türkiye it Supports Ankara's Fight Against the PKK," *Reuters.com*, May 11, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-türkiye-mattis-idUSKBN1871F0>.

period, the PKK had been demoralized and defeated in field operations by the year 2000, withdrawing its remaining fighters on its own accord.<sup>20</sup>

### 2.3. 2003-2014

The U.S. military campaign in Iraq led to a *modus vivendi* with the PKK. With an increasingly difficult occupation of Iraq after the 2003 invasion, U.S. military and intelligence forces provided little or no support to Ankara against the PKK - the Iraqi insurgency and Al Qaeda in Iraq were their sole focus. The U.S. also warned against Turkish incursions, meaning the PKK had a more secure base in northern Iraq than it had in previous decades.<sup>21</sup> With the PKK using this to escalate attacks into Türkiye, a new crisis in bilateral relations emerged, as both elite and popular opinion towards the U.S. hardened in Türkiye.<sup>22</sup> President Bush met with Prime Minister Erdoğan to find a mutually acceptable resolution, which included new intelligence support, more forceful denunciations of the PKK by Washington, and a green light for renewed - though limited - Turkish operations in northern Iraq.<sup>23</sup> The U.S. also appointed a retired four-star general, James Ralston, as special envoy for cooperation against the PKK.<sup>24</sup>

Renewed, albeit limited, resurgence in U.S. support to Turkish counter-PKK efforts may have helped stimulate the most serious attempt at a negotiated solution to the PKK's armed campaign, beginning in 2008 with secret talks in Oslo, Norway between representatives of the Erdoğan government and the PKK. In fact, both episodes of the U.S. demonstrating solidarity with Ankara in its counter-PKK efforts - the late 1990s culminating in the capture of Öcalan, and 2007/2008 - resulted in serious peace talks. Convinced that it could not defeat the Turkish military and lacking the sponsorship of a global power, the PKK changed its political program in the early 2000s to shift from an independent Kurdish state to changing the nature of the Turkish state.<sup>25</sup> The AKP changed political narratives about the Kurdish issue in Türkiye, lifting many taboos and implementing serious reforms. Discrete negotiations ensued, first with Turkish intelligence engaging the PKK and then with increasingly senior confidantes. The point of these talks was to shift from the securitized approach to conflict termination and seek a political settlement.<sup>26</sup>

By 2009 these exploratory talks matured into the "Kurdish Opening," an increasingly public dialogue and discrete set of negotiations in pursuit of a political settlement.<sup>27</sup> The process seemed close to ultimate success by March of 2013, when Öcalan issued a call for withdrawal of PKK fighters from Turkish territory and a shift to political struggle.<sup>28</sup> Yet the government and PKK negotiating positions on structural change within the state proved irreconcilable, and the PKK built up new fighting units and infrastructure in the cities of

<sup>20</sup> Michael Radu, "The Rise and Fall of the PKK," *Orbis* 45, no. 1 (2001): 47-50.

<sup>21</sup> Reuters staff (no byline), "U.S. Warns Against Turkish Action in Iraq," *Reuters.com*, October 9, 2007. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-Türkiye-iraq-usa/u-s-warns-against-turkish-action-in-iraq-idUSWAT00822720071009>.

<sup>22</sup> Çağaptay, "The PKK's New Offensive," 2004.

<sup>23</sup> Karen Kaya, "A Different War on Terrorism: The U.S., Türkiye, and the PKK," *Small Wars Journal* 2, no. 4 (2012): 1-7.

<sup>24</sup> Sean McCormack (State Department Spokesman), "Press Statement," *U.S. Department of State*, August 28, 2006. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/71563.htm>

<sup>25</sup> Arin Savran, "The Peace Process Between Türkiye and the Kurdistan Workers' Party, 2009-2015," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 22, no. 6 (2020): 777-792.

<sup>26</sup> F. Stephen Larrabee "Why Erdoğan Wants Peace with the PKK," *Foreign Affairs* March 27, 2013. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/Türkiye/2013-03-27/why-erdoğan-wants-peace-pkk>.

<sup>27</sup> Mesut Yegen, "The 2011 Elections and the Kurdish Question," *Insight Türkiye* 13, no. 4 (2011): 147-169.

<sup>28</sup> Cengiz Candar, "Öcalan's Message is Much More than a Ceasefire," *Al-Monitor*, March 24, 2013. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2013/03/Öcalan-ceasefire-newroz-speech-farewell-to-arms.html>.

southeast Türkiye.<sup>29</sup> During the period of the Kurdish Opening - also referred to sometimes as the “Solution Process” - Öcalan and other key PKK figures retained revolutionary violence and armed actions in Türkiye not only as an alternative to negotiations, but as a necessary complement to them. Given the group’s growing military power and international support in Syria beginning in 2014, the leadership decided they had better options than concessions and an end to the conflict with Türkiye.<sup>30</sup>

By late 2014 the PKK’s Syrian affiliate, the YPG, had developed a proxy relationship with U.S. forces fighting ISIS in Syria<sup>31</sup>, emboldening PKK fighters in Türkiye to resume combat operations. The rapid turn of fortunes for the PKK regionally - international sympathy, new recruits, U.S. air and logistical support, control of territory in Syria - convinced Ankara that the PKK was deepening, rather than abandoning, its military campaigns and territorial ambitions.<sup>32</sup> The U.S.-YPG relationship was initially presented by Washington as one of necessity (temporary, tactical, and transactional)<sup>33</sup>, but fostered soaring rhetoric and deepening implied commitment.<sup>34</sup> Given the tepid nature of previous U.S. commitments to countering the PKK, the readiness of Washington to partner with the PKK’s Syrian affiliate, and the strengthening of the YPG (and by extension the broader PKK) as a result of U.S. sponsorship, signalled that a clear change in dynamics was underway.

#### 2.4. 2015-present

In 2013 and 2014, with the Kurdish Opening in progress, leaders in Ankara felt unease but little direct risk as thousands of PKK-aligned fighters from Türkiye, Iran, and Iraq traveled to Syria to help the YPG wrest territory from the anti-Assad opposition and defend it against ISIS fighters. Concerns became far more intense as it became clear that events in northeast Syria were leading to a surge in pan-Kurdish sentiment across the region, lionization of the group in the Western press, plus territorial and political control unprecedented in the history of the PKK’s various franchises.<sup>35</sup> After ISIS’ rapid territorial gains during 2014 - and spectacular killings of American hostages - the Obama Administration became desperate to partner with a local force that would oppose ISIS without requiring large numbers of U.S. ground forces. Despite connections to the broader PKK FTO network, the YPG seemed the most efficient option for Washington.<sup>36</sup> During the late 2014 ISIS siege of Kobane, Ankara declined to intervene on behalf of the Kurdish forces and the U.S. decided to do so. The decision to partner with the YPG despite Ankara’s concerns about the disintegrating peace process with the PKK - and the concurrent dramatic increase in PKK capabilities due to U.S. support - ended prospects for U.S.-Turkish cooperation in Syria and marked a significant new source of tension in the bilateral relationship. To Washington however, it seemed strategically

<sup>29</sup> Margarita Konaev and Burak Kadercan, “Old Dogs, New Tricks: Urban Warfare in Türkiye’s War With the PKK,” *War on the Rocks*, January 3, 2018. <https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/old-dogs-new-tricks-urban-warfare-türkiyes-war-pkk/>.

<sup>30</sup> Murat Yesiltas and Necdet Özcelik, *When Strategy Collapses: The PKK’s Urban Terrorist Campaign* (Ankara: SETA, 2018).

<sup>31</sup> Daniel Byman, “Why Be a Pawn to a State? Proxy Wars from a Proxy’s Perspective,” *Brookings.edu*, May 22, 2018. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-be-a-pawn-to-a-state-proxy-wars-from-a-proxys-perspective/>.

<sup>32</sup> Savran, “The Peace Process,” 777-792.

<sup>33</sup> Cansu Camlibel, “U.S. Relations With YPG Temporary, Transactional, Tactical,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, May 19, 2017. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/us-relations-with-ypg-temporary-transactional-tactical-113277>.

<sup>34</sup> Ranj Alaaldin, “Türkiye, the U.S., and the YPG After the Afrin Operation?” *Brookings.edu*, January 26, 2018. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/whats-next-for-türkiye-the-us-and-the-ypg-after-the-afrin-operation/>.

<sup>35</sup> Aaron Stein and Michelle Foley, “The YPG-PKK Connection,” *Atlantic Council*, January 26, 2016. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-ypg-pkk-connection/>.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Stephens and Aaron Stein, “The YPG: America’s New Best Friend?” *Al Jazeera*, June 28, 2015. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/6/28/the-ypg-americas-new-best-friend/>.

sound, and the costs manageable.<sup>37</sup>

The U.S. began a Train and Equip program for the YPG, later re-designated the Syrian Democratic Forces or SDF, that entailed the deployment of top-tier U.S. special forces advisors, air and logistical support, and funding under the Counter Terrorism Train and Equip Fund (CTEF) of more than \$100 million per year.<sup>38</sup> Collaboration with the SDF enabled the U.S. to end Islamic State control in northeast Syria<sup>39</sup> - though the Turks themselves had cleared ISIS forces from west of the Euphrates with their own military operations in 2016.<sup>40</sup> Yet it did not result in the “enduring defeat” of ISIS, as small terror actions continued while tens of thousands of ISIS-affiliated prisoners remain still in a network of SDF-run detention facilities in northeast Syria.<sup>41</sup>

Turkish concern about the open-ended U.S. military partnership with and subsidy of PKK-affiliated forces in Syria has evolved into a broadly-held view among political and security elites in Ankara that the U.S. is consciously and indefinitely nurturing a threat to its NATO ally.<sup>42</sup> One response to this has been a series of additional military campaigns in northern Syria - Olive Branch (2018), Peace Spring (2019), and Spring Shield (2020) - to establish a secure corridor or “safe zone” that keeps both Assad and PKK-aligned forces away from much of the Turkish border.<sup>43</sup> Together with operations in Iraq in coordination with the Iraqi Kurdish forces aligned with the Erbil-based Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP),<sup>44</sup> these operations have resulted in a broad zone of Turkish military operations that will almost certainly stay in place until the U.S.-PKK arrangement ends, and PKK military capabilities are attenuated. Washington seems locked in to a military arrangement without an end state or political goal, which means the U.S. and Türkiye are in a sort of proxy cold war in Syria with no end in sight.<sup>45</sup>

In fact, the stalemate in northeast Syria may bring even sharper tensions in the US-Turkish bilateral relationship in coming years. The massive train and equip program for SDF/YPG shows no signs of significant reduction, with funding secure into the foreseeable future.<sup>46</sup> Indefinite sponsorship continues despite that the ideology, strategic approach, and tactical

<sup>37</sup> Michael Knights and Lahur Talabani, “The Iraqi Kurdish Battle Against ISIS: Reports from the Front,” *Washington Institute*, November 6, 2015. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraqi-kurdish-battle-against-isis-reports-front>.

<sup>38</sup> Christopher Blanchard, *Syria and U.S. Policy*, (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2023). <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11930>.

<sup>39</sup> Mohammed Hassan, “Why ISIS Cannot Bring the Caliphate Back to Life,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, July 18, 2023. [https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/90221#:~:text=On%20March%2023%2C%202019%2C%20the,State%20\(ISIS\)%20in%20Syria](https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/90221#:~:text=On%20March%2023%2C%202019%2C%20the,State%20(ISIS)%20in%20Syria).

<sup>40</sup> Aaron Stein, Hossam Abouzahr, and Rao Komar, “Post-Conflict Stabilization: Türkiye and the End of Operation Euphrates Shield,” *Atlantic Council*, July 13, 2017. <https://atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/post-conflict-stabilization-Türkiye-and-the-end-of-operation-euphrates-shield/>.

<sup>41</sup> Edith Lederer, “Islamic State Group Still Has Thousands in Syria and Iraq and Poses Afghan Threat, UN Experts Say,” *abcnews.com*, August 14, 2023. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/islamic-state-group-thousands-syria-iraq-poses-afghan-102271017>.

<sup>42</sup> Rich Outzen, “Prospects for U.S.-Turkish Convergence on Syria,” *Atlantic Council*, June 22, 2023. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/ac-Türkiye-defense-journal/prospects-for-us-turkish-convergence-on-syria/#:~:text=The%20war%20in%20Syria%20has,focused%20on%20eradicating%20Sunni%20extremism>.

<sup>43</sup> Canan Sevgili, Azra Ceylan, Halilcan Soran, and Oben Mumcuoglu “Turkish Military Operations in Iraq and Syria,” *Reuters.com*, November 21, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/Türkiyes-military-operations-iraq-syria-2022-11-21/>.

<sup>44</sup> Rich Outzen, “Claw-Lock: An Assessment of Turkish Counter-PKK Operations in Iraq in 2022,” *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor*, August 12, 2022. <https://jamestown.org/program/claw-lock-an-assessment-of-turkish-counter-pkk-operations-in-northern-iraq-in-2022/>.

<sup>45</sup> Daniel DePetris, “After Syrian Airstrikes, what is the U.S. End Game?” *Washington Examiner*, October 29, 2023. <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/after-syria-airstrikes-what-is-the-us-endgame#:~:text=The%20only%20clear%2C%20measurable%2C%20and,destruction%20of%20ISIS's%20proto%20Dstate>.

<sup>46</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), “Justification for FY2024: Counter-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) Train and Equip Fund (CTEF),” *Department of Defense*, March 2023. <https://www.asafm.army.mil/Portals/72/Documents/BudgetMaterial/2024/Base%20Budget/Other%20Funds/CTEF.pdf>.

relationships of the YPG and its controlling PKK headquarters in the Qandil mountains of Iraq threaten not only NATO ally Türkiye, but Kurdish rivals such as the U.S.-allied KDP.<sup>47</sup> Yet U.S. forces have gone beyond merely working with the SDF in Syria, and have begun transporting SDF elite units and political leaders into Iraq and beyond, with no declared policy from Washington to explain why.<sup>48</sup> The SDF has also faced significant uprisings among tribal elements in the majority-Arab areas it exercises de facto control over. The current stage of U.S. policy towards the PKK is thus one in which the PKK, supported by Iran and the U.S., maintains some territorial control in both Iraq and Syria, remains politically marginal in northern Iraq and Türkiye, and faces sustained military pressure, all of which ensures its dependence on American support - as well as a deficit of regional political legitimacy that has no apparent remedy.<sup>49</sup>

Over the four decades from 1984 through 2023, then, U.S. policy toward the PKK has shown great variability, as has the behavior of the PKK in responding to policy change. The PKK has conducted ceasefires and negotiations after periods of significant counter-terror operations by Turkish forces and/or U.S. support of such operations in 1993, 1998-99 and 2007-08. The first of these negotiating interludes ended with the death of Turkish President Turgut Özal. The latter two ended after major U.S. military moves that impeded Turkish freedom of military action south of its borders with Iraq and Syria - Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003, and the commitment of U.S. airpower, logistical support, and advisors to YPG forces in 2014. On a regional level, U.S. efforts to curtail central government control over northern Iraq and northeast Syria led to growing PKK control over large parts of these regions. U.S. policy has thus had the contradictory effect of supporting Turkish efforts to suppress PKK within Turkish territory, while strengthening the group's capabilities and its search for political legitimacy elsewhere.

### 3. Effect on the U.S.-Turkish Alliance

In each phase and shift of U.S. policy, it is possible to discern motives of pragmatism rather than principle or declared counter-terror policies. From 1984 through 1996 the U.S. demonstrated no interest in making the PKK an American problem, preferring to leave it to regional diplomacy and power politics.<sup>50</sup> Concerns in Western capitals over the PKK centered as much on concerns about human rights violations by Turkish security forces as they did on the group as a terror phenomenon, yet geopolitical considerations led to avoidance of either helping or opposing Turkish counter-PKK efforts.<sup>51</sup> Washington's professed commitment to humanitarian concerns and protecting Kurdish civilians was increasingly seen in Ankara as tacit consent and occasional direct support to PKK elements based in northern Iraq and Türkiye.<sup>52</sup> In 1994 the U.S. Congress stipulated that further military loans to Türkiye would

<sup>47</sup> Tomas Kavalek and Miroslav Mares, "PKK's Friends and Foes in the Middle East Since 1999," *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 12, no. 2 (2018): 100-129.

<sup>48</sup> Rich Outzen and Necdet Ozcelik, "US-Backed Proxy Strengthens Iranian Hand in Intra-Kurdish Struggle," *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor*, May 12, 2023. <https://jamestown.org/program/us-counter-terrorism-in-kurdistan-strengthening-irans-allies-at-erbils-expense/>.

<sup>49</sup> Mohammed Hassan, "Deir Ez-Zor Torn Between Arab Tribes' Struggle For Independence And The SDF's Efforts To Subdue Them," *Middle East Institute*, September 9, 2023. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/deir-ez-zor-torn-between-arab-tribes-struggle-independence-and-sdfs-efforts-subdue>.

<sup>50</sup> Sabri Sayari, "Türkiye and the Middle East in the 1990s," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 26, no. 3 (1997): 44-55.

<sup>51</sup> Jonathan Randal, *After Such Knowledge, What Forgiveness? — My Encounters with Kurdistan* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 261-291.

<sup>52</sup> Mahmut Bali Aykan, "Türkiye's Policy in Northern Iraq 1991-1995," *Middle Eastern Studies* 32, no. 4 (1996): 343-366.



require a report on alleged human rights violations by Turkish security forces during counter-PKK operations.<sup>53</sup>

From 1996-2003, elevated support for Türkiye against the PKK reflected a need for Turkish support in the Balkans, on Iraq, in Afghanistan and elsewhere - a PKK policy based on a quid pro quo for Turkish support in other conflicts. It also coincided with the advent of triangular cooperation (Türkiye-Israel-U.S.) and the narrative of a “strategic partnership” that was reshaping the Middle East.<sup>54</sup> From 2003-2014, the U.S. sought to deter major Turkish military operations against the PKK in Iraq, but acceded to limited operations after PKK attacks became intolerable to Ankara.<sup>55</sup> The post-2014 arrangement with the YPG stemmed from the disinclination to use U.S. ground troops, the preference to conduct counter-terror operations using local proxies without being responsible for political outcomes (the so-called By-With-Through operational approach), and the fact that Washington could not come to any consensus on the Syrian mess other than defeating ISIS.<sup>56</sup> Washington opted for the very pragmatic - and in terms of intra-alliance relations, extremely problematic - course of instrumentalizing an FTO offshoot (YPG) to fight another FTO (ISIS) despite linkages of ideology, personnel, and strategic guidance to the parent organization (PKK) still fighting a treaty ally (Türkiye).<sup>57</sup>

Such pragmatism operates in tension with the logic of alliance. U.S. security experts and officials, including the current Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, have long maintained that the key strategic advantage of the U.S. against potential rivals is its network of alliances.<sup>58</sup> The consensus components of alliance systems are the pooling of military resources, and mutual support against external threat to an alliance member.<sup>59</sup> American pragmatism regarding the PKK demonstrates a failed alliance in this regard, dysfunction that predates accusations that Ankara has become a “bad ally” in recent decades.<sup>60</sup> Many observers have noted that non-alliance “alignment” relationships incur more limited and contingent obligations, and are more common in the current era than true alliances. The U.S. policy of ignoring Turkish threat assessments and security concerns coincides with scholarly literature questioning the relevance of formal treaty mechanisms in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>61</sup>

The larger partner in a security relationship or alliance may have the luxury of double standards, but middle-sized partners have options of their own. Ankara has responded to the strategic alienation and mutual antagonisms stemming from U.S. PKK policy - reinforced by an enduring search for strategic autonomy beyond the PKK issue - through a number of hedging and balancing strategies. These have included local cooperation with Russia and

<sup>53</sup> Zanotti and Thomas, *Türkiye, the PKK, and U.S. Involvement*, 2019.

<sup>54</sup> Isa Afacan, “Turkish-American Relations in the Post-Cold War Era, 1990-2005,” Ph.D. diss., (Florida International University, 2011), 84-104, 140-150. <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1427&context=etd>.

<sup>55</sup> “America Between the Turks and Kurds,” *The Economist*, December 13, 2006. <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2006/12/13/america-between-the-turks-and-kurds>.

<sup>56</sup> Joseph Votel and Eero Keravouri, “The By-With-Through Operational Approach,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 89, no. 2 (2018): 40-47.

<sup>57</sup> Rena Netjes and Erwin van Veen Henchman, “Rebel, Democrat, Terrorist: the YPG/PYD During the Syrian Conflict,” *Clingendael*, April, 2021. <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/the-ypgpyd-during-the-syrian-conflict.pdf>.

<sup>58</sup> Jim Garamone, “Defense Official Says Allies, Partners Are Key to Our Defense,” *DefenseNews*, February 10, 2023. <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3295507/defense-official-says-allies-partners-are-key-to-defense/>.

<sup>59</sup> Kathleen McInnis, “The Competitive Advantages and Risks of Alliances,” *heritage.org*, October 30, 2019. <https://www.heritage.org/military-strength-essays/2020-essays/the-competitive-advantages-and-risks-alliances>.

<sup>60</sup> Steven Cook, *Neither Friend nor Foe: The Future of U.S.-Turkish Relations* (Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 2018).

<sup>61</sup> Thomas Wilkins, “‘Alignment,’ not ‘alliance’ - the shifting paradigm of international security cooperation: toward a conceptual taxonomy of alignment,” *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 1 (2012): 53-76.

Iran, deepened security relationships with non-NATO states such as Ukraine and Azerbaijan, and an expanding set of diplomatic and economic partners globally.<sup>62</sup> Ankara has also sought to change the asymmetric nature of power relations between itself and Washington by developing independent power projection capabilities including unmanned combat systems, precision munitions, regional defense agreements, and more agile civil-military relations.<sup>63</sup> The following section will examine how Ankara has responded to the evolution of the U.S. PKK policy, and the current dynamics likely to follow from this response in the coming years.

#### 4. An Expert Cross-Section

How do long-time observers of the U.S.-Turkish relationship who have closely followed the vicissitudes of U.S. PKK policy and Turkish counter-PKK strategies assess the current impact on bilateral relations? With minor differences, a half-dozen such experts<sup>64</sup> reflected several common themes in responding to questions about the salience of U.S. YPG/PKK support to bilateral relations; whether the YPG has autonomy or can be separated from the PKK; the long-term impact of the impasse over the YPG/PKK; and how critical a turning point in bilateral relations occurred with the 2014 U.S. decision to train, equip, support, and ultimately arm the YPG. In each case, the responses indicate a long-term structural impediment to improved, or even functional, alliance relations, and reinforce the centrality of U.S. PKK policy as a problematic aspect of bilateral relations. On how to characterize the U.S.-PKK relationship:

Whereas US help in capturing Öcalan had strengthened the sense of appreciation in Türkiye, the US's subsequent reluctance to help Türkiye in eliminating PKK targets in Northern Iraq and, worst of all, the artificial distinction it began to make between PKK elements in Syria and its mothership, eroded that trust and led to a deep sense of resentment that has now permeated Turkish society. The US continues to underestimate the destructive impact of this on Turkish-US relations.

The relationship continued due to USCENTCOM transforming from a policy-implementing entity into a policy-making entity. As the White House did not develop a policy for Syria, USCENTCOM did its own thing and exceeded its legal framework in Syria. The US relationship with the PKK is a product of USCENTCOM and a disinterest of the White House in Syria.

We can define what the US relation with the PYD is not: temporary, transactional or tactical as U.S. officials claim. The pretext of the PYD/YPG being the local actor to defeat the common threat of ISIS is not a credible argument. ISIS was a common threat to all at the global scale, but the PYD/YPG together with the PKK/HPG is the common threat to all at the regional scale. U.S. relation with the PYD is a replacement of the ISIS threat with PYD/YPG threat by downgrading the threat level from global sale to regional scale.

<sup>62</sup> Pavel Shlykov, "The State of Strategic Hedging: Türkiye's Foreign Policy and Relations With Russia," *Russia in Global Affairs* 21, no. 3 (2023): 134-158.

<sup>63</sup> Rich Outzen, "Deals, Drones, and National Will: The New Era in Turkish Power Projection," *Washington Institute*, July 9, 2021. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/deals-drones-and-national-will-new-era-turkish-power-projection>.

<sup>64</sup> Interviews conducted in October 2023 via written exchanges with U.S.- and Türkiye-based analysts with advanced security credentials and a minimum of two decades in security or policy analysis / practice. Names available upon request.

### On whether there is a substantive difference between the YPG/PYD and broader PKK:

The facts say otherwise. Of course, there was a time when Türkiye itself had engaged the PYD. But that doesn't change the fact that they (both the PYD and the YPG) are affiliated with the PKK. That slogan (temporary, tactical, transactional) never resonated with Ankara and is so stale that it adds insult to injury. It was a bad excuse for a selfish US decision to make an exception in the fight against terrorism, at Türkiye's expense.

The YPG is not a suitable partner for this new period to eliminate ISIS. The YPG may have had an interest in fighting against ISIS, but they don't have an interest in extinguishing their sole source of legitimacy as well. The YPG is interested in keeping ISIS alive without letting it become a real threat.

In today's world, nothing remains secret. The public knows that the USA continues this relationship knowing that the YPG is an organic part of the PKK. This relationship not only creates moral problems in the relations between the USA and Türkiye, but also poisons other relations. The USA is clearly at odds with its own value system. The perception of the United States among the Turkish public is untrustworthy, selfish and hostile.

### On how the perception of U.S. support to the YPG/PYD and, by extension, the PKK affects Turkish views of the longer-term relationship:

Türkiye's main national security concern continues to revolve around the PKK and its offshoots. In that sense, US policy on these issues will be among the main drivers of the Turkish-US partnership.

The American partnership with the YPG is seen as a direct threat to Türkiye. Most Turks believe that the end target is Türkiye. For Turks, the PKK is the single most important threat across the political spectrum. The US support for them poisons the relationship way more than Washington thinks. Anti-Americanism is on the rise in Türkiye. In any public TV debate about relations with the US, Eurasianists win within the scope of minutes. They refer to the American support of the YPG, and the debate ends. Many Turks believe that the US destroyed Iraq and Syria and that Türkiye is next.

The PKK (and the PUK) owe their organizational survival and growth to Iran, historically. Now, the US is promoting the PYD/YPG to help combine the capacity and capability of Iranian proxies so that Iran would easily instill its influence in Syria and Iraq with a more advantageous regional context.

### How big a turning point was the 2014 U.S. decision to support the YPG, in terms of bilateral relations?

It had two major destructive implications. First, it was a blow to bilateral Turkish-US relations and continues to severely hemorrhage it. Second, it had destructive implications within NATO. Coupled with its national policy shift, the US also spearheaded the same approach within NATO and effectively nurtured a bloc within the Alliance against Türkiye, leading to a vicious cycle that came at a cost to NATO's resilience.

Many foreign policy and security decisions of Türkiye can be explained by the US support to the YPG in 2014. Turkish decision-makers lost their trust in the US and have made several other political decisions in response to the American support of the YPG. For example, the acquisition of the S-400 air defense system from Russia would not have occurred if the US had not partnered with the YPG.



All aspects of the bilateral relationship with the US are viewed from the prism of the US partnership with the YPG.

The Syrian revolutionary movement suffered a major set-back and many of them either leaned towards ISIS or Heyet Tahrir al Sham (HTS now, Jabhat al-Nusra at that time) (...) the PKK/HPG was influenced by the PYD/YPG's grip over US support and the PKK ended the ongoing solution process in 2015 and waged a renewed terror campaign in the form of an uprising in urban cities in eastern Turkish cities. Discrepancy between US and Turkish ... also allowed Russia and Iran to get involved in the Syrian Civil War more actively in 2015. As the revolutionary movement weakened, the PYD/YPG increased its influence and they posed more threat to Türkiye... weakened NATO collective defense...and may have even encouraged the 2016 coup attempt in Türkiye.

## 5. Turkish Responses and Current Dynamics

U.S. policy towards the PKK has had major shifts and a unique evolutionary path. So too has the Turkish approach to counter-PKK tactics and strategy. As the PKK shifted first from rural to urban insurgency on Turkish soil from bases in Iraq and Syria, then to control over areas in Iraq and Syria, Turkish efforts moved from domestic counterterror operations to eliminating PKK control of border areas. Sympathetic Western observers counseled the PKK in Syria to avoid conflict with Türkiye and focus on local administration in an attempt to preserve its gains, but the twin realities of a YPG whose value lies in fighting prowess rather than political legitimacy and the continuing political control exercises by foreign PKK cadres prevented real evolution or compromise.<sup>65</sup>

Turkish counter-PKK strategies from 1984 to the present have relied on a mixture of elements.<sup>66</sup> These have included security operations within national borders by police, intelligence, military, and “village guard” forces; diplomatic campaigns to neutralize foreign pressure on Ankara and external support to the PKK; co-optation and alliances with conservative Kurds; political and economic reforms; direct negotiations; and increasingly effective cross-border military operations and precision strikes against PKK leadership. During the period of AKP rule (2002-present), the early emphasis was on reforms coupled with continued “brute force” military operations. From 2009-2013, negotiations and restraint in the use of force was attempted. Since the collapse of negotiations and the advent of direct U.S. support to the YPG, Ankara has relied on dramatically enhanced military technical capabilities to move the fight off of Turkish territory and to go after PKK bases, infrastructure, and personnel in Iraq and Syria.<sup>67</sup> The U.S. has adapted in turn to this increasingly forward posture by tacitly accepting Turkish operations, while warning against significant escalations and insisting on due protection for U.S. forces in the region.<sup>68</sup>

This cycle of evolving U.S. policy and Turkish response has produced five key dynamics that will shape the next several years of Türkiye's counter-PKK efforts and greatly influence

<sup>65</sup> Murat Yesiltas, “How Türkiye Has Changed its Counter-Terrorism Policy Against the PKK,” *Politics Today*, June 15, 2018. <https://politicstoday.org/how-türkiye-has-changed-its-counter-terrorism-policy-against-the-pkk/>; Yesiltas, “Making Sense of Türkiye's New Counter-Terrorism Strategy,” *Politics Today*, November 23, 2018. <https://politicstoday.org/making-sense-of-türkiyes-new-counter-terrorism-strategy/>.

<sup>66</sup> Mustafa Cosar Unal and Marina Miron, “Losing a War While Defeating the Enemy: The Vitality of the Strategy Bridge,” *Revista Científica General Jose Maria Cordova* 20, no. 40 (2022): 989-1023.

<sup>67</sup> “Türkiye's PKK Conflict - a Visual Explainer,” *International Crisis Group*, September 28, 2023. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/türkiyes-pkk-conflict-visual-explainer>.

<sup>68</sup> Berkay Mandiraci, “Türkiye's PKK Conflict: A Regional Battleground in Flux,” *International Crisis Group*, February 18, 2022. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/türkiye/türkiyes-pkk-conflict-regional-battleground-flux>.

bilateral relations. The first is sustained proxy conflict between the U.S. and Türkiye in Syria. American commitment to the By-With-Through operational approach in northeast Syria prompted the Turkish “Safe Zone” strategy, and the continuation of both ensures sustained future conflict and mutual mistrust.<sup>69</sup> By-With-Through triggered this response by supporting local governance structures linked to the U.S.-subsidized proxy force - the YPG - as presumptively local and legitimate, without real scrutiny or compromise to sensitivities of other local actors and in willful disregard of the YPG’s close ties to the PKK. The de facto administrative structure organized by the PKK’s Syrian political wing (the PYD) is referred to as Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria (AANES), and it claims authority over areas controlled by the Turkish-supported Syrian Interim Government (SIG)<sup>70</sup>. Unquestioned U.S. support has obviated the need for genuine political compromise between the AANES and various groups in northeast Syria.<sup>71</sup> U.S. spending in support of YPG/PYD control<sup>72</sup> militates against political stabilization of the area, and virtually assures future conflict with other local actors (including those supported by the Turks). Until the U.S. develops an alternative political strategy to unquestioned YPG/PYD control of Northeast Syria via the AANES - or until the AANES collapses or is re-absorbed by the Assad regime - this dynamic will persist.

The second dynamic is the continued ascendance of the YPG as the most effective and prominent node of the regional Öcalan movement.<sup>73</sup> The YPG is currently the highest-profile franchise in the PKK broader network - the only place where PKK ideas have been put into practice on a regional scale - but remains constrained by political leadership of the movement at Iraq’s Qandil mountain complex and elsewhere.<sup>74</sup> Ironically, the Kurdish demographic base is much thinner in Syria than in either Iraq or Türkiye, and thus the Kurd-based revolutionary movement rests on the most tenuous, and externally-dependent grounds. Yet YPG leadership has expressed aspirations to become a “national army” with 100,000 fighters, which would presumably entail a power shift within the PKK from northern Iraq to northeast Syria.<sup>75</sup> U.S. military officials have attempted to extend the group’s reach regionally by escorting YPG fighters to joint training with PUK forces in Iraq’s Sulaymaniya,<sup>76</sup> and facilitating the travel of top commander Mazloom Abdi to meetings in Abu Dhabi.<sup>77</sup> Similar to the first dynamic, this will continue as long as U.S. presence alongside and subsidy to the YPG/PYD keeps flowing.

<sup>69</sup> Sinem Adar, “Repatriation to Türkiye’s ‘Safe Zone’ in Northeast Syria,” *Stiftung für Wirtschaft und Politik* (SWP), January 13, 2020. <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2020C01/>.

<sup>70</sup> Aurora Sottimano, “The Syrian Interim Government: Potential Thwarted by Domestic ‘Irrelevance’ and Foreign Neglect,” in *Actors and Dynamics in the Syrian Conflict’s Middle Phase*, eds. Jasmine Gani and Raymond Hinnebusch, (New York: Routledge, 2022), 140-163.

<sup>71</sup> Saleh Malas, Mamoun al-Bustani, Lujain Mourad, and Diana Rahima, “Charter of Autonomous Administration: Infringement of Society Components’ Rights?” *Enab Baladi*, March 7, 2022. <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2022/03/charter-of-autonomous-administration-infringement-of-society-components-rights/>.

<sup>72</sup> “Counter-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria Train and Equip Fund (CTEF) Justification for FY2024,” *Office of the Secretary of Defense*, March 2023, 18-27. <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2022/03/charter-of-autonomous-administration-infringement-of-society-components-rights/>.

<sup>73</sup> Jared Ferris and Andrew Self, “Dead Men Tell No Tales: Using Killed-in-Action (KIA) Data to Expose the PKK’s Regional Shell Game,” *ORSAM Review of Regional Affairs*, no. 57 (2017): 1-40.

<sup>74</sup> Zeynep Kaya and Robert Lowe, “The Curious Question of the PYD-PKK Relationship,” in *The Kurdish Question Revisited*, eds. Gareth R.V. Stansfield and Mohammed Sharif (London: Hurst, 2017), 275-292.

<sup>75</sup> Tom Perry, “Exclusive: Syrian Kurdish YPG Plans to Expand Force to Over 100,000,” *Reuters.com*, March 20, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-ypg-exclusive-idUSKBN16R1QS>.

<sup>76</sup> Outzen and Ozcelik, “US-Backed Proxy,” 2023.

<sup>77</sup> Amberin Zaman, “Syria’s Kurds Turn to UAE to Ease Tensions With Assad,” *Al-Monitor*, May 3, 2023. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/05/syrias-kurds-turn-uae-ease-tensions-assad>.

The third dynamic is the increasing capability of the Turkish defense industry to not only meet domestic demand for affordable, high-quality arms and equipment, but to export to an expanding network of trusted allies and defense partners, both within NATO and outside it.<sup>78</sup> The Turkish defense industry has become a global leader, and has reached a “critical mass” of engineering and systems integration experience to develop new technologies with or without Western approval. This has mitigated the longstanding threat of erstwhile arms suppliers in the West who sought to constrain Turkish counter-PKK and other military actions through restrictions on defense exports.<sup>79</sup> Combined with an effective operational approach bringing together unmanned reconnaissance and strike systems, manned aircraft, precision munitions, ground maneuver forces, local proxies, and agile security decision-making, Turkish industrial advances have more or less driven the PKK from the field within Turkish borders - and exacted an increasing toll on the PKK beyond them.<sup>80</sup> This dynamic seems likely to continue as long as the PKK and its affiliates maintain an armed presence along or near those border. Under conditions of relative advantage for Turkish forces - whose losses in counter-PKK operations are proportionally far less than those of the militants - a military solution or effective suppression likely will continue to hold more appeal than new negotiations.<sup>81</sup>

The fourth dynamic is sustained and manifest tension between the KDP and PKK in northern Iraq as U.S. support emboldens, and Turkish counterterrorism operations squeeze the latter. The Erbil-based KDP has faced pressure from Tehran, Baghdad, and the rival PUK in recent years, with the former seeking to restrain Kurdish autonomy and the latter trying to wrench control of it from the KDP.<sup>82</sup> Tacit coordination among those KDP opponents has pressed the Barzani leadership, adding even more value to the alignment with Ankara.<sup>83</sup> Ankara and Erbil share in interest in limiting PKK influence in northern Iraq. This applies to the YPG in Syria, as well, which has marginalized and suppressed activities of the KDP-aligned Kurdistan National Congress (KNC).<sup>84</sup> The complex competition for influence among the PKK/YPG, PUK, and KDP is exacerbated by opposing and sometimes contradictory efforts by Baghdad, Tehran, Washington and Ankara to influence its outcome.<sup>85</sup> For the KDP, U.S. efforts to maintain or grow PKK/YPG power pose no less of a security concern than they do for the Turks; the U.S., through a combination of inattention, inertial support to the PKK, and naivete regarding the results of the KDP-PUK rivalry is on the brink of ceding the region to Tehran.<sup>86</sup> The fragility of the situation in Iraqi Kurdistan may be the most dangerous dynamic in the entire PKK-Türkiye-U.S. network of issues, as it threatens to reverse three

<sup>78</sup> Can Kasapoglu, “Transforming from Arms Importer to Trendsetter: Assessing the Growth of Türkiye’s Defense Industries,” *Atlantic Council*, December 22, 2022. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/ac-Türkiye-defense-journal/transforming-from-arms-importer-to-trendsetter-assessing-the-growth-of-Türkiyes-defense-industries/>.

<sup>79</sup> Burak Ege Bekdil and Matthew Bodner, “No Obliteration: Western Arms Embargo Has Little Impact on Türkiye as it Looks East,” *DefenseNews*, October 24, 2019. <https://www.defensenews.com/global/mideast-africa/2019/10/24/no-obliteration-western-arms-embargo-has-little-impact-on-Türkiye-as-it-looks-east/>.

<sup>80</sup> Outzen, “Deals, Drones, and National Will,” 2021.

<sup>81</sup> “A Visual Explainer,” *International Crisis Group*, 2023.

<sup>82</sup> Nawras Jaff, “PUK and KDP: A New Era of Conflict,” *Washington Institute*, December 21, 2022. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/puk-and-kdp-new-era-conflict>.

<sup>83</sup> Mustafa Gurbuz, “Türkiye’s Ambitions in Iraq Play Out in Kirkuk,” *arabcenterdc.org*, October 3, 2023. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/puk-and-kdp-new-era-conflict>.

<sup>84</sup> Netjes and van Veen Henchman, “Rebel, Democrat, Terrorist,” 2021.

<sup>85</sup> Bilal Wahab, “The Rise and Fall of Kurdish Power in Iraq,” *Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP)*, Spring, 2023. <https://merip.org/2023/04/the-rise-and-fall-of-kurdish-power-in-iraq/>.

<sup>86</sup> Ranj Alaaldin, “Iran is Exploiting Divisions and U.S. Inaction in Iraqi Kurdistan,” *Foreign Policy*, September 29, 2023. <https://foreignpolicy-com/2023/09/29/iraq-iran-kurdistan-krp-puk-pmf-kdp/>.

decades of progress for U.S. Kurdish policy in Iraq with no clear political gain to offset.<sup>87</sup>

The fifth and final dynamic is the gradual diminution of U.S. rationale for supporting the PKK's Syrian franchise, as the *raison d'être* (ISIS) fades further from public consciousness. All U.S. authorities and funding for operations in Syria stem from the threat of ISIS.<sup>88</sup> Yet the Caliphate was removed in early 2019, and the concept of "enduring defeat" for an enemy that controls no territory and no longer launches major operations decreases over time, as domestic critics have noticed.<sup>89</sup> U.S. defense and policy experts generally recognize that the presence of U.S. forces in Syria - and thus their relationship with the PKK-affiliated YPG - has outlasted the ISIS-rooted justification.<sup>90</sup> As conflicts in Ukraine, Gaza, and elsewhere eclipse the ISIS campaign in Syria - and as the Islamic State itself shifts operational focus to Africa - the link between U.S. interests and the PKK in Syria has attenuated.<sup>91</sup> There may be valid reasons for the U.S. to keep troops in Syria - deterring Iran, constraining Russia, not giving Assad a free pass - but they have little to do with the legal and strategic rationale for partnering with the YPG and by extension the PKK, and cannot demonstrably provide returns worth the risk of antagonizing NATO ally Türkiye.

The aggregate effect of these five dynamics has been initial satisfaction of urgent counter-Islamic State goals followed by mounting complications and costs with no easy off-ramp. U.S. assistance increased YPG/PKK capabilities and political influence in Syria and Iraq, but these were reduced in turn by Turkish offensives against what Ankara perceived as an emerging "terror corridor."<sup>92</sup> The operational capabilities and reach of PKK forces plateaued, and they have lost considerable territory, retaining far too little to be self-sustaining without U.S. support. A legacy ISIS movement survives in the prison camps and rural hinterlands of northeast Syria. Meanwhile, Iranian threats to U.S. allies in the Gulf and Israel have spilled over into threats on U.S. installations in Iraq and Syria.<sup>93</sup> In short, the PKK policy, enmeshed as it has been with Iraq and Syria policy, now represents an eroding position with increasingly shaky strategic logic and increasing risks.

## 6. Projected Scenarios out to 2030

The stalemate that emerged from evolving U.S. PKK policy, Turkish responses, geopolitical and other regional dynamics will persist until one or more significant variables change. A short list of variables with considerable potential to reshape dynamics might include the following:

<sup>87</sup> Amberin Zaman, "In a Letter to Biden, Barzani Warns of Iraqi Kurdistan's Collapse, Urges Mediation," *Al-Monitor*, September 12, 2023. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/09/letter-biden-barzani-warns-iraqi-kurdistan-collapse-urges-mediation>.

<sup>88</sup> Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), "Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve I Quarterly Report to the United States Congress I January 1, 2023 – March 31, 2023," *Department of Defense of Inspector General*, May 2, 2023. <https://www.dodig.mil/Reports/Lead-Inspector-General-Reports/Article/3380832/lead-inspector-general-for-operation-inherent-resolve-i-quarterly-report-to-the/>.

<sup>89</sup> Jonathan Guyer, "Why Are There Still American Troops in Syria?" *Vox.com*, June 15, 2023. <https://www.vox.com/world-politics/2023/6/15/23669622/syria-900-us-troops-forever-war-isis-assad>.

<sup>90</sup> Alexander Ward, Lara Seligman, and Lawrence Ukenye "What Are We Still Doing in Syria," *politico.com*, August 26, 2022. <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/national-security-daily/2022/08/26/what-are-we-still-doing-in-syria-00053898>.

<sup>91</sup> Katherine Zimmerman, "The State of Al-Qaeda and ISIS in 2023," *American Enterprise Institute*, September 11, 2003. <https://www.aei.org/articles/the-state-of-al-qaeda-and-isis-in-2023/>.

<sup>92</sup> Ozgur Korpe, "Framing Türkiye's Cross-Border Counterterrorism Operations in the Context of Pragmatic Strategic Culture: An Operational Analysis," *U.S. Army University Press*, September-October, 2021. <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/SO-21/korpe-Turkiye/korpe.pdf>.

<sup>93</sup> Dan Lamothe, "24 U.S. Troops Injured in Attacks Since Gaza War Began, Officials Say," *Washington Post*, October 24, 2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/10/24/us-troops-attacked-syria-iraq-israel-hamas-gaza/>.

- Fundamental shift in U.S. Syria policy toward withdrawal of forces and ending the YPG proxy relationship (possibly after the 2024 Presidential elections)
- Failure of SDF/YPG control over northeast Syria as a result of actions by Sunni tribal groups, Assad regime forces, Iranian proxy forces, or Turkish forces
- A significant incident involving U.S. casualties in Syria
- A political deal between Damascus and the YPG/PYD
- A return to negotiations between the Turkish government and PKK
- Emergence of a stable governance model in northeast Syria that achieves legitimacy with Arab tribes, non-YPG/PYD Kurds, the KDP, and Ankara.

The last three of these six appear implausible as of early 2024. There have been multiple rounds of negotiations between the YPG and Damascus, but no indication that Assad has any intention of meeting the other side's demands.<sup>94</sup> Turkish security experts have made clear that there is no current or projected appetite in Ankara for renewed political dialogue with the PKK movement.<sup>95</sup> As for reform of the AANES into something more palatable and pluralistic, precious few observers who know the YPG/PYD first hand believe that it can or will share power in any substantive way.<sup>96</sup>

The first three all are plausible, and each would likely lead to the end of the status quo altogether and collapse of the AANES. President Trump tried to pull out of Syria twice, and will likely mount a third attempt should he win election in 2024 - and other Republican candidates may do the same.<sup>97</sup> Arab uprisings against the Kurdish-dominated AANES and SDF in 2023 did not fundamentally damage YPG control, but may escalate in the future.<sup>98</sup> Absent an explicit strategic or political goal for the current U.S. deployment in support of the YPG, it is hard to imagine that it would continue if significant casualties are incurred.<sup>99</sup> The bad news for Washington is that all of these plausible changes would mark the collapse of its current Syria and ISIS strategies. The silver lining is that they would also remove the de facto subsidy to an FTO (the broader PKK movement,) and remove a key irritant in bilateral relations with Ankara.

Depending on how these variables play out in the coming months and years, several scenarios are possible for the U.S. presence in Syria and the related impact of U.S. PKK policy on the U.S.-Türkiye relationship. The first would be a deliberate reduction in U.S. presence and support to the YPG accompanied by negotiations with Ankara, YPG leadership, and (indirectly) Damascus to achieve a *modus vivendi* that reduces the likelihood of new military actions by any of them in northern Syria. Ankara has already been in touch with Damascus to discuss acceptable parameters for such a process.<sup>100</sup> A second scenario would be an abrupt collapse of the AANES and departure of U.S. forces without such an arrangement.

<sup>94</sup> Rodi Said, "Syrian Kurds Seek Damascus Deal Regardless of U.S. Moves," *Reuters.com*, January 4, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-kurds-idUSKCN1OY1ET>.

<sup>95</sup> Burhanettin Duran, "Can They Dare Call for a New Kurdish Opening?" *Daily Sabah*, July 15, 2022. <https://www.setav.org/en/can-they-dare-for-a-new-kurdish-opening/>.

<sup>96</sup> Mohammed Hassan, "How Have the AANES Policies Contributed to the Resurgence of ISIS?" *Middle East Institute*, May 5, 2021. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/how-have-aaness-policies-contributed-resurgence-isis>.

<sup>97</sup> Aaron David Miller, Eugene Rumer and Richard Sokolsky, "What Trump Actually Gets Right About Syria," *politico.com*, October 18, 2019. <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/10/18/trump-syria-türkiye-kurds-news-analysis-229858/>.

<sup>98</sup> Wladimir Van Wilgenburg, "Syria: SDF Fights Rival Arab Tribes for Control of Deir Ezzor," *Middle East Eye*, September 5, 2023. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-deir-ezzor-sdf-fights-arab-tribes-control>.

<sup>99</sup> Lolita Baldor, "A Look at the U.S. Military Mission in Syria and its Dangers," *apnews.com*, March 24, 2023 <https://apnews.com/article/syria-us-troops-drone-attack-6194dca97f594e3609914637463c4ce3>.

<sup>100</sup> Amer Ababakr, "In the Background of Ankara's Opening to Damascus," *modern diplomacy.eu*, December 11, 2022 <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2022/12/11/in-the-backgrounds-of-ankaras-opening-to-damascus/>.



A third scenario would be success in the U.S. experiment to forge a form of “Kurdish unity” that anchors the AANES to the KRG.<sup>101</sup> A final scenario would be the continuation of the current status quo - U.S. amid deteriorating political conditions and increasing Iranian-backed pressure in both Syria and Iraq. The latter seems analogous to U.S. relations with the Sahwa (Arab Uprising) forces in Iraq in from 2008-2011 and to Afghan forces from 2017-2021 - support of military forces within the context of a diminishing strategic logic.

Under the most likely scenarios, the YPG - and thus the broader PKK movement - will retain residual sympathy in Washington, and some level of military support, in the coming years. Consequently, deep mistrust between US and Turkish policy elites will likely also continue. Ankara will continue to feel a need to balance and hedge against U.S. approaches in Iraq and especially in Syria, hindering collaboration in stabilizing the region and in broader strategic cooperation.

## 7. Conclusion

The foregoing analysis has established that U.S. PKK policy has negatively influenced bilateral relations, leading both to low trust in Ankara and consequent Turkish policy responses that erode trust and sympathy in Washington, as well. The trajectory of this policy over the periods examined has undermined faith in mutual security commitments, and contributed to a highly transactional bilateral relationship with little “feel” of a sincere alliance. This fundamental problem of coordination and cooperation persists to the present day.

A second central finding is that U.S. policy has lacked cohesion or unity of principle over time. During each period of U.S. policymaking with regard to the PKK, there has been a degree of pragmatism that makes each incremental decision or shift understandable on its own terms. Taken as a whole however, the shifts comprise a pattern of inconsistency that undermines long-term interests such as alliance solidarity and conflict resolution. The U.S. has conducted a Global War on Terror, meticulously maintains a list of Foreign Terror Organizations (FTOs), and routinely adds terror designations for those related to FTOs in a secondary or sometimes tertiary manner. Yet it has shown a willful ignorance regarding the palpable - and regionally acknowledged - intimate connections between the YPG/PYD and the broader PKK movement. This mindset has not upheld the U.S. policy position anywhere but in Washington - it is generally perceived by Turks, Kurds, Arabs and others as a proverbial wink and nod at its own terror listings. More broadly speaking, the variability of the U.S. approach to the PKK over time *in the context of an alliance relationship* may give reason for U.S. partners and treaty allies to doubt the sincerity of U.S. security guarantees. The U.S. has walked away from allies in Afghanistan and convinced Mideast allies it is ambivalent to the Iran threat, but the maneuvering regarding the PKK predates both of these as an indication that it protects allies at its own convenience.

A third conclusion that emerges from the analysis is that time, so to speak, favors the Turks. The growth of Turkish power projection capability and defense industrial resources, coupled with a shift in Turkish strategic culture towards a more independent and autonomous mode, has lowered the barriers and costs associated with Turkish action against the PKK. The growing network of Turkish defense and security partners, plus Ankara’s leverage within NATO, greatly reduces the threat of international pressure against Türkiye to soften

<sup>101</sup> Sirwan Kajjo, “Prospects for Syrian Kurdish Unity: Assessing Local and Regional Dynamics, Policy Note No. 86,” *Washington Institute*, October, 2020. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/3879>.

its approach to the PKK. With the U.S. seeking to avoid wars and military commitments in the Middle East, the tenuous position of the PKK regionally - and the YPG/PYD in Syria specifically - will likely become more acute over time. Policy returns for the U.S. seem destined to shrink and turn negative.

A major caveat pertains to these conclusions. The PKK/YPG/PYD is not the only problem in the bilateral relationship. U.S. policy decisions regarding the group have had a clear negative impact on bilateral relations, but there are other issues. From the Turkish side, these include U.S. Mideast policy, especially regarding Israel and Palestine; U.S. failure to expel or prosecute Fethullah Gülen for his alleged role in the coup attempt of 2016; a de facto arms embargo reinforced by anti-Turkish lobbies in Washington; and a general failure to recognize Türkiye as an equal partner. For Washington, concerns over Turkish animosity with Israel and Greece, the perceived democratic deficit in Türkiye, and the view in Congress that Erdoğan's Türkiye has become generally anti-Western contribute to the lack of trust. Even if the respective views and approaches to the PKK became more compatible, these other frictions would remain.

Yet no issue mobilizes the Turkish public, and Ankara's policy elites, quite like U.S. support for the PKK. For scholars of policy and international relations, as for practitioners, it is important to understand the centrality and durability of this issue to bilateral relations. It presents a unique and thorny case for scholars working to understand low-trust relationships, transactionalism, and incrementalism in foreign policy. For the respective policy communities in Washington and Ankara, the analysis presented in this paper may provide context, framing, and assessment of dynamics helpful in managing further evolution of U.S. PKK policy. A shift from policy incrementalism to non-incremental change - in this case, a shift back away from PKK-tolerance or instrumentalization - is more likely in later stages of a policy "life cycle," and the Syria/ISIS policy may well be in such territory.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Michael T. Hayes, "A Realist Case for Incrementalism," in *Incrementalism and Policymaking in the USA*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2023), 13-26.

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## Turkey and the US in the Middle East: A Case for Alliance Change

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### Abstract

*Turkey-US relations in the Middle East have evolved significantly in recent years. Initially based on shared threat perceptions and strategic outlooks during the Cold War, the alignment became characterized by divergences on some issues after the Gulf War in 1991. Their relationship in the Middle East has even become hostile in recent years. Turkey's increased regional aspirations and evolving threat perceptions in the Middle East, framed within an ontological security narrative, have strained bilateral ties. This shift is compounded by divergent worldviews influenced by domestic political changes in both countries. Despite these challenges, the alliance persists within NATO, albeit with complexities arising from the interplay of external pressures and internal dynamics. This article explores these dynamics using a Neoclassical Realist framework to explain how Ankara's evolving threat perceptions and ontological security concerns have reshaped Turkey-US relations in the Middle East amid changing global and regional contexts.*

**Keywords:** Turkey-US relations, Middle East, Neoclassical Realism, alliance change, threat perceptions

### 1. Introduction

The Middle East has always been an important factor in Turkey-US relations. Yet, its role and meaning have evolved over time. Turkey-US relations have two dimensions, albeit at times interrelated: a multilateral one within NATO, and a bilateral one. Although the Middle East sometimes factored into the multilateral dimension of the relationship, primarily in the 1950s, especially since the end of the Cold War, the region has progressively turned into an independent factor in their bilateral relations. As the Cold War ended, the Middle East became important for both Turkey and the US, not so much as an extension of global politics but as a region of its own, presenting its own opportunities and threats. Although in this new context the two allies have been trying since the 1990s to cooperate on Middle East issues and manage their alliance, the increasing divergence of interests and worldviews has begun to erode their bilateral relations in the current century.

This article focuses on Turkey-US bilateral relations in the Middle East and how this alliance relationship has evolved from a “strategic partnership” in the 1990s to a state of mutual distrust and threat perception, especially since the 2010s. Despite not always being aligned on every issue, Turkey and the US shared a common threat perception during the

Cold War. Even after the Cold War, they maintained a similar strategic outlook, particularly in those regions around Turkey experiencing significant transformation. For that reason, they chose to call their evolving relationship a “strategic partnership” in 1999 and as late as 2009.<sup>1</sup> Yet their bilateral relations in the Middle East have dramatically deteriorated since the 2010s. Thus, the article addresses how evolving threat perceptions and diverging ontological security narratives have influenced Turkey-US bilateral relations in the Middle East amidst shifting global and regional orders. This question highlights an important case of alliance change: despite the deterioration of their relations in the Middle East, their alliance within NATO continues. The article seeks to understand the changing nature of the alliance between Turkey and the US in the context of the Middle East by examining international systemic and unit-level variables. It is argued that the interaction of the external shifts and domestic transformations has facilitated an alliance change.

In analyzing alliance change, the article draws upon IR scholarship. Although alliance theory is highly developed in IR, most of the literature focuses on alliance formation and, to some extent, termination.<sup>2</sup> However, as Goh and Shashi claim, there is relatively little work on the “‘in-between’ questions: when and how alliances change in character or significance.”<sup>3</sup> The issue of alliance change is important in analyzing Turkey-US relations, mainly due to its complex character, which is based on the existence of a dual dimension in their relationship. Thus, although bilateral aspects have become increasingly problematic, the multilateral aspect continues--despite challenges--within one of the most successful collective security organizations, NATO. The issue of change and the co-existence of two dimensions in Turkey-US relations present challenges to alliance theory. This article attempts to deal with this challenge by using the Neoclassical Realist framework as a heuristic device, integrating systemic level changes with unit-level variables. It focuses on the question of how can the Neoclassical Realist framework help to explain the evolution of Turkey-US bilateral relations in the Middle East from a ‘strategic partnership’ to mutual distrust and threat perception while maintaining an overall alliance? In answering this question, it also acknowledges that there is more to do in understanding and explaining such in-between cases in which the multilateral alliance persists yet bilateral relations in a particular region become highly conflictual.

The article first develops a conceptual framework to understand and explain the change in the Turkey-US alliance in the Middle East. It then focuses on the historical foundations of the relationship, analyzing the nature of the relations during the Cold War when the multilateral dimension was relatively dominant. Finally, the changes in the bilateral relationship are analyzed in the last section by focusing on the 1990s and 2000s, when the Middle East progressively became the relationship’s focal point.

<sup>1</sup> “Remarks by the President in Address to the Turkish Grand National Assembly,” November 15, 1999, accessed date November, 2023. <https://clintonwhitehouse4.archives.gov/WH/New/html/19991115.html>; “Joint Statement by Turkey and the United States of America on the Occasion of the Visit of US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton upon the invitation of Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey Ali Babacan,” *Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, March 7., accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/joint-statement-by-turkey-and-the-united-states-of-america-on-the-occasion-of-the-visit-of-us-secretary-of-state-hillary-rodham-clinton-upon-the-invitation-of-minister-of-foreign-affairs-of-turkey-ali-babacan.en.mfa>

<sup>2</sup> Stephan Walt, *Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Evelyn Goh and Ryo Shashi, “Worldviews on the United States, Alliances, and the Changing International Order: An Introduction,” *Contemporary Politics* 26, no. 4 (2020): 372.



## 2. Conceptual Framework

One can extrapolate the causes of change in alliances from the explanations of alliance formation. The most prominent explanations of alliance formation have been developed by the realist school of IR. According to these explanations, also called capabilities aggregation models, states ally to improve their security. They do so either by balancing power<sup>4</sup> or threat.<sup>5</sup> Especially the balance of threat explanation can be useful in explaining the change in alliances; thus, it can be argued that if the allies do not share a common threat or the magnitude of the threat decreases, this will lead to a change in the alliance. In the case of Turkey-US relations, for instance, the disintegration of the Soviet Union clearly had an impact on their alliance. The distinction between multilateral and bilateral dimensions in their relations, however, becomes once again important here: although the disintegration of the Soviet Union did not have a complete negative impact on Turkey's membership in NATO due to the fact that NATO membership provides other benefits to Turkey, it has led to a general deterioration of the bilateral alliance. This is particularly important in the Middle East as the two sides' threat perceptions and, thus, strategic priorities started to diverge. Therefore, for this article, the shift in the international system and, thus, the removal of the common threat perception that led to the alliance to start with, constitutes the general framework of change in the alliance, specifically in the Middle East.<sup>6</sup> But it does not by itself explain why this did not lead to the deterioration of the alliance in the 1990s and early 2000s as Turkey and the US cooperated on different issues, and again, it fails to account for the deterioration of bilateral relations since the 2010s. For that reason, one needs to focus on other variables.

The other group of explanations in alliance formation rely on what may be called domestic determinants.<sup>7</sup> Here, the argument is that, ultimately, who is a threat is determined domestically and thus is a function of different factors such as identity, ideology, and regime type. Therefore, one can extrapolate arguments for alliance change from domestic-level explanations and claim that the alliances may change and weaken if there are divergences of ideology and identity or overall worldviews between allies. Of course, regime change can also be seen as a factor leading to a change or even more to the termination of an alliance,<sup>8</sup> as happened between the US and Iran after the Iranian Revolution. In the case of change in the Turkey-US alliance in the Middle East, several domestic factors can be cited: changes in domestic politics in the 1960s and 1970s or divergences of worldviews with the AKP. In the 1960s and 1970s, the questioning of Turkey's alliance with the US and even in NATO occurred in the context of the rise of fringe parties on the right and the left, their representation in the parliament due to the change in the election system, and increasing public debates about foreign policy. Similarly, starting from the 1990s, the Kurdish issue and its ups and downs have been an important factor in how foreign and security policy elite have approached Turkey's alliance with the US. On the other hand, individual leaders such as Turgut Özal played an important role in improving Turkey-US relations, also in the Middle East, in the context of a transforming global and regional order. The AKP rule in Turkey has contributed

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> Walt, *Origins of Alliances*.

<sup>6</sup> Lenore Martin, "Constructing A Realistic Explanation of Turkish-US Relations," *Turkish Studies* 23, no. 5 (2022): 765-783.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Barnett and Jack Levy, "Domestic Sources of Alliances and Alignments: The Case of Egypt, 1962-73," *International Organization* 59, no. 4 (1991): 369-395.

<sup>8</sup> James D. Morrow, "Alliances and Asymmetry: An Alternative to the Capability Aggregation Model of Alliances," *American Journal of Political Science* 35, no. 4 (1991): 904-933; Randolph M. Siverson and Harvey Starr, "Regime Change and the Restructuring of Alliances," *American Journal of Political Science* 38, no. 1 (1994): 145-161.



to the changes in Turkey-US relations in the Middle East. Whether in cooperation or discord with the US, under the AKP, Turkey-US relations have become “games of strategy rather than partnership.”<sup>9</sup>

A third group of explanations, broadly Neoclassical Realism (NCR), aimed to introduce systemic and unit-level explanations, and argued that, ultimately, it is international systemic factors that lead to the formation and survival of alliances by providing incentives, thus creating permissive or restrictive strategic environments for states.<sup>10</sup> Yet, these incentives were understood and evaluated through the domestic intervening variables.<sup>11</sup> Although which domestic variables are to be included still remains fuzzy, the list includes leadership and public opinion, among others.<sup>12</sup> This article will focus on the worldviews of leaders and the nature of domestic coalitions as the most significant domestic variables.<sup>13</sup> The NCR has been criticized for trying to reconcile the irreconcilable and still giving priority to the systemic variables.<sup>14</sup> More significantly for this study, NCR also reproduces a distinction between the external and the internal. Much of Turkey-US relations in the context of the Middle East, for instance, the increasing importance of the Kurdish issue, make it impossible to continue this distinction. Despite such limitations, the NCR is still considered useful for the analysis of this topic for two reasons: 1) it provides a framework to incorporate systemic and domestic level variables; and 2) it suggests that “a state’s strategic environment (or security environment), defined as the magnitude of the external threats and opportunities it confronts at any given time, will have a more consequential impact on that state’s foreign and security policies than the polarity of the international system.”<sup>15</sup>

Focusing on the Middle East region in Turkey-US relations, this paper prioritizes the regional level. The importance of the regional level has been recognized in IR, especially after the end of the Cold War. For instance, Lake and Morgan<sup>16</sup> argue that with the end of bipolarity, “the regional level stands more clearly on its own as the locus of conflict and cooperation for states and as the level of analysis for scholars seeking to explore contemporary security affairs.” However, this article aims to demonstrate that the regional level has always been important in Turkey-US relations. Therefore, being aware of its limitations, this study will use NCR as a heuristic device to understand and explain the change in Turkey-US relations in the Middle East and thus Turkey-US alliance since the Cold War years.

<sup>9</sup> Ahmet K. Han, “From ‘Strategic Partnership’ to ‘Model Partnership’: AKP, Turkish-US Relations and the Prospects under Obama,” in *Turkish Foreign Policy: Old Problems, New Parameters*, ed. Mustafa Aydın (Madrid: UNISCI, 2010), 148.

<sup>10</sup> Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, “The Neoclassical Realist Research Paradigm and Its Independent Variable,” in *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 33-58.

<sup>11</sup> Gideon Rose, “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,” *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 144-172; Randall L. Schweller, “The Progressiveness of Neoclassical Realism,” in *Progress in International Relations Theory: Appraising the Field*, eds. Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 311-349; Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Lobell et al., *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy*.

<sup>14</sup> Kevin Narizny, “On Systemic Paradigms and Domestic Politics: A Critique of the Newest Realism,” *International Security* 42, no. 2 (2017): 155-190.

<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Defending Frenemies: Alliances, Politics and Nuclear Nonproliferation in US Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 38.

<sup>16</sup> David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan, *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World* (Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 1997), 6.



### 3. Historical Foundations: The Cold War Years

One of the arguments of this article is that the Middle East dimension has been present in Turkey-US relations since the Cold War years. However, its meaning and impact on the relationship changed during the course of the Cold War due to shifts in the global and regional levels as well as domestic developments in Turkey. In that respect, the Cold War years are divided into three sub-periods with different global, regional, and domestic dimensions that were reflected in Turkey-US relations.

#### 3.1 Immediate post-WWII Era: the overriding impact of global politics

In the immediate post-WWII period, Turkey's geopolitical place as "a bulwark against Soviet expansionism" in the Middle East and the eastern Mediterranean constituted the core of US interest in Turkey. The initial debate between the US and the UK, however, was whether this objective could be achieved via Turkey's active participation in a Middle East-centered security arrangement, a project that was especially favored by Britain.<sup>17</sup> Eventually, due to Turkey's insistence and the US's shifting perspective, Turkey became a member of NATO in 1952.<sup>18</sup> Yet the Middle East dimension did not disappear in Turkey-US relations. From the US's point of view, from the beginning, the value of its alliance with Turkey also included the Middle East. The US policymakers believed that Turkey, due to its geographical location between the Soviet Union and the Middle East, was crucial also in containing the Soviet influence in the eastern Mediterranean and the oil-rich Gulf. Therefore, in justifying Turkey's and Greece's membership in NATO, the US and the UK claimed that "the security of the whole Middle East would be jeopardized if Russia gained control of either Greece or Turkey, which would in turn jeopardize the security of the west as well."<sup>19</sup> In its support of Turkey's membership in NATO, the US administration often argued that "Turkish troops are the only ones (immediately available) for land defense," and that these troops were "located where they can be best utilized for Middle East defense, i.e. at the northern mountain line."<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, it is also argued that "with large efficient training schools organized with JAMMAT<sup>21</sup>" Turkey was in a unique position to "provide military training for Middle Eastern countries and [is] as a matter of policy willing to do so," and also "in a position to sell arms to the Middle Eastern states."<sup>22</sup>

More significantly, the idea that Turkey's cultural identity would be useful and that Turkey, which would become a member of NATO, could serve as a bridge with the Middle East, emerged even then. In a memo written by the State Department in 1950, American diplomats were asked to "[e]ncourage Turkey, which is able to understand and interpret Western views, to take a more active interest in promoting closer relations with the Middle East neighbors and to assume a role of leadership among the Moslem states."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Ayşegül Sever, *Soğuk Savaş Kuşatmasında Türkiye, Batı ve Orta Doğu (1945-1958)* [Turkey, the West, and the Middle East in the Cold War Siege] (Istanbul: Boyut Yayınları, 1997).

<sup>18</sup> Turkey also became a very active member of the British-designed Baghdad Pact, which became highly unsuccessful and eventually dissolved after the overthrow of the monarchy in Iraq, the only Arab member of the Pact.

<sup>19</sup> "Foreign Relations, Vol. 5, p. 260," *U.S. Department of State - The National Archives*, 1950, accessed date November, 2023. <http://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/059.html>

<sup>20</sup> "Foreign Relations, Vol. 9, p. 202," *U.S. Department of State - The National Archives*, 1952-54, accessed date November, 2023. <http://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/059.html>

<sup>21</sup> The Joint American Military Mission to Aid Turkey was a military modernization program established as part of the containment of the Soviet Union in the context of the Truman Doctrine.

<sup>22</sup> "Foreign Relations, Vol. 9, p. 202."

<sup>23</sup> "Foreign Relations, Vol. 5, p. 260."

Turkey accepted this role within the alliance and, especially in the 1950s, became heavily involved in Middle East affairs. Just before becoming a member of NATO, in 1951, the Turkish government had already announced that it was ready to “take on a defense role in the Middle East if they were admitted to NATO.”<sup>24</sup> The Menderes government, which was in power in the 1950s, shared the perspective of the US administration that Turkey should play a role in supporting and protecting the interests of the Western bloc in the Middle East. The Menderes government indicated to US officials that Turkey could serve as a regional “locomotive,” that could drag Arab states towards the Western bloc.<sup>25</sup>

At the height of the Cold War, the Middle East region was going through its own regional Cold War, characterized by fierce competition and, at times, rivalry between Arab nationalist republics and conservative monarchies.<sup>26</sup> Arabism was the dominant regional ideology and movement, leading up to regime changes in different countries while seriously challenging others. Like Washington, Ankara also failed to understand Arabism in its own right and mainly perceived it as a stooge of Soviet expansionism. Thus, Turkey and the US shared a common threat perception in the region and adopted policies to contain it. This was also in line with Turkey’s policymakers’ worldview, which was anti-Soviet and anti-communist.

Throughout this decade, Turkey became crucial in protecting Western interests, projecting US power in the region and containing the Soviet Union and Arab nationalist regimes. Ankara took the lead in establishing a pro-Western Baghdad Pact in 1955. In 1957, on the suspicion that a pro-Soviet group had taken power in Syria and that it had become a “Soviet satellite,” Democrat Party officials called for the enactment of the Eisenhower Doctrine to prevent Syria from turning into a communist country.<sup>27</sup> As the US and the UK eventually proved unwilling to engage in military involvement, Turkey went ahead with its own plans to apply military pressure on Syria, an undertaking that attracted an angry response from the Soviets. Following an urging by the US administration, Turkey de-escalated its military activities.<sup>28</sup> A similar scenario was at play one year later when Turkey considered military intervention in Iraq following the military coup in 1958 that toppled the monarchy in that country. Yet again, Turkey was dissuaded by the UK and the US from engaging in military action, given the risk of pushing Iraq into the arms of the Soviet Union and Egypt. At times when the US and Britain undertook military action in the Middle East, Turkey enthusiastically expressed support. For example, the Turkish Foreign Ministry announced “complete approval” of the US military intervention in Lebanon, hailing the operation “as an effort to prop up the Lebanese government against the subversive activities of external forces,” and allowing the use of Incirlik airbase in the intervention.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Britain’s deployment of troops to Jordan in 1958 also received approval from the Turkish Foreign Ministry, for whom the operation aimed to protect the legitimate government of Jordan. Prime Minister Menderes also expressed his contentment with these military interventions, saying Turkey was glad

<sup>24</sup> William Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy since 1774 - 3<sup>rd</sup> edition* (Routledge, 2002).

<sup>25</sup> Hüseyin Bağcı, *Demokrat Parti Dönemi Dış Politikası* [Foreign Policy of the Democrat Party Period] (Ankara: İmge Kitabevi Yayınları, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War, 1958-1967: A Study of Ideology in Politics - 2<sup>nd</sup> edition* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1967).

<sup>27</sup> Reem Abou al-Fadl, *Foreign Policy as Nation Making: Turkey and Egypt in the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 248-249.

<sup>29</sup> Irene Gendzier, *Notes from the Minefield: United States Intervention in Lebanon, 1945-1958* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).



that the Middle East had not been left to its fate.<sup>30</sup> Turkey also recognized Israel in 1949 and became part of the secret peripheral alliance of David Ben Gurion, and thus established strategic relations with Israel between 1958–1960/63.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, in the 1950s, Turkey’s policies in the Middle East were in line with those of the US. The US National Security Council Report in 1960 stated that “Turkey is of great importance in the US effort to build a position of strength in the Middle East.”<sup>32</sup>

Yet, Turkey’s activism in the Middle East in the 1950s sometimes went beyond Washington’s expectations and desires. This became clear during the crisis with Syria when Turkey backed down only with US pressure. Similar disputes seemed to convince the Menderes government “that the United States preferred a far more modest role for Turkey in the Middle East.”<sup>33</sup> Washington was indeed unhappy with what it perceived as Turkey acting to extend its own influence rather than limiting itself to advance the interests of the alliance: President Eisenhower complained privately in 1957 that DP ambitions went beyond “the job to be accomplished” (containing the Soviet Union within a NATO framework) and extended to a vision of Turkey as a regional power pursuing interests of its own.<sup>34</sup> Thus, as early as in the 1950s and at the height of the Cold War, a characteristic of Turkey’s relations with the US in the context of the Middle East emerged, that is, even when Turkey’s interests converged with the US in the region, as a regional power Turkey generally continued to have its own agenda as well.

## 2.2. 1960s-1970s: Reluctance to be active in the region

After the military overthrew the Menderes government, a major question for Washington was whether the new regime would continue to cooperate closely with the United States and NATO.<sup>35</sup> Raising this issue, the National Security Council (NSC) analysis in 1960 concludes that the new provisional government in Turkey would “likely continue its fundamental cooperation with the United States but is likely to be more independent than the previous government in assessing its own interests.”<sup>36</sup> In fact, in the 1960s and the 1970s, Turkey increasingly became less eager to support the US policies in the Middle East. For instance, during both the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars, Turkey refused to allow the US to use the bases and other facilities in Turkey to help Israel.<sup>37</sup> In fact, from then on, Turkey tried to separate its relations with the US from those with the Middle East as Turkish officials continued to declare the US and NATO facilities in Turkey would not be available for non-NATO military actions in the Gulf or elsewhere in the Middle East without prior Turkish approval.

These two decades were already being characterized by several crises in bilateral relations between Turkey and the US, starting with the Cuban Missile Crisis and culminating in the

<sup>30</sup> Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy*.

<sup>31</sup> Ofra Bengio, *The Turkish-Israeli Relationship: Changing Ties of Middle Eastern Outsiders* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Çağrı Erhan, *Türkiye-İsrail Diplomatik İlişkilerinin Kuruluşu* [Establishment of Turkey-Israel Diplomatic Relations] (Istanbul: Altınbaş Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2023).

<sup>32</sup> “379. National Security Council Report – NSC 6015/1,” *Department of the State – Office of the Historian*, October 5, 1960, accessed date November, 2023. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v10p2/d379>

<sup>33</sup> Malik Mufti, *Daring and Caution in Turkish Strategic Culture: Republic at Sea* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 35.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> “379. National Security Council Report – NSC 6015/1.”

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Ayşe Ömür Atmaca, “The Geopolitical Origins of Turkish-American Relations: Revisiting the Cold War Years,” *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace* 3, no. 1 (2014): 26.

Cyprus issue. From Turkey's perspective, the Cyprus issue, which erupted in 1963, began to dramatically influence Turkish foreign policy, and the lack of support from Turkey's Western allies led to some rethinking about Turkey's partnerships. Thus, during this period, Turkey began to work to improve its relations with other regions, including the Arab world. On the US side, Turkey's reluctance to be active in the Middle East, as well as Washington's shifting relations with the Soviet Union and its other Middle Eastern allies, decreased Turkey's importance. After all, for the main theatre, that is, Western Europe, Turkey's strategic importance was rather limited as a country located on the far south-eastern flank. Thus, up until the 1980s, relations between Turkey and the US became limited, particularly after the US imposed an arms embargo on Turkey from 1974–1980.

Overall, the changing global and regional context and domestic transformations in Turkey played an important role in changes in Turkey-US relations in the Middle East in the 1960s and 1970s. These two decades were characterized by détente between the two superpowers, and thus, the urgency and the magnitude of the threat began to decline. In addition, the oil crisis of 1973-74 ushered in an intense global economic crisis and increased the importance of Arab oil producer states in many countries' foreign policy calculations. In the meantime, regional politics shifted from Arabism to "political petrolism," where the influence of Arab nationalist regimes began to progressively decline in regional politics after the Six-Day War in 1967, and the influence of conservative oil monarchies began to rise. All these developments decreased the sense of urgency of threats emanating from the Middle East, both in Ankara and Washington. Domestically, after the 1960 military coup, the adoption of the new constitution and election law opened up the domestic political space to varying viewpoints, and intense discussions about foreign policy including the questioning of relations with the US, started to take place.<sup>38</sup> Finally, in the 1970s, the internal strife between leftist and rightist groups, called the "anarchy period," led to enormous instability in the country; Turkey became much more inward-looking, and its activism in the Middle East became much more limited. Due to all these reasons, the US, with its "twin pillars policy," began to rely on its other allies, Saudi Arabia and Iran, rather than Turkey, to support its objective of "deradicalization" in the Middle East.

### 2.3. The 1980s: the emergence of limited cooperation in the region

With the beginning of the so-called Second Cold War in the 1980s, Washington wanted to renew its strategic cooperation with Turkey. This occurred due to developments in the Middle East and the Reagan administration's concerns about protecting the US position in this region, which was regarded as vital to US interests. The first challenge came with the fall of the Shah in 1979, the so-called military pillar, and the establishment of an anti-American regime in Iran. Washington not only lost a reliable ally but also feared initially that Soviet-backed forces might take advantage of the revolutionary turmoil in that country. Furthermore, shortly after the fall of the Shah, in February 1979, a border war broke out between South and North Yemen. As there was a pro-Soviet government in the South, this was considered yet another threat to US interests in the Gulf. Washington, in response, sent arms to North Yemen and stationed a carrier task force off the South Yemeni coast.<sup>39</sup> Finally, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1980 confirmed to Washington that the Soviets were

<sup>38</sup> Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy*, 104-106.

<sup>39</sup> John E. Peterson, *Defending Arabia* (London: Croom Helm, 1986).



threatening the Gulf. US President Jimmy Carter stated that “[t]he Soviet effort to dominate Afghanistan has brought Soviet military forces to within 300 miles of the Indian Ocean and close to the Straits of Hormuz.”<sup>40</sup> The US response was what came to be known as the Carter Doctrine, announced by the President during his State of the Union address in January 1980: any “assault on the vital interests” of the US in the Gulf region by an outside force “will be repelled by the use of any means necessary including military force.”<sup>41</sup> In order to implement this policy, the formation of a rapid deployment joint task force (RDF) was announced.

The Reagan administration, which came to power in 1981, further increased the US military presence in the region. The new policy, “strategic consensus,” aimed to enlist the support of the regional countries, including Turkey, Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Oman, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, to cooperate with the US against “the common Soviet threat” in the Middle East. Thus, once again, due to the increasing threat perception of Washington from the Soviet Union in the Middle East, the strategic importance of Turkey increased as it was seen as a base for operations in the Gulf and eastern Mediterranean. These developments coincided with a military coup in Turkey on 12 September 1980. The army seemed to share the concerns and threat perceptions of the US in the region. A study published by the Turkish General Staff in 1980 referred to an “aggressive Soviet expansion strategy” and the necessity to demonstrate the “will and effort” to resist it.<sup>42</sup> As a result, security relations with the US deepened. The commander-in-chief of Allied Forces Southern Europe, Admiral William Crowe, explained Turkey’s importance for the US’s strategic interests in the context of the Middle East in the 1980s:

Turkey sits on the flank of any Soviet thrust into Iran or the Gulf and is the only alliance nation which is Muslim and geographically located in the Middle East. No Western or Soviet planner can address the Middle East challenge without considering Turkey’s orientation, terrain, airspace forces, and bases.<sup>43</sup>

Although Turkey shared the threat perception with the US, unlike in the 1950s, this time it acted more cautiously by refusing to commit itself formally to the defense of the Gulf through RDF but rather preferring to develop its bilateral ties with the USA by signing the Defense and Economic Cooperation Agreement (DECA) on 29 March 1980.<sup>44</sup> In parallel, NATO also changed its guidelines for out-of-area operations in May 1982 and emphasized the strategic importance of the Middle East, which meant increasing the importance of Turkey as NATO’s only member in the region.<sup>45</sup>

Therefore, during the Cold War, the Turkey–US alliance had a Middle Eastern dimension. The US interest in Turkey was partly related to preventing Soviet encroachment into this region, but it went beyond that as well. From Washington’s point of view, Turkey’s geopolitical significance was derived from its location, mainly geographically but also ideationally. After all, Turkey was the only Muslim nation in NATO. In this general context, Turkey-US relations in the Middle East shifted during the Cold War years, based on changes in the international and regional system (such as detente, the Second Cold War, or the Iranian

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<sup>40</sup> William S. Slany, *American Foreign Policy Basic Documents, 1977-1980* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 1983), 55.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Mufti, *Daring and Caution*, 54.

<sup>43</sup> Ömer Karasapan, “Turkey and the US strategy in the Age of Glasnost,” *Middle East Report* 19, no. 5 (1989): 8-9.

<sup>44</sup> Ali L. Karaosmanoğlu, “Turkey’s Security and the Middle East,” *Foreign Affairs* 62, (1983): 157-175.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*



Revolution) or due to domestic factors in the US (mainly the influence of the US Congress and the lobbies as well as the changes in the presidency) and Turkey (mainly political and economic changes, changes in governments and coup d'états').

Nevertheless, overall, during the Cold War, Turkey and the US largely shared similar perspectives and strategic outlooks on the Middle East. The 1950s represented the decade when Washington and Ankara saw mostly eye-to-eye in the region, and Turkey became instrumental in protecting the Western bloc's interests there. From the 1960s onwards, Turkish governments, sometimes unsuccessfully, tried to separate the Turkey-US alliance from Turkey's relations with the Middle East, whereas at other times, they tried to use Turkey's location "as a bridge between the West and the Middle East" as an asset to the Western bloc. General crises in the alliance were reflected in their bilateral relations in the Middle East. Thus, the overall dynamics of the Turkey-US alliance in the Middle East were affected by systemic developments. However, these developments acquired a meaning through domestic politics and thus affected Turkey's foreign policy. The leaders' worldviews, in general, prioritized the overall Soviet threat and anti-communism throughout the Cold War years. Yet shifts in domestic politics, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, and the rise of smaller parties on the left and the right, and the polarization of politics had repercussions on Turkey's foreign policy and its relations with the US. Overall, due to changes in the international and regional system as well as domestic politics, Turkey's foreign policy had become more diversified. The real shifts in Turkey-US relations in the Middle East, however, began to increasingly appear after the end of the Cold War.

### 3. The recent period: Transformation of Turkey-US Relations in the Middle East

The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the end of bipolarity opened up a new era in Turkey's US relations. These developments meant, at least initially, the disappearance of international systemic logic in the relationship based on varying degrees of Soviet threat, a factor that also had a bearing on Turkey's relations with the US in the Middle East. Thus, bilateral relations started to be conditioned more on regional issues, including the Middle East, which not only provided new partnership opportunities but also increased divergence of interests.<sup>46</sup>

#### 3.1. The 1990s: The emergence of strategic partnership with a twist

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was a cluster of shocks due to the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the Gulf Crisis of 1990-1991. The Gulf Crisis was initially seen as an opportunity by President Turgut Özal to increase Turkey's strategic importance for the US after the end of bipolarity. Thus, he engaged in intense dialogue with President George Bush and tried to play an active role in the US-led coalition.<sup>47</sup> Eventually, Turkey could only become part of the war effort indirectly as Özal faced opposition to a more direct involvement, even from his own party.

In any case, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and the subsequent war against Iraq by the US-led coalition marked the beginning of a new era in regional politics. After the war, the US engaged in an effort to create a new Middle East order as part of a new global

<sup>46</sup> Kemal Kirişçi, "US-Turkish relations: New Uncertainties in a Renewed Partnership," in *Turkey in World Politics: An Emerging Multiregional Power*, eds. Barry Rubin and Kemal Kirişçi, (Istanbul: Bogaziçi University Press, 2002), 169.

<sup>47</sup> Murat Yetkin, *İyi Günler Bay Başkan: Körfez Savaşı'nda Özal-Bush Görüşmeleri* [Good Days Mr. President: Özal-Bush Talks during the Gulf War] (Istanbul: Doğan Yayınları, 2022).



order which was characterized by unipolarity. The elements of this new regional order were going to be based first and foremost on an Arab-Israeli peace process and, thus, integration of Israel into the region, in parallel with multilateral regional processes that would bring a more economically integrated and peaceful region. It was also based on the dual containment policy, which aimed to contain both Iraq and Iran, that were seen as the spoilers of a new Middle East order. In the meantime, the 1990s witnessed extensive military involvement of the US in the region, not only to continue the post-war regime that was imposed on Iraq but also to militarily support the new regional order.

Turkey's position in this new order project was a mixed bag. Post-war developments in Iraq, especially the emergence of a region in northern Iraq which was no longer under the control of the central government but rather governed by two Iraqi Kurdish parties, created a sense of threat. Ankara was not only concerned about the PKK's use of this new region to launch attacks against Turkey but also about the possible division of Iraq and the emergence of a Kurdish state that could have an impact on Turkey's Kurdish problem. What is interesting about this new constellation is that despite its misgivings about US Iraq policy, Turkey continued to cooperate with Washington in sustaining the post-1991 war settlement in Iraq throughout the 1990s. Incirlik airbase in southern Turkey became crucial in the enforcement of the no-fly zone north of the 36th parallel. In return, Turkey obtained tacit US approval for its cross-border operations in pursuit of the PKK. However, the periodic renewal in the Turkish parliament of the mandate of Operation Provide Comfort (OPC), later renamed Operation Northern Watch (ONW), became a very contentious issue. On the one hand, it was an important card in the hands of Turkish policy-makers vis-a-vis the US and the Iraqi Kurdish groups. On the other hand, the Operation continued to stir debates as to its possible contribution to the establishment of a Kurdish state and the suspicions about the "real intentions of the US" in Iraq.<sup>48</sup> Despite several statements coming from Washington on the US commitment to the territorial integrity of Iraq, several Turkish politicians, opinion-makers and even, at times, government officials publicly doubted US commitment to that policy, implicitly suggesting that US policy aimed to create an independent Kurdish state.<sup>49</sup> Thus, the Operation came to exemplify the complexity of the issues related to northern Iraq in Turkey-US relations.

From the mid-1990s, Turkey began on occasions to openly dissent from US policy in Iraq. Overall, Turkey's policy towards Iraq, in general, was largely influenced by lingering suspicions and disappointments. Turkey's Iraq policy emphasized the political unity and territorial integrity of Iraq, while Ankara was all the more concerned that the US policy of containment was undermining that objective. In order to deal with these challenges, Turkey used several diplomatic and military policy avenues. On the military front, Turkey launched several incursions in northern Iraq and eventually established a military contingent there. Diplomatically, Ankara aimed to get the US to support its objectives. Turkey also established ties with the Iraqi Kurdish groups while at the same time building its relations with the Turkmens, the Iraqi Turkic community, as a counterweight to Kurdish influence.<sup>50</sup>

Beyond the Iraqi issue, however, Turkey continued to cooperate closely with the US in its

<sup>48</sup> Meliha Benli Altunışık, "The Middle East in Turkey-USA Relations: Managing the Alliance," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 15, no. 2 (2013): 162-163.

<sup>49</sup> Meliha Benli Altunışık, "Turkey's Iraq Policy: The War and Beyond," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 14, no. 2 (2006): 183-184.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

quest for a new regional order. Turkey supported the Arab-Israeli Peace Process and actively participated in the multilateral tracks. During this period, Turkey-Israel relations were first normalized, and then, they reached a level of strategic cooperation.<sup>51</sup> Although Turkey had its own interests in developing this relationship, it also fit well with the new US policy in the region. In fact, in the 1990s, Turkey and the US, together with Israel and, at times, Jordan engaged in several military exercises, especially in the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, the 1990s represented an important turning point in Turkey-US relations in the Middle East. On the one hand, the two sides named their relationship as a “strategic partnership,” thus elevating their bilateral relations. This was very important as the Turkish side was concerned about the future of bilateral relations and even the future of NATO in the context of the end of bipolarity. The strategic partnership meant that the two countries shared a similar strategic outlook, especially in regions around Turkey where there were significant transformations. They cooperated intensely in the Balkans, Central Asia, and the Caucasus. On the surface, they also cooperated in the Middle East. However, due to the developments in northern Iraq, the Turkey-US strategic partnership in the Middle East became like a fruit that looked healthy from the outside but started to rot from the inside. In that sense, the 1990s represented the beginning of a new era in Turkey-US relations in the Middle East where, for the first time, their interests began to diverge and sow seeds of distrust, especially on the part of Turkey. Changing threat perceptions in Ankara now focused on the Middle East as the main source of threat to its territorial integrity, not only due to the rise of Kurdish nationalism in the region but also the US’s involvement in Iraq. On the other hand, Turkey had several common interests with the US and was eager to cooperate with the only remaining superpower. This cooperation was also useful for signaling to Turkey’s foes in the region, such as Iran and Syria. Finally, Turkey’s cooperation with the US allowed Turkey room to maneuver in Iraq, establishing a limited military presence and engaging in hot pursuit of PKK terrorists. In any case, this decade ended with the capture of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1998 with the help of the US, a development which eased the threat perception in Ankara somewhat.

Therefore, Turkey-US relations in the Middle East were affected by global and regional systemic shifts in the 1990s. However, how these systemic shifts were interpreted differed. While Özal perceived opportunities in the shifts and thus a permissive strategic environment, the coalition governments that governed after his death and, more importantly, the increasingly influential military saw threats and thus a highly restrictive regional context. More significantly, threat perception was not just about external threats; it was also linked to the domestic Kurdish problem. Thus, the construction of an ontological threat emanating from the Middle East and the US involvement in Iraq began to have tremendous repercussions for Turkey-US relations in the Middle East.

### **3.2. The 2000s: From a rocky start to an increasing cooperation**

Regional politics underwent important changes due to the impact of the 11 September attacks on the US and following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. After including Iraq in its “war on terrorism,” the Bush administration sought to convince Ankara to cooperate with it to open

<sup>51</sup> Meliha Benli Altunışık, “Turkish-Israeli Rapprochement in the Post-Cold War Era,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 36, no. 2 (2000): 172-191.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*



a northern front in its planned invasion of Iraq. The immediate response by Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit of the three-party coalition government was to raise the difficulties of such a war and its possible negative fallout for Turkey, mainly, destabilizing the Kurdish issue and worsening the economic situation in the country.<sup>53</sup> Soon, due to intra-coalition differences on several issues, the prime minister called for an early election. As a result, the newly established Justice and Development Party (AKP) formed a majority government that found itself in the midst of urgent issues related to the upcoming war in Iraq and the continuing pressure of the US.

The new government engaged in negotiations with the US, and eventually, three Memoranda of Understanding, dealing with military, economic and political affairs, were signed.<sup>54</sup> In the meantime, deep divisions about the war among and within political parties, including the AKP, as well as among the foreign and security policymakers and the public, continued. In the end, the motion to allow Turkey's participation in the war in terms of both sending forces and receiving foreign forces was rejected on 1 March 2003 in the parliament. Thus, Turkey blocked the creation of a northern front. Of the 533 parliamentarians in session, 264 voted for the motion, 250 voted against it, and 19 abstained, leaving the motion just three votes short of a constitutionally mandated full majority. In addition to all the deputies of the opposition party, the People's Republican Party (CHP), 99 AKP deputies also voted against the motion.<sup>55</sup> The vote exposed the divisions within the AKP. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who still remained outside the parliament and yet, as the leader of the party, had extensive influence over the party and its constituency, avoided this subject publicly for a long time. Just two weeks earlier, in mid-February did he make an important speech in which he said that although morally he was against the war, they would do whatever was necessary, meaning cooperate with the US in this war, "in order to protect our national interests."<sup>56</sup> Yet this was not apparently enough to persuade all the AKP MPs.

The war started soon afterwards, and Ankara watched with dismay as the Iraqi Kurds became one of the US's main allies throughout the war in Iraq. Turkey-US relations, on the other hand, hit a new low after the so-called "hood incident." On 4 July 2003, 11 members of the Turkish Special Forces, part of the Turkish military contingent that had been stationed in northern Iraq since 1995, were apprehended by American troops in Sulaymaniyah, taken to Baghdad and finally freed a few days later. The whole ordeal, however, led to humiliation and anger in Turkey and created another crisis in Turkey-US relations. The Turkish chief of staff, Hilmi Özkök, said that the arrests led to the biggest crisis of confidence ever between Turkish and US forces. The joint Turkish-US fact-finding commission expressed regret that the unfortunate incident had occurred and decided to establish better coordination in Iraq.<sup>57</sup>

Thus, Iraq once again contributed to the problem of mistrust between the two allies. However, in due time, the AKP government was able to take several measures to repair its relations with Washington. In the Middle East context, this was done in two ways: First, as to the March 1 debacle, the government (and the US administration as well<sup>58</sup>) chose to blame

<sup>53</sup> Altunışık, "Turkey's Iraq Policy," 185.

<sup>54</sup> Turkey was promised six billion dollars in aid in addition to some 26 billion dollars in loan guarantees. The number of troops that the US wished to deploy through Turkey had been reduced to some 60,000. It was also agreed that some 40,000 Turkish troops would be deployed in northern Iraq alongside the USA. See, *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>58</sup> US Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, in an interview on Turkish television on 6 May 2003, said that the US was

“the old Turkey,” particularly the military, for this crisis. Furthermore, starting in 2008, the government began to normalize Turkey’s relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq by engaging the region politically and economically.<sup>59</sup> Thus, post-war political developments in Iraq as regards to the Kurdish region ceased to be a point of conflict with the US. Second, Turkey became highly active in two other policy elements of the “war on terrorism”: namely, participation in the war in Afghanistan, which was a NATO operation based on Article 5, by sending non-combat forces. As NATO’s only Muslim-majority country, Turkey’s participation was appreciated by Washington.<sup>60</sup> Second, there was a declaration of support for and participation in the US policy of “forward strategy of freedom” in the Middle East, which claimed to spread democracy in the region.<sup>61</sup> Overall, post-2003 regional politics were perceived as amenable by the AKP, which, for political, economic, and ideological reasons, was ready to play a more active role in regional politics. On the other hand, the US in the post-9/11 period favored Turkey, governed by a party regarded as post-Islamist, as a possible model for democracy in the Muslim world. Therefore, although the 2000s started with a clash between Turkey and the US over Iraq, eventually, global, regional, and domestic factors aligned to further their bilateral cooperation in the region.

In sum, the 2000s were again characterized by significant shifts in the global system after the 9/11 attacks on the US, and the regional system after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. This period also coincided with an important domestic shift. Thus, whether the developments in the international and regional system were seen as permissive or restrictive were very much dependent on domestic factors, particularly the leadership and its political and ideological outlook. The AKP, which was formed by a nucleus cadre that split from Turkey’s Islamist movement, the *National Outlook*, made foreign policy one of the cornerstones of its ideology and practice, and the Middle East has had a special place in the party’s quest to redefine and re-constitute Turkey’s domestic and international identity. This new vision of Turkey’s foreign policy toward the Middle East region started with criticism of traditional policy and its historical narrative. The “old era” republican foreign policy toward the Middle East was characterized by Turkey’s turning its back on the region, which signaled an ideological choice that favored a rupture with Turkey’s past. Thus, from the beginning, the worldview of the leadership of the AKP favored Turkey’s active and independent involvement in the Middle East. However, in its quest to consolidate itself domestically in its first decade, it used the shifting global system after 9/11 and the regional system post-2003 to strengthen its relations with the US in general and in the Middle East in particular.

### 3.3. Since the 2010s: Becoming Rivals in the Middle East?

The 2010–2011 Arab Uprisings were a major turning point for the whole region as they opened the way for intense competition among the regional powers vying for influence. Soon, the region became rife with civil wars, intensification of violence as well as military interventions by regional and international actors, and multi-layered and complex conflicts

disappointed with the Turkish military for not playing “a strong leadership role.” See, Çağrı Erhan and Efe Sivriş, “Determinants of Turkish-American Relations and Prospects for the Future,” *Insight Turkey* 19, no. 1 (2017): 100.

<sup>59</sup> Özlem Kayhan Pusane, “The Role of Context in Desecuritization: Turkish Foreign Policy towards Northern Iraq (2008-2017),” *Turkish Studies* 21, no. 3 (2020): 392-413.

<sup>60</sup> Jim Garamone, “NATO Deputy Stresses Alliance’s Dedication to Turkey,” *U.S. Department of Defense*, January 25, 2018, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1424345/>

<sup>61</sup> Çağrı Erhan, “Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative and Beyond,” *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs* 10, no. 3 (2005): 153-170.



where states and non-state actors engage in a myriad of shifting alliances.

These post-uprising developments exposed Turkey's limitations in its quest for regional leadership and its ability to influence events to its liking in the Middle East. Especially after the 2013 toppling of President Morsi in Egypt and the rapid evolution of the Syrian uprising into a prolonged civil war involving regional and extra-regional powers, Turkish political elites started to perceive developments in the Middle East as largely presenting new threats to Turkey's national security and regional aspirations. In the process, Turkey became directly involved, including militarily, in ongoing civil wars in Syria and Libya.

In the immediate aftermath of the Arab Uprisings, Turkey and the US cooperated in their positions of supporting the uprisings, although by then, the US was already redefining its relations with the Middle East and thus was not spearheading such policies. Yet, the leaders of both countries called Hosni Mubarak of Egypt to step down. Despite their initial reluctance, Turkey and the US were part of the NATO intervention in Libya. More significantly, they cooperated in the context of Syria, where both countries engaged in diplomatic and military pressures and assisted the opposition to garner a regime change.<sup>62</sup>

Yet, the level of cooperation started to change in 2013-2014 with the increasing radicalization of the opposition in Syria and eventually with the rise of ISIS. After that, the US began to focus its activities in Syria on defeating ISIS by forming an international coalition. The AKP government was slow to join this coalition and continued to focus its attention on the overthrowing of Bashar Assad. In the meantime, the US started to rely on the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing, the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), as part of the Obama Administration's doctrine of relying on surrogate warfare<sup>63</sup> to fight the war against ISIS on the ground. Thus, the PYD/YPG, a group that has organic links with the PKK, became an ally of the US, starting to receive military assistance in the form of training and arms. Furthermore, through its war with ISIS, the YPG expanded into new territory and thus succeeded in controlling a contiguous region in northern parts of Syria. Turkey has failed to convince the US to cut its support for and cooperation with the PYD/YPG and thus has been facing the reality of a US-supported Kurdish entity with links to the PKK along its southern border.

All this coincided with significant domestic developments in Turkey, such as the collapse of the Kurdish peace process (2014–2015) and the failed coup attempt in July 2016. After the failed coup, there have been clear shifts in AKP alliances, with the formation of the "People's Alliance" with the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), and changing of the political system to a presidential one with extensive powers given to the president.

As a result, domestic actors' perceptions of global and regional politics have begun to evolve in recent years. The AKP elite believes that in a transforming global context where the old-world order is disappearing, and a new post-Western order is emerging, Turkey cannot just rely on traditional alliances to pursue its national interests. This is especially true for the Middle East, where in Syria, Turkey perceives the US as not only threatening its interests but also its territorial integrity by supporting and arming the PYD/YPG. Therefore, in the context of transforming global order and the perceived US retrenchment from the region, as well as its alliance with the PYD/YPG, possibilities of Turkey-US alignment in the region have

<sup>62</sup> Christopher Philips, "Turkey's Syria Problem," *Public Policy Research* 9, no. 2 (2012): 137-140.

<sup>63</sup> Andreas Krieg, "Externalizing the Burden of War: the Obama Doctrine and US Foreign Policy in the Middle East," *International Affairs* 92, no. 1 (2016): 97-113.



become dimmer. Furthermore, as Turkey has started to launch several military operations into northern Syria and created a zone of military presence there, even the possibility of confrontation with the US increased. This was demonstrated by the shooting down in 2023 of an armed Turkish drones by the US in Syria, which allegedly came close to its troops.<sup>64</sup> Although the Turkish government tried to downplay the event to some extent, the tensions again increased after the Biden administration's statement that Turkey's military actions in northern Syria posed a threat to the security of both the region and the US. In response, President Erdoğan speaking at the Closing Ceremony of the Turkey-Africa Business and Economic Forum held at the Istanbul Congress Center said:

America's activities in this country, with the PKK's extensions in Syria, are an extraordinary threat to Turkey's national security. Are we not together with America in NATO? We are together. But did America shoot down our Armed Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV)? It did. How are we together with you in NATO? How can you do such a thing? There is a security problem between us. This statement is incompatible with the spirit of alliance and strategic partnership and encourages terrorist organizations to try to divide Syria.<sup>65</sup>

The divergences between Turkey and the US in the Middle East have recently expanded to the Palestinian conflict. Although this conflict has generally led to ups and downs in Turkey-Israel relations, the government chose to criticize the US directly in terms of its policy towards the ongoing Gaza war. Erdoğan in his speech at the Youth Foundation of Turkey (TÜGVA) Organization Meeting held at Beştepe National Congress and Culture Center asked, "Is it better for a country like America to establish peace or to add fuel to the fire?" Reacting to the US sending an aircraft carrier, Erdoğan said, "Where is America, where is Israel-Palestine? What are you doing there?"<sup>66</sup> Thus, the divergences between the two countries in the Middle East seem to be widening.

All this does not mean that there has been no cooperation between the two countries in the Middle East in recent years. For instance, despite its initial hesitance, Turkey joined more actively in the US-led coalition against ISIS and allowed the US' use of İncirlik airbase.<sup>67</sup> In fact, Turkey-US relations continue within the context of NATO. Turkey participates in the NATO mission in Iraq.<sup>68</sup> In November 2023, US B1-B Lancer bombers were deployed to İncirlik airbase as a deterrence against the widening of the Gaza war.<sup>69</sup> Yet, considering the history of Turkey-US relations in the context of the Middle East, it is safe to argue that divergences have largely dominated the bilateral relations. For the first time, both sides clearly framed each other as undermining their security objectives and even posing a threat to each other. Moreover, their worldviews began to diverge increasingly. These shifts in the

<sup>64</sup> "US shoot down Turkish drone flying near its troops in Syria," *The Guardian*, October 6, 2023, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/05/us-shoots-down-turkish-drone-syria>

<sup>65</sup> "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: ABD ile aramızda güvenlik sorunu var [President Erdogan: There is a security problem between us and the US]," *NTV*, October 13, 2023, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-abd-ile-aramizda-guvenlik-sorunu-var,QzwhTx5GPEiX7PoGpPAAvg>

<sup>66</sup> "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan'dan ABD'ye uçak gemisi tepkisi: Ne işin var senin orada? [President Erdoğan reacts to the US aircraft carrier: What are you doing there?]," *Oksijen*, October 12, 2023, accessed date November, 2023. <https://gazeteoksijen.com/turkiye/cumhurbaskani-erdogandan-abdye-ucak-gemisi-tepkisi-ne-isinin-var-senin-orada-191464>

<sup>67</sup> Jared Szuba, "US deploys B-1b bombers Turkey for 'long-planned' exercise amid Gaza war," *Al-Monitor*, November 1, 2023, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/11/us-deploys-b-1b-bombers-turkey-long-planned-exercise-amid-gaza-war>

<sup>68</sup> Meliha Benli Altunışık, "Promoting Turkey-EU Cooperation in Iraq: Challenges and Prospects," in *Tackling Uncertainty: Turkish-EU Foreign Policy Cooperation in the Middle East and North Africa*, eds. Andrea Dessi, Senem Aydın-Düzgüt, and Daniela Huber (Rome: IAI, 2022), 52.

<sup>69</sup> "U.S. Relations with Turkey (Türkiye)," *U.S. Department of State, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs*, January 9, 2023, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-turkey/>



bilateral alliance occurred in the context of transforming global and regional contexts and were influenced by domestic developments in both countries. While the transformation of the AKP and its alliances had an impact on bilateral relations, the change of administrations in the US contributed to the trajectory of how the US approached Turkey's interests.

Turkey-US relations are currently facing new tests in the face of significant regional transformations and a change of presidency in the US. The overthrow of the Assad regime in December 2024 by the Hayat Tahrir as-Sham (HTS) and other opposition forces has created a new reality on the ground in Syria. Turkey as a country that has consistently supported the opposition groups in Syria since the uprisings there, finds itself in an advantageous position in terms of its influence in the post-Assad era. This together with Trump's presidency in the US, could reduce Turkey's threat perception from Syria and open new opportunities for cooperation with Washington. Thus, although the situation in Syria and beyond in the region remains highly uncertain, we may be on the cusp of a new era in Turkey-US relations in the Middle East. Given the context of global change and both Trump's and Erdoğan's preference for transactionalism in foreign policy, these new developments may not probably return the relationship to its better days, but it could open more cooperation in the Middle East.

## 5. Conclusions

The Middle East has always been part of Turkey-US relations. However, overall, Turkey has adopted an ambiguous position on this as it tried to use its Middle East policy and identity as an asset in its relations with the US while at the same time, as an aspiring regional power, it always developed distinct interests in the region. In that regard, the region increasingly became a source of contention as Turkey's quest for being a significant power in the region increased, and the perception of threats emanating from the region became related to its territorial integrity. These shifts were affected by transformations in the global and regional orders as well as in the domestic realm.

Despite the asymmetrical power relations, as a regional power, even in the 1950s, when Turkey and the US had a common strategic outlook, shared threat perceptions and similar worldviews, Turkey also pursued its own agenda. Yet these divergences did not cause major problems during the Cold War and were managed to some extent after the end of the Cold War. At once, this is generally seen as part of alliance politics. As Morrow<sup>70</sup> argued, "allies must share both harmonious and divergent interests. Without the latter, an alliance would be unnecessary." These two allies have largely shared common threat perceptions and worldviews. However, beginning with the Gulf War, trust eroded between them and their interests on significant issues started to diverge despite episodes of cooperation on several other issues. What is happening in the last years is that not only do their threat perceptions diverge, but Turkey perceives a threat from the US, and its threat perception is framed in an ontological security narrative that severely undermines bilateral relations. In addition, their worldviews are also diverging. Domestic political changes are affecting how the two countries view the world and their places in it. The changes in AKP rule, increasingly becoming personalistic and less institutionalized, have been affecting Turkey's foreign policy. A significant result has been the weakening of Turkey's ties with its allies in the West.

The transformation of Turkey-US relations has demonstrated the utility of focusing

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<sup>70</sup> James D. Morrow, "Alliances and Asymmetry: An Alternative to the Capability Aggregation Model of Alliances," *American Journal of Political Science* 35, no. 4 (1991): 906.

on both the international systemic and domestic factors. The NCR's emphasis on the international and regional strategic environment and going beyond focusing on polarity have been significant in that regard. Rather than polarity, the existence of permissive and restrictive strategic environments at the international and regional levels had a significant impact on Turkey-US relations in the Middle East. Yet, the way domestic political elites perceived these environments was equally significant and that was largely determined by their political aims and overall worldviews. In that way, the interrelatedness of external and internal defies the explanations based on such a distinction in explaining alliance politics.<sup>71</sup>

What does all this mean to a complex alliance with two dimensions? This presents another difficulty of explanation. As the bilateral dimension in the Middle East has deteriorated, Turkey is still a member of NATO. Furthermore, although there are problems in that context as well, Turkey seems to think that the benefits of being a member of NATO are still relevant.<sup>72</sup> This juxtaposition seems to bring US-Turkey relations into a new phase. As Goh and Sahashi<sup>73</sup> argue, alliances can be in three forms: threat-based, ontological, and transactional. As the two elements in the Turkey-US alliance in the Middle East have eroded, the transactional<sup>74</sup> element seems to prevail. The question then is whether and to what extent alliances endure if they just rely on transactionalism. Furthermore, how might the end of a bilateral alliance in one region reflect on the general characteristics of an alliance? The answers to these questions will have repercussions not only for Turkish-American relations but also for alliance theory. The case of the Turkey-US alliance in the context of the Middle East raises important questions for further research beyond this case on the issue of focusing on alliance change, rather than only alliance formation and termination. It further demonstrates the need for further research on the issue of transactionalism in international politics and whether and how that is linked with transformations in the international system as well as domestic politics.

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<sup>71</sup> Although Stephen David's omnibalancing approach considers domestic threat perceptions in alliance making, it does not deal with alliance change and the cases where multilateral alliances continue to survive while bilateral alliances erode. See, Stephen R. David, “Explaining Third World Alignment,” *World Politics* 43, no. 2 (1991): 233-256.

<sup>72</sup> Didem Buhari Gülmez, “The Resilience of the US-Turkey Alliance: Divergent Threat Perceptions and Worldviews,” *Contemporary Politics* 26, no. 4 (2020): 475-492.

<sup>73</sup> Goh and Shashi, “Worldviews on the United States,” 371-383.

<sup>74</sup> İter Turan, “Avoiding A Transactional Framework for US-Turkey Relations,” *GMF Insights on Turkey*, December 6, 2017, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.gmfus.org/news/avoiding-transactional-framework-us-turkey-relations>

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## The Deinstitutionalization of U.S. and Turkish Foreign Policy: Why Societal Ties Are an Anchor in Bilateral Relations

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### Abstract

*This paper challenges two prevailing narratives about U.S.-Turkey relations: first, that international and individual-level factors are responsible for volatility in the relationship and second, that bilateral relations are uniformly bleak. In contrast to these perspectives, this paper proposes a domestic and institutional explanation for the rising volatility of U.S.-Turkey relations and conceptualizes societal ties as an anchor in the bilateral relationship. This paper advances two inter-related arguments. First, I argue that a key driver of volatility in U.S.-Turkey relations since 2016 is the deinstitutionalization of U.S. and Turkish foreign policymaking. In the United States, the root cause of deinstitutionalization is intensifying polarization over foreign policy, fueled by the rise of populism. In Turkey, by contrast, foreign policy has deinstitutionalized through personalization: the steady concentration of decision-making power in the hands of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Second, against this backdrop of deinstitutionalization, I show that societal ties between the United States and Turkey provide a uniquely stable and enduring area of bilateral cooperation. I provide evidence for this argument in two key domains: 1) civil society and media and 2) higher education. These societal linkages, I argue, are often resilient precisely because they are disconnected from domestic politics and foreign policy. These societal ties should thus be understood not as agents that can reshape bilateral relations but as anchors that prevent the two nations from drifting apart.*

**Keywords:** foreign policy analysis, bureaucratic politics, U.S. foreign policy, Turkish foreign policy, political polarization, civil society, media, higher education

### 1. Introduction

Why have relations between the United States and Turkey experienced increasing volatility over the past decade, and what factors continue to bind these treaty allies together? By investigating these questions, this paper challenges two dominant narratives about contemporary U.S.-Turkey relations. First, scholars often attribute volatility in the U.S.-Turkey relationship to changes in the *international* system or the *individuals* in power. At the international level, scholars such as Reynolds and Ovali argue that the shift toward a multipolar world order and shrinking power imbalance between the United States and Turkey has eroded bilateral cooperation; at the individual level, Eissenstat documents how Turkey's

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Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has left a deep imprint on Turkish foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> Building upon a different literature on political institutions and bureaucratic politics, this paper contributes a domestic *institutional* explanation by arguing that the deinstitutionalization of foreign policy processes in both the United States and Turkey since 2016 has undermined bilateral relations.

What is more, this paper complicates the prevailing narrative that U.S.-Turkey relations are almost uniformly bleak. In recent scholarly work, Reynolds observes that the bilateral relationship is “fading and fraying,” while Coşkun notes that this “distressed partnership” is “now characterized by benign neglect.”<sup>2</sup> Studies by Ovalı and Özdikmenli, Balta and Elçi, and Köstem et al. identify currents of anti-Americanism and anti-Westernism in Turkish political history and public opinion.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, this paper shows that there are still limited bright spots in the relationship, especially in the realm of societal linkages. Policymakers should seek to cultivate these areas of opportunity in U.S.-Turkey relations while also acknowledging their limitations.

By disaggregating U.S.-Turkey relations into their political and societal dimensions, this paper observes a paradox. At the same time that both U.S. and Turkish foreign policy have become increasingly volatile, societal ties between the two nations have largely proven resilient. To explain this paradox, this paper advances two inter-related arguments.

First, I argue that a key driver of volatility in U.S.-Turkey relations since 2016 is the *deinstitutionalization* of both U.S. and Turkish foreign policymaking—that is, the waning influence of professional foreign policymaking institutions. In U.S. foreign policy, this deinstitutionalization is evident in policy flip-flops, for instance on U.S. support for democracy or the Syrian Kurdish forces, and in the disproportionate influence of individual policymakers, such as former U.S. Senator Bob Menendez. In Turkish foreign policy, Turkey’s purchase of the S-400 missile system and on-and-off support for Sweden’s NATO accession are just two manifestations of deinstitutionalization. The deinstitutionalization of foreign policy in both countries helps explain why U.S.-Turkey relations have proven so volatile since 2016 across diverse issues, from the Syrian conflict to cooperation within NATO.

While both countries are experiencing deinstitutionalization, U.S. and Turkish foreign policy have deinstitutionalized in different ways and for different reasons. In the United States, the root cause of deinstitutionalization is intensifying *polarization* over foreign policy caused by the rise of populism, especially since 2016.<sup>4</sup> With the emergence of Donald Trump

<sup>1</sup> Michael A. Reynolds, “From Contentious yet Robust to Fraying and Fading: Thoughts on US-Turkish Relations since 1945,” presented at *Continuities and Changes in Türkiye-U.S. Relations Conference*, Ankara, Turkey, 2023; Ali Şevket Ovalı, “System, State and the Individual: A Comparative Historical Analysis of the Determinants of Türkiye-U.S. Relations,” presented at *Continuities and Changes in Türkiye-U.S. Relations Conference*, Ankara, Turkey, 2023; Howard Eissenstat, “After the Honeymoon: US-Turkish Relations in the 21st Century,” presented at *Continuities and Changes in Türkiye-U.S. Relations Conference*, Ankara, Turkey, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Reynolds, “From Contentious yet Robust to Fraying and Fading;” Alper Coşkun, “Turkey and the United States Need to Redefine the Paradigm in Their Relationship,” presented at *Continuities and Changes in Türkiye-U.S. Relations Conference*, Ankara, Turkey, 2023; Coşkun, “How Washington and Ankara Can Recover from Their Latest Setback,” *Carnegie Endowment*, May 9, 2024, accessed date November, 2024. <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2024/05/turkey-us-erdogan-postponed-visit-fallout?lang=en>

<sup>3</sup> Ali Şevket Ovalı and İlkim Özdikmenli, “Ideologies and the Western Question in Turkish Foreign Policy,” *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace* 9, no. 1 (2020): 105-126; Evren Balta and Ezgi Elçi, “‘I Cannot Hail Oppression’: The Rise of Civilizational Anti-Americanism in Turkey,” presented at *Continuities and Changes in Türkiye-U.S. Relations Conference*, Ankara, Turkey, 2023; Efe Tokdemir, Melike Metintaş, and Seçkin Köstem, “A Multi-Dimensional Evaluation of Turkish Public Opinion towards the United States,” *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace* 14, no. 1 (2024): 1-24.

<sup>4</sup> I thank Howard Eissenstat for his insightful comment that the rise of populism in 2016 was a critical juncture at which polarization over foreign policy widened. On the rise of polarization in the United States, see Thomas Carothers, “The Long Path of Polarization in the United States,” in *Democracies Divided: The Global Challenge of Political Polarization*, eds. Thomas Carothers and Andrew O’Donohue (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2019), 65–92; Thomas Carothers and Andrew O’Donohue,

as de facto leader of the Republican party, U.S. administrations from different political parties have taken divergent stances on key issues for the U.S.-Turkey relationship, such as support for human rights and the Syrian Kurds. At the same time, partisan gridlock in Washington means that individual policymakers can exert inordinate influence over foreign policy, for instance by obstructing congressional action. In Turkey, by contrast, foreign policy has deinstitutionalized through *personalization*: the steady concentration of decision-making power in the hands of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and marginalization of the foreign policy bureaucracy, especially after the 2018 shift to an executive presidential system.<sup>5</sup>

Against this backdrop of deinstitutionalization, societal ties between the U.S. and Turkey provide a uniquely stable and institutionalized area for bilateral cooperation. I provide evidence for this argument by analyzing two key areas of societal interaction: 1) civil society and media and 2) higher education. In civil society, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) such as Amnesty International, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and Reporters without Borders have linked Turkey's robust civil society to international communities for decades, and U.S. grant-makers have built sustained relationships with Turkish non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Although international civil society organizations in Turkey interact with only a minority of Turkish society at large, transnational civil society linkage is nonetheless an important component of societal ties between the U.S. and Turkey.<sup>6</sup> In higher education, institutions such as the Turkish Fulbright Commission, the American Research Institute in Turkey, and Turkish studies programs at U.S. universities have endured through decades of turbulence in U.S.-Turkey relations. The depth and persistence of these societal ties is a bright spot in U.S.-Turkey relations.

Yet while these societal ties are uniquely stable, they are also politically marginal. Indeed, I argue that societal ties are often enduring precisely because they are insulated from domestic politics and foreign policy. In civil society, by conducting interviews with Turkish civil society representatives, I find that Turkish and international NGOs are largely disconnected from Turkey's public policy process.<sup>7</sup> Online media organizations funded by U.S. grant-makers typically fail to reach the average consumer of news in Turkey. In the domain of higher education, drawing on an analysis of 12 existing or defunct Turkish studies programs at U.S. universities, as well as correspondence with nine leaders of such programs, I find that these programs are sometimes unstable when they rely on funding from the U.S. or Turkish national governments and typically focus on history and the humanities, rather than contemporary foreign policy or politics.<sup>8</sup>

At a time when U.S. and Turkish foreign policymaking has become deinstitutionalized, bilateral societal linkages in civil society, media, and higher education remain enduring and robust. Yet it is important to be clear-eyed in acknowledging that these societal ties have

<sup>5</sup> "How Americans Were Driven to Extremes," *Carnegie Endowment*, September 25, 2019, accessed date November, 2023. <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2019/09/how-americans-were-driven-to-extremes?lang=en>

<sup>6</sup> On the personalization of Turkey's foreign policy and Erdoğan's foreign policy outlook, see Eissenstat, "After the Honeymoon."

<sup>7</sup> For a five-part conceptualization of linkage to the West that includes transnational civil society linkage, see Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, "International Linkage and Democratization," *Journal of Democracy* 16, no. 3 (2005): 20–34.

<sup>8</sup> The author conducted six interviews with Turkish civil society leaders for related research on human rights and the rule of law in Turkey. See, Andrew O'Donohue, "Law versus Democracy: Minoritarian Courts, Audience Costs, and Democratic Backsliding in Turkey," *SSRN*, August 30, 2023, accessed date November, 2023. [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=4465840](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4465840)

<sup>9</sup> Although, as Lockman notes, many of the early builders of Middle East Studies in the United States were informed by U.S. national security priorities and had previously served in the U.S. government, policy influence has largely shifted away from university centers toward think tanks and advocacy organizations. See, Zachary Lockman, *Field Notes: The Making of Middle East Studies in the United States* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

limited connection to or influence over policymakers. Thus, these societal linkages should be understood not as agents with the power to reshape U.S.-Turkey relations but as *anchors* that prevent the two nations from drifting apart.

## 2. The Bureaucratic Politics Model and the Deinstitutionalization of U.S. and Turkish Foreign Policy

In arguing that domestic political institutions shape foreign policy decision-making, this paper builds upon an influential literature on bureaucratic politics. In his classic work in this tradition, Allison challenges the “Rational Actor” model, which conceptualizes foreign policy decisions as the “purposive acts of unified national governments.”<sup>9</sup> Through his analysis of the Cuban missile crisis, Allison argues that this model must be “supplemented, if not supplanted, by frames of reference that focus on the governmental machine—the organizations and political actors involved in the policy process.”<sup>10</sup> As Allison and Halperin elaborate, this “Bureaucratic Politics Model” posits that a given foreign policy decision should be understood not as “a single rational choice,” but rather as “a result of bargaining among players positioned hierarchically in the government.”<sup>11</sup>

This bureaucratic politics model was principally developed to explain U.S. foreign policy decision-making, but it has offered a valuable conceptual lens for studying non-Western cases as well, including Turkey. However, these non-Western case studies highlight that the power of bureaucratic agencies should not be taken as a given, but rather as a variable. That is, whereas scholars in the United States may safely assume that bureaucracies have some decision-making power, researchers outside the United States show that the power of bureaucracies can *vary* over time.

Indeed, bureaucratic politics studies of Turkey are striking because they demonstrate how elected governments can strategically reduce or remove “traditional restraints on foreign policy.”<sup>12</sup> In a rare scholarly piece that analyzes Turkey’s foreign policy bureaucracy through in-depth data analysis, including interviews with more than 61 Turkish foreign policymakers, Gülen identifies how the elected AKP government has fought “turf wars in the foreign policy bureaucracy...to undermine the involvement of bureaucrats in decision-making processes.”<sup>13</sup> As Gülen further demonstrates, the AKP government used bureaucratic tactics, such as generating competition among state agencies within the foreign policy bureaucracy, to ultimately gain the upper hand over bureaucratic actors in foreign policy decision-making.<sup>14</sup> Contributing to these findings, in an analysis of the changing sociology of elites within Turkey’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm documents how “the emergence of a new clique of ruling elites subordinate to political elites...led to the politicisation of the foreign policy decision-making process in the post-2011 period.”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Graham T. Allison and Philip D. Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis - 2nd Edition* (New York: Longman Publishing, 1999), 4–5.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Graham T. Allison and Morton H. Halperin, “Bureaucratic Politics: A Paradigm and Some Policy Implications,” *World Politics* 24, no. S1 (1972): 40–79.

<sup>12</sup> Ersel Aydınli and Onur Erpul, “Elite Change and the Inception, Duration, and Demise of the Turkish–Israeli Alliance,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 17, no. 2 (2021): 2.

<sup>13</sup> Berkay Gülen, “Turf Wars in Foreign Policy Bureaucracy: Rivalry between the Government and the Bureaucracy in Turkish Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 18, no. 4 (2022): 1–20; Berkay Gülen, “Who Is in Charge of Making Decisions?” (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 2023).

<sup>14</sup> Gülen, “Who Is in Charge of Making Decisions?”

<sup>15</sup> Rahime Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm, “The Sociology of Diplomats and Foreign Policy Sector: The Role of Cliques on the Policy-Making Process,” *Political Studies Review* 19, no. 4 (2021): 558–573.

In order to understand variation in the degree to which bureaucratic constraints influence and stabilize foreign policy decision-making, this paper employs a Huntingtonian definition of institutionalization.<sup>16</sup> Whereas Allison's model, developed in the U.S. context, assumes that bureaucratic institutions have the power to shape outcomes, Huntington's approach usefully acknowledges that the strength of institutions and their influence on foreign policy decisions can vary over time. A country's foreign policy apparatus is more institutionalized to the extent that it scores high on Huntington's four criteria of institutionalization, which measure an institution's age, complexity, autonomy, and unity. Thus, Huntington's approach, unlike Allison's, enables scholars to identify when and why foreign policy has experienced deinstitutionalization. Applying Huntington's definition, I argue that U.S. and Turkish foreign policy reveal deficits of institutionalization for different criteria. These distinct patterns emerge because deinstitutionalization has different causes in the United States and Turkey. Whereas polarization over foreign policy is at the root of deinstitutionalization in the United States, personalization of political power is the core issue in Turkey.

### 2.1. Defining (De)institutionalization

Following Huntington's path-breaking work, this paper defines institutionalization as "the process by which organizations and procedures acquire value and stability."<sup>17</sup> In Huntington's influential formulation, the level of institutionalization can be identified and measured using four criteria.

The first criterion is the *age* of an institution, or what Huntington termed "adaptability."<sup>18</sup> As Huntington observed, "The more challenges that have arisen in [an institution's] environment and the greater its age, the more adaptable it is."<sup>19</sup> Thus, he wrote, "the longer an organization or procedure has been in existence, the higher the level of institutionalization."<sup>20</sup> Although younger, newly created institutions may be more influential in decision-making processes, as Drezner identifies, Huntington's definition indicates that older institutions are more likely to continue to survive and remain entrenched in the future.<sup>21</sup>

This first criterion suggests that the foreign policy apparatuses in the United States and Turkey exhibit different levels of institutionalization. In the United States, the National Security Council—the quarterback of the inter-agency policy process—has existed for more than 75 years since its establishment in 1947.<sup>22</sup> By comparison, Turkey's executive presidency—the current hub of foreign policymaking—has existed for less than a decade since its ratification in Turkey's 2017 constitutional amendments.<sup>23</sup> To be sure, in both countries, the U.S. Department of State and Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as the bureaucratic agencies charged with foreign affairs, are much older institutions. Nonetheless, significant decision-making power has shifted in the United States toward the National

<sup>16</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1973), 12–24.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 13–14.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>21</sup> Daniel W. Drezner, "Ideas, Bureaucratic Politics, and the Crafting of Foreign Policy," *American Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 4 (2000): 733–749.

<sup>22</sup> John Prados, *Keepers of the Keys: A History of the National Security Council from Truman to Bush – 1st Edition* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1991).

<sup>23</sup> Kemal Kirisci and Ilke Toygur, "Turkey's New Presidential System and a Changing West: Implications for Turkish Foreign Policy and Turkey-West Relations," *Brookings Institute*, January, 2019, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/turkeys-new-presidential-system-and-a-changing-west/>

Security Council, which coordinates foreign policy across the State Department, Defense Department, and USAID, and in Turkey toward the office of the presidency.

Huntington's second criterion of institutionalization is an organization's *complexity*: "The more complicated an organization it is, the more highly institutionalized it is."<sup>24</sup> By this measure, a foreign policy apparatus is more institutionalized to the extent that it is organized into functionally distinct and hierarchically organized subunits, such as bureaus for different regions or functional issues. Conversely, personalization of power represents the polar opposite of institutionalization. As Huntington observed, "The simplest political system is that which depends on one individual."<sup>25</sup>

Again, by this criterion, U.S. and Turkish foreign policy show distinct patterns of deinstitutionalization. In both countries, foreign policy is organized into complex bureaucracies. In the Turkish case, however, foreign policy decision-making is centralized in the hands of the president, rather than shared with this bureaucracy.<sup>26</sup> In Turkey today, proximity to the president may thus be a greater source of influence than one's position within an organizational hierarchy.

The third criterion that Huntington proposes is an institution's *autonomy*. This criterion of institutionalization measures "the extent to which political organizations and procedures exist independently of other social groupings and methods of behavior."<sup>27</sup> An autonomous institution, in other words, is "insulated" from outside influences on its behavior and is not merely "the instrument of a social group—family, clan, class."<sup>28</sup>

Assessing the autonomy of U.S. and Turkish foreign policy, this paper suggests that U.S. and Turkish foreign policy both lack autonomy, but in distinctive ways. In the United States, lobbyists, special interests, and foreign influence operations exert significant sway over foreign policymaking, as the recent investigations into former Senator Bob Menendez and former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn illustrate.<sup>29</sup> Although the U.S. State Department may be responsible for executing foreign policy, lobbyists and special interests have found avenues to influence foreign policy decision-making by swaying powerful members of Congress and even the president's national security advisor. In Turkey, by comparison, foreign policy lacks autonomy because it is closely linked to the president's fortunes and is "geared mainly to attain regime security and facilitate regime survival."<sup>30</sup>

Huntington's final criterion of institutionalization is *unity*: "The more unified and

<sup>24</sup> Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, 17.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>26</sup> Kirisci and Toygur, "Turkey's New Presidential System;" Senem Aydın-Düzgüt, Evren Balta, and Andrew O'Donohue, "Turkey, Russia, and the West: Reassessing Persistent Volatility, Asymmetric Interdependence, and the Syria Conflict," *Istanbul Policy Center*, April 2020, accessed date November, 2023. <https://ipc.sabanciuniv.edu/Content/Images/Document/reassessing-persistent-volatility-asymmetric-interdependence-and-the-syria-conflict-93d479/reassessing-persistent-volatility-asymmetric-interdependence-and-the-syria-conflict-93d479.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, 20.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>29</sup> Benjamin Weiser, Nicholas Fandos, and William K. Rashbaum, "Menendez and Wife Face Charges of Plotting to Make Him a Foreign Agent," *The New York Times*, October 12, 2023, November, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/12/nyregion/robert-menendez-foreign-agent-charge.html>; Peter Baker and Matthew Rosenberg, "Michael Flynn Was Paid to Represent Turkey's Interests During Trump Campaign," *The New York Times*, March 10, 2017, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/10/us/politics/michael-flynn-turkey.html>; William K. Rashbaum, Dana Rubinstein, and Jeffery C. Mays, "U.S. Investigating Whether Adams Received Illegal Donations from Turkey," *The New York Times*, November 2, 2023, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/02/nyregion/eric-adams-brianna-suggs-fbi-raid.html>

<sup>30</sup> Senem Aydın-Düzgüt, "Turkish Foreign Policy after the Elections: A New Dawn, or More of the Same?" *The Loop*, May 12, 2023, accessed date November, 2023. <https://theloop.eupr.eu/turkish-foreign-policy-after-the-elections-a-new-dawn-or-more-of-the-same/>



coherent an organization is, the more highly institutionalized it is.”<sup>31</sup> Here again, the United States and Turkey exhibit very different patterns of institutionalization. In the United States, as CIA Director William J. Burns has argued, “The style and substance of our polarized politics have infected American diplomacy. Policies lurch between parties, commitments expire at the end of each administration, institutions are politicized, and disagreements are tribal.”<sup>32</sup> By contrast, in Turkey, although the bureaucracy beneath the presidency may have its own ideological divisions, Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm finds that since 2011, the clique of ruling elites within Turkey’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs have largely been “subordinate to political elites.”<sup>33</sup> What is more, as Gülen observes, since the first direct election of Turkey’s president in 2014, the presidential office has emerged as “the omnipotent decision-maker, while other state departments... simply carried out the orders.”<sup>34</sup>

Why do the U.S. and Turkey suffer from different varieties of deinstitutionalization? In the following analysis, I illustrate that whereas the United States suffers primarily from partisan polarization over foreign policy, especially since the 2016 presidential election, what ails Turkey is personalization of power.

## 2.2. U.S. foreign policy: Deinstitutionalization through polarization

Rising partisan polarization is perhaps the main driving force behind the deinstitutionalization of U.S. foreign policy. Precisely because certain foreign policy decisions, such as supplying military aid or weaponry to foreign nations, are subject to approval by the U.S. Congress, partisan divisions have eroded congressional unity on foreign policy issues. As just one recent example, in November 2023, partisan acrimony was on full display in Congress, as House Republicans only voted to support a stopgap spending bill after roughly \$6 billion in aid for Ukraine was dropped from the legislation.<sup>35</sup> In the context of U.S.-Turkey relations specifically, polarization has resulted in partisan flip-flops across a variety of issue areas. The following analysis identifies two case studies in which U.S. polarization contributed to policy reversals: U.S. support for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and U.S. support for human rights in Turkey. U.S. polarization over foreign policy was not the sole driver of these reversals, as Turkish foreign policy priorities were also evolving, but was nonetheless a significant cause.

As a first example, U.S. partisan polarization and the isolationist turn of the Republican party contributed to a major policy reversal on U.S. support for Kurdish partners in the SDF. For five years, starting under President Barack Obama in 2014, the United States engaged in close counter-terrorism cooperation with the SDF as part of the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL.<sup>36</sup> Yet in October 2019, after a phone call with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, President Donald Trump gave a green light to Turkey’s occupation of northern Syria,

<sup>31</sup> Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, 22.

<sup>32</sup> William J. Burns, “Polarized Politics Has Infected American Diplomacy,” *The Atlantic*, June 6, 2020, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/polarized-politics-has-infected-american-diplomacy/612778/>

<sup>33</sup> Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm, “The Sociology of Diplomats,” 558-573.

<sup>34</sup> Gülen, “Turf Wars in Foreign Policy Bureaucracy,” 4.

<sup>35</sup> Jeff Stein, John Hudson, Paul Kane, and Jacob Bogage, “Alarm Grows in Kyiv, Washington as GOP House Blocks Ukraine Aid,” *Washington Post*, October 1, 2023, November, 2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2023/09/30/ukraine-aid-government-shutdown/>

<sup>36</sup> Robin Wright, “Turkey, Syria, the Kurds, and Trump’s Abandonment of Foreign Policy,” *The New Yorker*, October 20, 2019, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/10/28/turkey-syria-the-kurds-and-trumps-abandonment-of-foreign-policy>



effectively “abandoning” the SDF.<sup>37</sup> Specifically, Trump ordered the abrupt withdrawal of 1,000 U.S. Special Forces stationed in SDF-held areas—a policy that led Kurdish forces to turn to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, as well as Russian troops, for military help.<sup>38</sup> This dramatic policy reversal raised serious questions about America’s trustworthiness and showed U.S. allies that even established military cooperation could fall victim to America’s domestic political divisions.

A further example of policy reversals in U.S.-Turkey relations concerns U.S. support for human rights in Turkey. As Carothers and Press note in their review of the “democracy-security dilemma” in U.S. foreign policy, the Trump administration “exerted no systematic criticism or pressure on Turkey” regarding democracy and human rights issues.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps the only major exception to this policy was U.S. engagement in the case of Andrew Brunson, an American evangelical pastor arrested in Turkey. Urged on by evangelical voters in the United States, Trump’s administration went to great lengths to secure Brunson’s release, including by applying Global Magnitsky Act sanctions on Turkey’s interior and justice ministers in 2018.<sup>40</sup> Overall, however, Trump’s administration was indifferent to Turkey’s domestic politics.

In sharp contrast, the Biden administration has taken “a markedly different tone on democracy and rights” in Turkey.<sup>41</sup> In an interview with editors from the *New York Times* while on the campaign trail, Joe Biden went so far as to call President Erdoğan an “autocrat” and state that Washington should make clear “that we support opposition leadership.”<sup>42</sup> Once in office, Biden’s first call to President Erdoğan was to notify Turkey that the United States would officially recognize the Armenian genocide.<sup>43</sup> At two Summits for Democracy, held in December 2021 and March 2023, Biden’s administration declined to invite Turkey, as well as another NATO ally, Hungary.<sup>44</sup>

Policy flip-flops on the Syrian Kurds and human rights may be the most visible manifestations of how polarization has resulted in a deinstitutionalization of U.S. foreign policy. Yet a second form of deinstitutionalization is less obvious. In a polarized, gridlocked Washington, individual policymakers exert disproportionate influence on foreign policy, often by exerting a veto over congressional legislation.

The criminal allegations against former Senator Bob Menendez vividly illustrate that in a gridlocked Congress, individual politicians may decisively shape U.S. foreign policy. For years, Menendez served as perhaps the “most vocal” critic of Turkey in Washington and played a key role in blocking the sale of F-16 fighter jets to Ankara.<sup>45</sup> Yet in October 2023,

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Carothers and Benjamin Press, “Navigating the Democracy-Security Dilemma in U.S. Foreign Policy: Lessons from Egypt, India, and Turkey,” *Carnegie Endowment*, November 4, 2021, accessed date November, 2023. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/11/04/navigating-democracy-security-dilemma-in-u.s.-foreign-policy-lessons-from-egypt-india-and-turkey-pub-85701>

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Jonathan Spicer, “Turkey Slams Biden’s Past Call for U.S. to Back Erdogan Opponents,” *Reuters*, August 15, 2020, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-biden-turkey-idUSKCN25B0XS>.

<sup>43</sup> Carothers and Press, “Navigating the Democracy-Security Dilemma in U.S. Foreign Policy,” 14.

<sup>44</sup> Kemal Kirişci, “Biden’s Exclusion of Erdoğan from the Democracy Summit May Be a Blessing in Disguise for Turkey,” *Just Security*, December 8, 2021, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.justsecurity.org/79477/bidens-exclusion-of-erdogan-from-the-democracy-summit-may-be-a-blessing-in-disguise-for-turkey/>; Elizabeth Hagedorn, “Turkey Left off Guest List for Biden’s 2nd Democracy Summit,” *Al-Monitor*, March 24, 2023, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/03/turkey-left-guest-list-bidens-2nd-democracy-summit>

<sup>45</sup> Joe Gould and Connor O’Brien, “Menendez Ouster Improves Odds for F-16 Sale to Turkey, Top Republican Says,” *Politico*, September 27, 2023, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/09/27/menendez-turkey-erdogan>

federal prosecutors charged then-Senator Menendez with conspiring to act as an agent of Egypt at the same time that the senator served as chairman of the influential Senate Foreign Relations Committee.<sup>46</sup> With Menendez stepping down from his post as committee chairman, odds of a deal to sell F-16s to Turkey have significantly improved, according to House Foreign Affairs Chair Mike McCaul.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, as President Erdoğan remarked to journalists, “One of our most important problems regarding the F-16s were the activities of U.S. Sen. Bob Menendez against our country.”<sup>48</sup> As the Menendez saga shows, Washington today is experiencing such significant gridlock that a single senator can decisively influence foreign policy by imposing a veto on foreign policy issues.

### 2.3. Turkish foreign policy: Deinstitutionalization through personalization

While Turkey also suffers from severe partisan polarization,<sup>49</sup> the primary driver of deinstitutionalization in Turkish foreign policy has not been polarization but the personalization of power under President Erdoğan. This personalization of Turkish foreign policy has three primary manifestations.

First, as Aydın-Düzgüt et al. observe, Erdoğan as head of state is “not constrained by bureaucratic institutions or public debate;” rather, he is “almost entire free to make or reverse policies” as he sees fit.<sup>50</sup> Especially since the 2017 constitutional referendum, in which Turkey adopted an executive presidential system, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has lost significant status as an influential actor shaping external relations. As Kirişçi and Toygür note from an interview with a serving Turkish diplomat, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs “has become ‘completely excluded’ from foreign policymaking and was in a ‘state of paralysis.’”<sup>51</sup> Erdoğan’s decision to acquire the Russian S-400 missile defense system in July 2019—which resulted in Turkey’s removal from the F-35 program—illustrates how personalized decisions may inflict long-term strain on institutional cooperation.<sup>52</sup>

Of equal importance, Turkey’s foreign policy apparatus largely elevates those loyal to Erdoğan. As Kirişçi and Toygür observe, under Turkey’s hyper-presidential system, the “most striking characteristic of this restructured state is that [Erdoğan’s] ministers and those serving under them are handpicked for loyalty.”<sup>53</sup> The minister of foreign affairs whom Erdoğan appointed after the May 2023 elections, Hakan Fidan, is a case in point. Fidan is a long-time confidant of Erdoğan: From 2010 to 2023, with only a one-month interruption around the May 2015 elections, Fidan served as director of Turkey’s National Intelligence Organization (MİT). Alongside current MİT director İbrahim Kalin, Fidan stands out as one of relatively few officials who have remained in Erdoğan’s inner circle for over a decade.

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<sup>46</sup> Weiser, Fandos, and Rashbaum, “Menendez and Wife Face Charges of Plotting to Make Him a Foreign Agent.”

<sup>47</sup> Gould and O’Brien, “Menendez Ouster Improves Odds for F-16 Sale to Turkey, Top Republican Says.”

<sup>48</sup> Andrew Wilks, “Erdoğan Says Menendez Resignation from Senate Committee Boosts Turkey’s Bid to Acquire F-16s,” *AP News*, September 26, 2023, accessed date November, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/erdogan-menendez-f16-azerbaijan-sweden-nato-netanyahu-cyprus-f4df7341a85f0362107648615015a8b1>.

<sup>49</sup> Senem Aydın-Düzgüt, “The Islamist-Secularist Divide and Turkey’s Descent into Severe Polarization,” in *Democracies Divided: The Global Challenge of Political Polarization*, eds. Thomas Carothers and Andrew O’Donohue, (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2019), 17–37.

<sup>50</sup> Aydın-Düzgüt, Balta, and O’Donohue, “Turkey, Russia, and the West.”

<sup>51</sup> Kirişçi and Toygür, “Turkey’s New Presidential System,” 6.

<sup>52</sup> Jim Garamone, “U.S. Begins Process of ‘Unwinding’ Turkey From F-35 Program, DOD Officials Say,” *U.S. Department of Defense*, July 17, 2019, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1908351/us-begins-process-of-unwinding-turkey-from-f-35-program-dod-officials-say/>

<sup>53</sup> Kirişçi and Toygür, “Turkey’s New Presidential System,” 6.

Finally, and perhaps most intangibly, Turkey's foreign policy interests are increasingly identified with its leader's political fortunes. As Aydın-Düzgüt et al. observe, Turkey's foreign policy has "blurred the lines between the public interest and partisan (or simply personal) interest, defined in terms of regime security."<sup>54</sup> Changes in Turkey's external relations after the May 2023 elections illustrate that domestic political calculations often undergird Turkey's foreign policy. Now that Erdoğan has secured reelection for another five years as president, he has submitted Sweden's NATO bid to Turkey's parliament and sought to court foreign direct investment by supporting a more orthodox monetary policy and appointing economic policy officials such as finance minister Mehmet Şimşek.<sup>55</sup>

### 3. Theorizing Societal Ties as an "Anchor" in U.S.-Turkey Relations: Why Societal Linkages Are Enduring but Politically Marginal

At a time when U.S.-Turkey relations have proven volatile and foreign policymaking has become deinstitutionalized, can societal ties enable the two nations to engage in constructive dialogue and make progress on core bilateral issues? For instance, can cooperation between U.S. and Turkish civil society improve mutual understanding and even generate progress on human rights issues? Can U.S. and Turkish universities offer sites for developing foreign policy dialogue?

By analyzing U.S.-Turkey societal ties in two key areas—civil society and media, as well as higher education—this paper argues that societal ties are uniquely institutionalized and enduring. Yet a close analysis suggests that these societal ties are politically marginal and often disconnected from policy processes. Indeed, as I suggest using data on Turkish studies programs at U.S. universities, the fact that societal ties are politically disconnected may be precisely what allows these ties to endure, and university programs that depend on funding from the U.S. and Turkish national governments have faced instability.

Ultimately, then, this paper theorizes that societal linkages should be conceptualized not as *agents* directly shaping foreign policy but as *anchors* that set boundaries on how far apart the United States and Turkey can drift. Anchors do not push ships in a particular direction, nor do they hold ships in exactly one spot. Rather, anchors allow ships to move in response to the currents, but within a defined radius. In the same way, societal linkages between the United States and Turkey function as anchors by creating lasting ties that bind the two nations together and increase the costs of a rupture in relations even as the relationship faces turbulence in other areas.

### 4. Civil Society and Media as a Societal Linkage

U.S. ties with Turkey's embattled but robust civil society and independent media organizations remain a bright spot in the U.S.-Turkey relationship. Numerous INGOs, such as the Committee to Protect Journalists, have been actively operating in Turkey for decades and provide a stable connection with U.S. and international civil society. U.S.-based grant-makers, such as the Chrest Foundation, have also built sustained, decades-long ties with various Turkish NGOs.

<sup>54</sup> Aydın-Düzgüt, Balta, and O'Donohue, "Turkey, Russia, and the West," 7.

<sup>55</sup> Keith Fray and Adam Samson, "Has Erdoğan Really Embraced Economic Orthodoxy in Turkey?" *Financial Times*, October 9, 2023, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.ft.com/content/69a30398-4fd6-4e94-a111-435cc01c3386>; Adam Samson and Richard Milne, "Recep Tayyip Erdoğan Submits Sweden's Nato Bid to Turkey's Parliament," *Financial Times*, October 23, 2023, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.ft.com/content/c261c0f7-7c94-42d0-8508-45f9fd621762>

Yet it is crucial to recognize that these civil society groups have limited influence over public policy. As Turkey's institutions have become increasingly personalistic, INGO representatives, especially those working in the field of human rights, have become more disconnected from Turkish public officials. The online media organizations that receive U.S. grants are limited in their ability to reach the Turkish public.<sup>56</sup>

#### 4.1. Turkey's robust civil society: The role of INGOs

INGOs that link Turkey's civil society to international communities have proven remarkably robust under political pressure. INGOs such as Amnesty International, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and Reporters without Borders have all become institutionalized over the course of decades.

Amnesty International has been operating in Turkey for over two decades, with the organization's Turkey branch receiving approval to open in 2001.<sup>57</sup> Despite the fact that the former head of Amnesty's Turkey branch, Taner Kılıç, was arrested in 2017 and held in prison for 14 months, the organization continues to conduct significant work.<sup>58</sup> A model of Turkey's robust civil society, Amnesty's Turkey branch has modest but significant resources, with total revenue of 12.9 million Turkish Lira in 2021.<sup>59</sup>

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) has been conducting work in Turkey since the 1990s—a further example of how institutionalized many INGOs are in Turkey.<sup>60</sup> The CPJ has a representative based in Turkey and currently holds meetings each year with Turkey's Constitutional Court, alongside other press freedom organizations such as the International Press Institute and Reporters without Borders.<sup>61</sup> The CPJ has been organizing high-level meetings with Turkish government officials since at least 1997, when the CPJ and other local and international press freedom organizations met with then-Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz.<sup>62</sup>

A third exemplar of Turkey's deeply rooted civil society is Reporters without Borders (RSF). RSF has published detailed, consistent coverage of media freedom in Turkey since at least 2002.<sup>63</sup> RSF has maintained this work despite the fact that its Turkey representative, journalist Erol Önderoğlu, was arrested in June 2016 and faced up to 14 years in prison for his work with the shuttered newspaper *Özgür Gündem* [*Free Agenda*].<sup>64</sup> Indeed, RSF has

<sup>56</sup> Andrew O'Donohue, Max Hoffman, and Alan Makovsky, "Turkey's Changing Media Landscape," *Center for American Progress*, June 10, 2020, accessed date November, 2023. [https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2020/06/09110232/06-20\\_TurkeysChangingMediaLandscape.pdf](https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2020/06/09110232/06-20_TurkeysChangingMediaLandscape.pdf).

<sup>57</sup> Necmi Ulus, "Amnesty International Turkey and Its Enterprise," *Amnesty International*, June 28, 2022, accessed date November, 2023, 4. <https://shorturl.at/nTzN1>

<sup>58</sup> Hamdi Fırat Büyük, "European Court: Turkey Broke Law by Arresting Amnesty Campaigner," *Balkan Insight*, May 31, 2022, accessed date November, 2023. <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/05/31/european-court-turkey-broke-law-by-arresting-amnesty-campaigner/>.

<sup>59</sup> Ulus, "Amnesty International Turkey and Its Enterprise," 9.

<sup>60</sup> "Turkey: Criminal Prosecutions of Journalists," *Committee to Protect Journalists*, July, 1999, accessed date November, 2023. <https://cpj.org/reports/1999/05/turkeyreport/>

<sup>61</sup> "Turkey: International Delegation Condemns Passage of Disinformation Law and Issues Call to Protect Safety and Freedom of Journalists Ahead of 2023 Elections," *Reporters without Borders (RSF)*, October 14, 2022, accessed date November, 2023. <https://rsf.org/en/turkey-international-delegation-condemns-passage-disinformation-law-and-issues-call-protect-safety>

<sup>62</sup> "Turkey: Criminal Prosecutions of Journalists."

<sup>63</sup> "Bill for Tightening the Legislation on Violation of the Press Laws," *Reporters without Borders (RSF)*, February 6, 2002, accessed date November, 2023. <https://rsf.org/en/bill-tightening-legislation-violation-press-laws>; "RSF Urges Turkey to Respect Press Freedom in Wake of Exhibition Protests," *Reporters without Borders (RSF)*, May 10, 2002, accessed date November, 2023. <https://rsf.org/en/rsf-urges-turkey-respect-press-freedom-wake-exhibition-protests>; "RSF Chief Banned from Turkey," *Reporters without Borders (RSF)*, May 15, 2002, accessed date November, 2023. <https://rsf.org/en/rsf-chief-banned-turkey>

<sup>64</sup> "Joint Statement in Support of Erol Önderoğlu, facing 14 Years in Prison," *Reporters without Borders (RSF)*, February 2, 2021, accessed date November, 2023. <https://rsf.org/en/joint-statement-support-erol-%C3%B6ndero%C4%9Flu-facing-14-years-prison>

been most active in publishing news posts when press freedom has been most threatened. Looking at RSF's record of online news posts since 2002, the organization published the most in 2016, 2017, and 2018—three years when journalists' rights were under acute stress.<sup>65</sup> RSF, along with Amnesty International and the CPJ, is a testament to the deep roots of many INGOs in Turkey's civil society.

#### 4.2. The U.S. connection: Philanthropic and government support

While INGOs provide one enduring societal linkage between Turkish and international civil society, U.S. grant-making organizations, both private and public, provide another sustained connection. Particularly noteworthy is the Chrest Foundation—a private, family foundation based in Irving, Texas—which has offered grants to support civil society in Turkey for more than two decades since 2001.<sup>66</sup> In 2022, the Chrest Foundation gave a total of \$697,582 in grants to nine Turkish civil society organizations.<sup>67</sup> These grants provided support to independent media outlets, such as *Gazete Duvar*, *Medyascope*, and *Serbestiyet*, as well as civil society organizations, such as the Memory Center (*Hafıza Merkezi*), the Hrant Dink Foundation, and the Platform for Independent Journalism (P24).

Among civil society funders, the Chrest Foundation stands out for its sustained work building relationships with Turkish civil society organizations, sometimes for more than a decade. For example, from 2008 to 2023, the Chrest Foundation provided the Hrant Dink Foundation with 21 grants—one or more in every year except 2020.<sup>68</sup> *Anadolu Kültür*, a non-profit cultural institution, was awarded 23 grants between 2005 and 2020.<sup>69</sup> The non-profit Memory Center received 11 grants from the Chrest Foundation between 2012 and 2022.<sup>70</sup> Another 10 grants supported Sabancı University's Gender and Women's Studies Center (SÜ Gender) from 2009 to 2020.<sup>71</sup>

The Chrest Foundation is but one prominent example of U.S. philanthropic and governmental support for civil society in Turkey. Since 2000, the U.S.-based non-profit Ashoka has invested in the non-profit work of 30 social entrepreneurship fellows in Turkey, including the founders of KAMER, a women's human rights organization, and Teyit, a digital fact-checking platform.<sup>72</sup> On the side of U.S. governmental support, the U.S. Embassy in Turkey, the National Endowment for Democracy, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), and the International Republican Institute (IRI) have acted as grant-makers and built ties with Turkish civil society.

#### 4.3. The disconnect between Turkey's civil society and public policy

Turkey's civil society organizations serve numerous invaluable functions, yet it is important to recognize—as civil society organization leaders do themselves—that these groups typically have very limited connections to policymakers within Turkey's national

<sup>65</sup> RSF published 41 news posts in 2016, 53 news posts in 2017, and 53 news posts in 2018. See, "Türkiye | RSF," *Reporters without Borders (RSF)*, November 3, 2023, accessed date November, 2023. <https://rsf.org/en/country-%C3%BCrkiye>

<sup>66</sup> "About Us: History of the Chrest Foundation," *Chrest Foundation*, accessed November, 2023. <https://chrestfoundation.org/about-us/>

<sup>67</sup> "Grants Awarded," *Chrest Foundation*, accessed November, 2023. <https://chrestfoundation.org/grants-awarded/>

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> "Sosyal Girişimciler [Social Entrepreneurs]," *Ashoka Türkiye*, accessed date November, 2023. <https://ashokaturkiye.org/sosyal-girisimciler/>

government. Turkey's government also wields significant power to restrict the work of media and civil society organizations when it so chooses: In 2022, for instance, Turkey banned access to two international public broadcasters, Deutsche Welle and Voice of America.<sup>73</sup> Thus, although U.S.-Turkey linkages in the domain of civil society provide a crucial anchor for the bilateral relationship and basic freedoms in Turkey, they usually lack influence over foreign or domestic policy.

The example of media freedom organizations demonstrates how Turkey's deinstitutionalization has undercut the influence of civil society organizations. As noted previously, media freedom organizations have a long tradition of meeting with high-ranking Turkish policymakers, dating back to at least the 1990s.<sup>74</sup> As one civil society representative mentioned in an interview, press freedom organizations even met in 2014 with President Erdoğan and then-Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu.<sup>75</sup> As late as 2016, this civil society representative reported having the cellphone numbers of secretaries within the Ministry of Justice. "I could at least call, and they would answer, even if the response was 'no comment,'" this representative observed.<sup>76</sup> "Now," this representative commented, "I don't know anyone in Ankara."<sup>77</sup>

Unfortunately, in Turkey's media landscape today, the online media outlets supported by U.S. civil society funders also tend to lack influence. For example, the online media outlets funded by the Chrest Foundation typically lack a large audience base. On Twitter, as of November 2023, *Gazete Duvar* had 827,500 followers, followed by *Medyascope* with 310,200 and *Sebestiyet* with 65,800.<sup>78</sup> By contrast, for example, pro-government outlet *AHaber* had 2.1 million followers on Twitter, more than all three outlets combined.<sup>79</sup> What is more, according to nationally representative polling conducted in 2018, approximately 72 percent of citizens in Turkey report that their primary news source is television, as compared to 19 percent who say they primarily get their news from social media or online news outlets.<sup>80</sup> Thus, it is important to note that while these online outlets provide important pluralism in Turkey's media landscape, they are influential among about a fifth of Turkey's population, especially younger, pro-opposition citizens who are more likely to report consuming online news.<sup>81</sup>

## 5. Bilateral Ties in Higher Education: The Tradeoff between Stability and Political Connections

To what extent can U.S. and Turkish universities play a role in strengthening bilateral relations, advancing dialogue on key challenges in U.S.-Turkey relations, and informing public policy processes? Through an analysis of ties between the U.S. and Turkey in higher education, I find that educational linkages face a tradeoff between stability and political

<sup>73</sup> Laura Pitel, "Turkey Bans Access to US and German Public Broadcasters," *Financial Times*, July 1, 2022, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.ft.com/content/49b4e348-304b-453c-9a65-48ee3e155109>

<sup>74</sup> "Turkey: Criminal Prosecutions of Journalists."

<sup>75</sup> Author's interview with Turkish civil society representative, October 2023. See, O'Donohue, "Law versus Democracy."

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> These data were collected on November, 2023 from the following Twitter pages: "duvaR (@gazeteduvar)," *X*, accessed date November, 2023. <https://x.com/gazeteduvar>; "Medyascope (@medyascope)," *X*, accessed date November, 2023. <https://x.com/medyascope>; "Serbestiyet (@serbestiyetweb)," *X*, accessed date November, 2023. <https://x.com/serbestiyetweb>

<sup>79</sup> "A Haber (@ahaber)," *X*, accessed date November, 2023. <https://x.com/ahaber>

<sup>80</sup> O'Donohue, Hoffman, and Makovsky, "Turkey's Changing Media Landscape."

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*



connection: Cooperation in higher education has been a laudably stable area of bilateral cooperation, precisely because these ties are largely though incompletely insulated from the political priorities of national governments. By compiling a dataset of 12 existing or defunct Turkish studies programs at U.S. universities, as well as corresponding with nine leaders of Turkish studies programs, I show that the primary strength of these programs is their distance from politics, given their focus on the humanities and access to non-governmental funding. Yet this strength also entails a tradeoff in policy influence, as these Turkish studies centers are largely disconnected from foreign policy research and practice.

### 5.1. Why educational ties are especially stable and institutionalized

In U.S.-Turkey relations, educational ties have proven uniquely stable, as compared to the volatility over political issues. Remarkably, the Turkish Fulbright Commission—created through a binational agreement in 1949—predates Turkey’s accession to NATO in 1952.<sup>82</sup> The Turkish Fulbright Commission has run without interruption since 1950, building bilateral ties through a unique network of more than 5,000 alumni.<sup>83</sup> The American Research Institute in Turkey (ARIT) is another prominent example of how educational cooperation has become deeply institutionalized. Since its foundation in 1964, ARIT has supported more than 700 U.S. students studying advanced Turkish, more than 550 Turkish scholars conducting research inside and outside Turkey, and more than 125 Greek and Turkish scholars who have conducted research in each other’s countries as Aegean Exchange fellows.<sup>84</sup>

At a time when inter-governmental cooperation is often challenging, public universities have been key agents in building and sustaining U.S.-Turkey connections. Since 2000, the State University of New York (SUNY) and the Turkish Council of Higher Education (YÖK) have maintained a dual diploma program that has developed ties between eleven SUNY institutions and seven Turkish universities.<sup>85</sup> Through this program, more than 2,200 graduates have earned dual diplomas by spending half of their education at a SUNY campus and half at a Turkish university.<sup>86</sup>

In the United States, Turkish studies has also developed as an academic field.<sup>87</sup> Reed documents that although “there was no systematic focus on Turkish studies in North American universities” until 1945, after World War II Turkish studies began to grow substantially, incubated in particular at the newly established Near East Studies Program at Princeton University.<sup>88</sup> Following the creation of the first academic center for Turkish studies at Princeton were centers at the University of Michigan, Columbia University, Indiana University, and Harvard University.<sup>89</sup> As Lockman shows in his remarkable portrait of the evolution of Middle East Studies in the United States, this emerging field received foundational support from the Carnegie, Ford, and Rockefeller foundations,<sup>90</sup> and the growth of the field after World War II was closely tethered to the perceived need for “military and

<sup>82</sup> “Mutual Memory,” *Turkish Fulbright Commission*, accessed date November, 2023. <https://70th.fulbright.org.tr/?lang=en>

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> “History,” *American Research Institute in Turkey*, accessed date November, 2023. <https://aritweb.org/home/about/history/>

<sup>85</sup> “Turkey – SUNY,” *State University of New York*, accessed date November, 2023. <https://system.suny.edu/global/turkey/>

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Howard A. Reed, “Perspectives on the Evolution of Turkish Studies in North America since 1946,” *Middle East Journal* 51, no. 1 (1997): 15–31.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>90</sup> Lockman, *Field Notes*, 1–3.

naval officers familiar with...actual and potential combat zones.”<sup>91</sup>

Today, Turkish studies has emerged as a small but institutionalized field, with its professional association, the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association (OTSA), founded in 1971.<sup>92</sup> Today, according to the American Association of Teachers of Turkic Languages, Turkish language classes are taught at 45 colleges and universities across the United States.<sup>93</sup> Among these 45 U.S. institutions, a particularly noteworthy development is that as of 2023, at least 12 programs, initiatives, and centers have formed with a dedicated focus on Turkish studies.<sup>94</sup> These programs go beyond Turkish language instruction by offering additional courses on Turkey's culture, history, literature, and politics.<sup>95</sup> The table below lists 10 existing Turkish studies programs, initiatives, and centers in the United States, as well as two defunct programs, along with information about their dates of operation, leadership, and funding sources. These Turkish studies centers serve an invaluable educational function by enabling students and faculty to gain a deeper, humanistic understanding of Turkey that extends beyond news headlines.

Precisely because these programs often receive private or university funding, many have the resources to operate over a long-time horizon and are thus partially insulated from the political turbulence of U.S.-Turkey relations. For example, at the University of Washington, the Turkish and Ottoman Studies Program has been running for 55 years since its foundation in 1968 by the late Professor Walter Andrews.<sup>96</sup> At Columbia University, the Sakıp Sabancı Center for Turkish Studies was founded in 2016 with a \$10 million endowment from the Sabancı family that aims to allow the center to operate in perpetuity.<sup>97</sup> Reliance on funding from universities or from private donors does not mean that Turkish studies centers are immune from political pressures, as discussed below. However, the data in the table below strongly suggest that the programs with university or private funding are more likely to survive amid a turbulent bilateral relationship.

## 5.2. Why educational ties are politically disconnected: Funding and personnel

While these educational ties are uniquely enduring, they are stable perhaps precisely because they are largely disconnected from contemporary politics and foreign policy. In effect, there is a clear division of labor in the United States between Turkish studies programs and think tanks, in which the former largely do not engage with current issues in U.S.-Turkey relations. There are two main reasons for this disconnect from foreign policymaking: funding and personnel.

Funding is the first key reason why Turkish studies programs typically do not have strong connections to foreign policymaking. When Turkish studies programs have been connected

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>92</sup> OTSA was originally founded in 1971 as the Turkish Studies Association (TSA). See, Reed, “Perspectives on the Evolution,” 27–28.

<sup>93</sup> “Programs In North America,” *American Association of Teachers of Turkic Languages*, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.aatturkic.org/na-programs>

<sup>94</sup> Although the now-defunct Institute of Turkish Studies (ITS) was primarily a grant-making institution, rather than an academic curricular program, I include it in the table for the sake of completeness. For a preliminary list of institutions, on which the list in this paper is based, see Bahar Otcu-Grillman, “Turkish Language Teaching in the US: Challenges, Opportunities, Sense of Belonging and Identities,” *Billig*, no. 70 (2014): 211–236.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> “Turkish and Ottoman Studies Program,” *University of Washington – Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures*, accessed date November, 2024. <https://melc.washington.edu/programs/turkish>

<sup>97</sup> “About | Sakıp Sabancı Center for Turkish Studies,” *Sakıp Sabancı Center for Turkish Studies*, accessed date November, 2023. <https://sakipsabancicenter.columbia.edu/content/about>

to foreign policy through funding from the U.S. or Turkish national governments, they have been more vulnerable to disruption. To begin with U.S. governmental funding, U.S. universities are eligible to apply for support from the U.S. Department of Education under Title VI when they offer courses in four major Middle Eastern languages.<sup>98</sup> However, Title VI places departments under onerous reporting requirements, as all events related to Middle East programming must be published and reported to Congress.<sup>99</sup> Members of Congress or their staff can then investigate the topics of events.<sup>100</sup> Funding from the U.S. Department of Defense can also be vulnerable to disruption. Although the Department of Defense provided funds to establish a Turkish Flagship Program at Indiana University in 2011, this program concluded in June 2020.<sup>101</sup>

The closure of the Institute of Turkish Studies (ITS) in 2020 further illustrates the precarity of relying on government funding. For over 30 years since its founding in 1982, the ITS was the only U.S.-based non-profit dedicated to supporting Turkish studies in higher education and awarded grants to more than 400 scholars in the field.<sup>102</sup> Crucially, the Turkish government provided foundational support for the ITS through a grant of \$3 million created in 1982.<sup>103</sup> When the Turkish government decided to defund the ITS in 2015, the institution proved unable to sustain itself through its own fundraising efforts.<sup>104</sup> A major point of contention, reportedly, was that representatives from the Turkish Embassy in Washington sought to steer the subject matter and tone of academic research in a direction that would reflect positively on Turkey.<sup>105</sup>

While private donors to Turkish studies initiatives may offer a more stable source of funding, these donors, especially those in Turkey, may have incentives to ensure that Turkish studies programs do not broach politically sensitive topics in Turkish domestic politics or foreign policy. In particular, the private donors who fund Turkish studies programs may wish to steer the activities of these initiatives away from politically charged issues, such as democracy, human rights, or the Kurdish issue. For families in Turkey who have the resources to support Turkish studies in the United States, events that engage with contemporary Turkish politics may raise a political and reputational risk.

Another challenge for Turkish studies centers is the money they must be careful not to take. As one Turkish studies center leader noted, universities are “working hard *not* to take certain dollars from rich Turkish people,” especially those affiliated with the Gülen movement, known officially in Turkey as the Fetullah Gülen Terrorist Organization (FETÖ).<sup>106</sup> In effect, even when drawing upon private donations, university leaders often feel they must be careful to avoid receiving donations that could draw them into a heated political conflict.

A second reason for the disconnect with politics is personnel. The leaders and activities of existing Turkish studies programs in the United States are predominantly focused on a

<sup>98</sup> Author correspondence with a Turkish studies program leader. See, O’Donohue, “Law versus Democracy.”

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> “IU Bloomington Chosen to Establish Nation’s First Turkish Flagship Program,” *University of Indiana Bloomington News Room*, October 6, 2011, accessed date November, 2023. <https://newsinfo.iu.edu/news/page/normal/19849.html>; “Status on the Turkish Flagship,” *The Language Flagships*, accessed date November, 2023. <https://flagship.indiana.edu/turkish-flagship.html>

<sup>102</sup> Liam Scott, “Institute of Turkish Studies Caught in Turkey’s Crackdown on Academic Freedom,” *The Hoya*, October 7, 2021, accessed date November, 2023. <https://thehoya.com/institute-turkish-studies-caught-turkey-crackdown-academic-freedom/>

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Author correspondence with a Turkish studies program leader. See, O’Donohue, “Law versus Democracy.”

humanistic understanding of Turkey, rather than on today's politics and policymaking. Of the ten existing programs in Turkish studies, only one, at Portland State University, was run by a political scientist, as of December 2023, as shown in the table above. Much more commonly, Turkish studies programs are led by historians (at Columbia, Northwestern, New York University, and the University of Washington), anthropologists (at Georgetown and the University of Arizona), or scholars of Turkish language and literature (at the University of Chicago and University of Texas at Austin).

The predominant training of Turkish studies leaders in the humanities likely predisposes the field to err on the side of stability and non-political engagement, rather than involving itself in foreign policy issues. To be sure, several scholars from the humanities, such as Eissenstat and Reynolds, publish research and engage in discussions on contemporary foreign policy.<sup>107</sup> However, in general, Turkish studies programs often do not produce foreign policy research or engage with policymakers on contemporary U.S.-Turkey relations. The exception to this rule, which suggests the influence of a Turkish studies program's leader, is the Center for Turkish Studies at Portland State University. The center—the only one run by a political scientist—published an occasional paper series on contemporary policy issues.

Troublingly, scholars who teach Turkish language courses also tend to be among the more precarious and vulnerable workers in academia. Even at well-resourced, private universities, Turkish-language teachers are not tenure-track faculty, despite often holding a Ph.D., but rather adjunct or non-tenure-track instructors.<sup>108</sup> Consistent with research on gender and ethnic disparities in U.S. academic positions,<sup>109</sup> Turkish-language instructors, who usually lack the status and protections of tenure-track faculty, are overwhelmingly female and non-native speakers of English.<sup>110</sup> The professional precarity of Turkish-language instructors may be a further reason why university personnel have strong incentives to maintain a safe distance from contemporary politics.

## 6. Conclusion: Societal Ties as an Anchor of U.S.-Turkey Relations

By disaggregating U.S.-Turkey relations into their political and societal dimensions, this paper presents a more complex picture of the bilateral relationship. In particular, I add nuance to the prevailing pessimism in U.S.-Turkey relations by identifying bright spots in the domain of societal relations. Of equal importance, I push back against the temptation to assign blame to either side by showing that both countries have experienced a deinstitutionalization of foreign policy—and thus that both bear some responsibility for volatile relations.

Overall, this paper advances two inter-related arguments. Drawing on Huntington's definition of "institutionalization," this article suggests that both U.S. and Turkish foreign policy have deinstitutionalized—but in different ways and for different reasons. In the United States, the foreign policy process is fraught with partisan disunity and offers disproportionate influence to particular individuals. At the root of this deinstitutionalization is profound and rising partisan polarization over foreign policy in the United States.<sup>111</sup> Meanwhile, in Turkey,

<sup>107</sup> Eissenstat, "After the Honeymoon;" Reynolds, "From Contentious yet Robust to Fraying and Fading."

<sup>108</sup> Author correspondence with a Turkish studies program leader. See, O'Donohue, "Law versus Democracy."

<sup>109</sup> Anaïs Llorens, et al., "Gender Bias in Academia: A Lifetime Problem That Needs Solutions," *Neuron* 109, no. 13 (2021): 2047–2074; Danielle J. Galvin, Susan C. Anderson, Chelsi J. Marolf, Nikole G. Schneider, and Andrea L. Liebl, "Comparative Analysis of Gender Disparity in Academic Positions Based on U.S. Region and STEM Discipline," *PLoS ONE* 19, no. 3 (2024): 1–14.

<sup>110</sup> Author correspondence with a Turkish studies program leader. See, O'Donohue, "Law versus Democracy."

<sup>111</sup> On the consequences of rising U.S. polarization, see Carothers, "The Long Path of Polarization," 80–84; Thomas Carothers

foreign policy has become increasingly personalized, with power consolidating in the hands of a powerful leader atop a hyper-presidential system of governance.

At the same time that foreign policymaking has become deinstitutionalized, societal ties between the United States and Turkey remain enduring. INGOs and civil society grant-makers have built ties for decades between U.S. and Turkish civil society. U.S. universities are now home to at least ten designated Turkish studies programs—many of which have operated for more than a decade. These areas of interaction represent only a fraction of U.S.-Turkey societal linkages, which include people-to-people contacts through cultural exchanges, migration, tourism, investment, and trade.

Yet it is important to recognize that societal ties have limited sway over and connection to the foreign policymaking process. Turkish and international NGOs have limited connections to Turkey's public policy process. Turkish studies programs at U.S. universities often are focused on a humanistic understanding of Turkey and the Ottoman world, rather than on contemporary U.S.-Turkey relations. Thus, as this paper has argued, these societal linkages are best conceptualized not as agents with the power and autonomy to push the United States and Turkey closer together but as anchors that prevent the two nations from drifting further apart.

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## A Multi-Dimensional Evaluation of Turkish Public Opinion towards the United States

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### Abstract


*Türkiye - United States relations have a multifaceted character and have spanned a long period, witnessing ups and downs throughout their historical trajectory. Türkiye's relations with and foreign policy towards the US have been closely monitored by the public, and diverse perspectives towards the US have emerged within Turkish public opinion over time. This paper investigates the various factors that affect Turkish public opinion towards the US. Previous studies have generally examined public opinion through the demand side, exploring what features of the public predict their behavior towards other countries. In this research, we examine what exactly it is about the US that the public likes or dislikes. The research question of this article is: What are the determinants of the variation in individuals' foreign policy attitudes towards the US in Türkiye? By answering this question through survey data conducted in 2021, we aim to present the economic, security-related, and political reasons behind the Turkish public's positive and negative attitudes toward the US. The findings demonstrate that individuals are influenced by various dimensions pertaining to the US and its relations with Türkiye. The respondents' demographic characteristics and political and foreign policy attitudes have resulted in disparate opinions regarding these multiple dimensions.*


**Keywords:** United States, Türkiye, Public Opinion, Attitudes, Foreign Policy


### 1. Introduction

The public opinion literature has extensively examined the views of individuals in various parts of the world towards the United States (US) and other major powers. In this paper, we attempt to answer the following research question: What are the determinants of the variation

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in individuals' foreign policy attitudes towards the US in Türkiye? We believe this question continues to be an important and unexplored dimension of Türkiye's relationship with and foreign policy towards the US. Türkiye has had close security ties with the US since the beginning of the Cold War. The relationship has had multiple crises during and after the Cold War period, significantly shaping Turkish public opinion. Despite its commitment to the transatlantic alliance, the Turkish government has pursued strategic autonomy from the Western-led international order in the past decade.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, Turkish public opinion has had persistent anti-American attitudes, as demonstrated by various public opinion surveys.<sup>2</sup>

This article argues that multiple characteristics of the US and various dimensions of US-Türkiye bilateral relations shape Turkish public opinion towards the US. Therefore, we aim to highlight the complexity behind the formation of individual attitudes towards the US in Turkish society. Instead of making a theoretical argument, the article offers a descriptive study that aims to explore the multiple dimensions of attitudes towards the US in Türkiye in detail. As the article will demonstrate, different dimensions of US-Türkiye relations and US foreign policy practices lead to the formation of public opinion in Türkiye. At the same time, we show that the varying demographic, societal, and ideological characteristics and inclinations of individuals have an influence on the formation of public opinion towards the US.

The article aims to make multiple contributions to the literature. First, we present a theoretically driven account of the sources of foreign policy attitudes towards the US. So far, the literature has mostly explored whether the public has positive or negative attitudes towards the US and other major powers.<sup>3</sup> Instead, we investigate the economic, security-related, and political reasons behind positive attitudes towards the US. Second, the literature that examines the sources of individual attitudes mostly looks at the demand side – what features of the society and individuals predict their attitudes and behaviors towards other countries.<sup>4</sup> Instead, our study explores the supply side by studying what exactly it is about the US that the public likes or dislikes. Third, the literature generally tends to explain negative attitudes towards other countries. For example, in the vast literature on attitudes toward the US, the dependent variable is typically anti-Americanism.<sup>5</sup> However, most regional and global powers heavily use soft power-building strategies and public diplomacy promotion efforts to attract positive attention. Bearing in mind the asymmetry of the impacts derived from positive vs. negative attitudes on foreign policy actions, we are interested in explaining

<sup>1</sup> Emre Erşen and Seçkin Köstem, "Introduction: Understanding the Dynamics of Turkey's Pivot to Eurasia," in *Turkey's Pivot to Eurasia: Geopolitics and Foreign Policy in a Changing World Order*, eds. Emre Erşen and Seçkin Köstem (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 2; Mustafa Kutlay and Ziya Öniş, "Turkish Foreign Policy in a Post-Western Order: Strategic Autonomy or New Forms of Dependence?" *International Affairs* 97, no. 4 (2021): 1086.

<sup>2</sup> "Türk Dış Politikası Kamuoyu Algısı Araştırması 2023," *Kadir Has University*, 2023, accessed date April 10, 2024. <https://www.khas.edu.tr/khas-kurumsal-arastirmalar/>

<sup>3</sup> See, Giulio Gallarotti and Isam Yahia Al-Filali, "Saudi Arabia's Soft Power," *International Studies* 49, no. 3-4 (2012): 233-261; Joseph S. Nye, "On the Rise and Fall of American Soft Power," *New Perspectives Quarterly* 22, (2005): 75-79; Nicu Popescu, "Russia's Soft Power Ambitions," *CEPS Policy Briefs*, no. 115 (2006): 1-3; Andrei P. Tsygankov, "If Not by Tanks, Then by Banks? The Role of Soft Power in Putin's Foreign Policy," *Europe-Asia Studies* 58, no. 7 (2006): 1079-1099.

<sup>4</sup> See, Giacomo Chiozza, *Anti-Americanism and the American World Order* (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009) for an exception.

<sup>5</sup> Sarah S. Bush and Amaney A. Jamal, "Anti-Americanism, Authoritarian Politics, and Attitudes about Women's Representation: Evidence from a Survey Experiment in Jordan," *International Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2015): 34-45; Daniel Corstange and Nikolay Marinov, "Taking Sides in Other People's Elections: The Polarizing Effect of Foreign Intervention," *American Journal of Political Science* 56, no. 3 (2012): 655-670; Benjamin E. Goldsmith and Yusaku Horiuchi, "In Search of Soft Power: Does Foreign Public Opinion Matter for US Foreign Policy?" *World Politics* 64, no. 3 (2012): 555-585.

the reasons why individuals form positive attitudes towards the US and how security/geopolitics, economy, identity, and domestic factors play out vis-à-vis each other.

The article is structured as follows. The next section presents a literature review on global attitudes towards the US with a specific focus on anti-Americanism, followed by a discussion on the sources of anti-Americanism in Turkish public opinion. The paper then explains the data and research design by presenting the results from an online survey conducted in April 2021 that aims to capture how individuals' foreign policy dispositions and domestic politics shape attitudes toward the US. The final section concludes the paper with a discussion on its contribution to the literature, limitations and implications for future research.

## 2. The Sources of Anti-Americanism: A Literature Review

Anti-Americanism is a complex topic encompassing negative public opinion against the US, the US Government, or American society. It can also include a bias towards the policies and developments in world politics associated with the US government. The early roots of anti-Americanism date back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the US emerged as a global actor. Yet the concept took on a new and more complex character at the end of the Cold War with growing criticisms of the American-led globalization and capitalism worldwide.<sup>6</sup> Anti-Americanism gained a violent character with the 9/11 attacks of the terrorist organization Al Qaeda, which paved the way for "The War on Terror." Since 9/11, there has been an increase in scholarly research and political debate on the topic.<sup>7</sup>

The literature highlights several factors that influence negative opinions against the US in a foreign country. There is a consensus in the literature on the complex and polarizing nature of anti-Americanism. As Rubinstein and Smith argue, 'Anti-Americanism can be likened to an onion; it has many layers, and these need to be peeled and examined separately.'<sup>8</sup> Scholars have developed different definitions of anti-Americanism over the past decades. The early generation of experts on the issue described anti-Americanism with the actions or statements that targeted the policy, culture, values, or citizens of the US,<sup>9</sup> while some of the cultural explanations conceptualized the term as prejudice.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, a useful and well-known approach arises from the scholars who define anti-Americanism with the dynamic changes of individual attitudes towards the US that depend on time and conditions.<sup>11</sup> This strand of the literature demonstrates the multifaceted nature of anti-Americanism by rejecting the characterization of this concept as a uniform phenomenon. Katzenstein and Keohane, for example, examine the profile of anti-American attitudes by demonstrating how the interplay of individuals' opinions, distrust, and bias

<sup>6</sup> Brendon O'Connor, "A Brief History of Anti-Americanism: From Cultural Criticism to Terrorism," *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 23, no. 1 (2004): 78.

<sup>7</sup> Giacomo Chiozza, "Disaggregating Anti-Americanism: An Analysis of Individual Attitudes toward the United States," in *Anti-Americanisms in World Politics*, eds. Robert O. Keohane and Peter J. Katzenstein (New Jersey: Cornell University Press, 2007), 93.

<sup>8</sup> Alvin Z. Rubinstein and Donald E. Smith, "Anti-Americanism in the Third World," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 497, no. 1 (1988): 36.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Minogue, "Anti-Americanism: A View from London," *The National Interest*, no. 3 (1986): 43-49; Jean François Revel, "Contradictions of the Anti-Americanism Obsession," *New Perspectives Quarterly* 20, (2003): 11-27; Russell A. Berman, *Anti-Americanism in Europe: A Cultural Problem* (California: Hoover Institute Press, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Peter J. Katzenstein and Robert O. Keohane, "Varieties of Anti-Americanism: A Framework for Analysis," in *Anti-Americanisms in World Politics*, eds. Peter J. Katzenstein and Robert O. Keohane (New Jersey: Cornell University Press, 2007), 9-38; Sophie Meunier, "The Distinctiveness of French Anti-Americanism," in *Anti-Americanisms in World Politics*, eds. Peter J. Katzenstein and Robert O. Keohane (New Jersey: Cornell University Press, 2007), 129-157; Chiozza, *Anti-Americanism*.

shapes their attitudes toward the US over time.<sup>12</sup> Meunier exemplified this multidimensional and dynamic approach to anti-Americanism in France by demonstrating how the French public held a negative opinion of the Americanization of globalization.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Chiozza finds that there is no single overarching demographic or attitudinal factor from which anti-American attitudes stem.<sup>14</sup>

The problem with such complex and varying definitions of anti-Americanism is that it is hard to measure what is essential for empirically testing public opinion towards the US. Yet, shifts in the global order, critical junctures such as 9/11 and the Iraq War, combined with the growth in the number of democracies have enhanced the political and scholarly interest in how publics react to these events.<sup>15</sup> In parallel, many recent international surveys have provided data about how public opinion is shaped by the US and its policies in different parts of the world. The Gallup International Survey, the Pew Research for Global Attitudes, the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), and the United States Information Agency (USIA) have made concerted efforts to measure attitudes towards the US worldwide. The public opinion literature in the context of anti-Americanism has taken advantage of these easily accessible data sets from large global opinion surveys.

Several studies have focused on empirical sources and consequences of anti-Americanism worldwide by conducting research relying on both quantitative and qualitative methods. Based on the scholarly literature, the sources of anti-Americanism can be examined in two categories: US and non-US factors. The scholars within these categories explain anti-American sentiments in the context of what the US does, what the US is, and a synthesis of these two attributes.<sup>16</sup> The first branch of the literature on sources of anti-Americanism has focused on individuals' dissatisfaction with the US for what it does, namely, its unilateralist behavior in global affairs, hypocritical foreign policies, and political, militaristic, and social oppression towards other countries. Mastanduno explains the countries' dissatisfaction with American unilateralism through the US's disrespect for several multilateral institutions like the United Nations by arguing that such behavior causes increasing ire within the international community.<sup>17</sup> Also, Huntington argues that while the US labeled several countries as 'rogue' states, in the eyes of many others it is itself becoming a 'rogue superpower'.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, Johnston & Stockmann and Tokdemir examine anti-Americanism in the contexts of China and Lebanon, respectively, and find that the most consistently negative views towards the US concern its overall strategy of being a hegemon in the international order, and being perceived as the ally of out-groups.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, the US's alleged hypocrisy impedes the individual's trust in the US and its policies. For example, Moghaddam presents a dataset hypothesizing that individuals'

<sup>12</sup> Keohane and Katzenstein, "Introduction: Politics of Anti-Americanism," 3.

<sup>13</sup> Meunier, "French Anti-Americanism," 129.

<sup>14</sup> Chiozza, *Anti-Americanism*, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Ole Rudolf Holsti, *To See Ourselves as Others See Us: How Publics Abroad View the United States after 9/11* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 11.

<sup>16</sup> Narayan M. Datta, *Anti-Americanism and the Rise of World Opinion: Consequences for the US National Interest* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 8.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Mastanduno, "Preserving the Unipolar Moment: Realist Theories and US grand strategy after the Cold War," *International Security* 21, no. 4 (1997): 58.

<sup>18</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, "The Lonely Superpower," *Foreign affairs* 78, no. 2 (1999): 42.

<sup>19</sup> Alastair I. Johnston and Daniela Stockmann, "Chinese Attitudes toward the United States and Americans," in *Anti-Americanisms in World Politics*, eds. Peter J. Katzenstein and Robert O. Keohane (New Jersey: Cornell University Press, 2007), 160; Efe Tokdemir, "'You are not my type': The Role of Identity in Evaluating Democracy and Human Rights Promotion," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 24, no. 1 (2022): 74-94.



perceived injustice from the US is associated with the violent behavior that constitutes the first step of terrorism.<sup>20</sup> The US support for authoritarian regimes and these regimes' crackdowns on any form of opposition reinforces anti-Americanism among these countries' publics.<sup>21</sup> Some scholars who are particularly focusing on anti-Americanism in the Arab world argue that the US's pro-Israeli position, which comes in the form of economic, political, and military assistance to Israel, and its biased position towards the Arab-Israeli conflict, antagonizes the Arab countries' public opinion.<sup>22</sup>

As a phenomenon of public opinion, anti-Americanism does not emerge only as a response to what the US does, it is also shaped by how local political leaders of foreign countries describe the US for their own political interests.<sup>23</sup> Also, as Furia and Lucas show, the source of anti-Americanism may be based on politics as opposed to cultural or social variables.<sup>24</sup> Empirically, several scholars have shown how policy-makers manipulated the US image for their political gain and interests. For example, Mesitte demonstrates that the political leaders in post-1945 France, Greece, and Italy used anti-American rhetoric to win elections.<sup>25</sup> Blaydes and Linzer also argue that both secularist and Islamist political parties in Arab countries seek to lay claim to anti-Americanism because it remains an issue for both sides to possess credible associations.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, by conducting an individual-level regression analysis in several Latin American countries, Azpuru and Boniface find that the level of anti-Americanism increases at the individual level when the domestic leader has a negative stance towards the US.<sup>27</sup>

The literature has also discussed the consequences of anti-Americanism for US foreign policy priorities and interests. Accordingly, the erosion of the US image and US-led values in global terms might impede American strategic interest in the long run. In short, the consolidation of anti-Americanism worldwide hurts US hard and soft power.<sup>28</sup> The consequences of anti-Americanism could have an adverse impact in multiple realms, such as military operations, diplomacy, trade, and foreign aid.

To remedy the negative consequences for US foreign policy, Washington has developed strategies to boost its reputation in the eyes of foreign publics. In the aftermath of 9/11, the US adopted a more proactive approach for public diplomacy, integrating it as a central component of its global strategy. The objective of this strategy was to win hearts and minds of

<sup>20</sup> Fathali M. Moghaddam, "The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration," *American Psychologist* 60, no. 2 (2005): 162.

<sup>21</sup> Abdel M. Abdallah, "Causes of Anti-Americanism in the Arab World: A Socio-Political Perspective," *Middle East* 7, no. 4 (2003): 63; Marc Lynch, "Anti-Americanism in the Arab World," in *Anti-Americanisms in World Politics*, eds. Peter J. Katzenstein and Robert O. Keohane (New Jersey: Cornell University Press, 2007), 196-224; Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Lars Berger, "Foreign Policies or Culture: What Shapes Muslim Public Opinion on Political Violence against the United States?" *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 6 (2014): 782-796.

<sup>22</sup> Abdallah, "Causes of Anti-Americanism," 196; Andrew L. Hammond, *What the Arabs Think of America* (Oxford: Greenwood World Publishing, 2007); Kylie Baxter and Shahram Akbarzadeh, *US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Roots of Anti-Americanism* (London: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> Lisa Blaydes and Drew A. Linzer, "Elite Competition, Religiosity, and Anti-Americanism in the Islamic World," *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 2 (2012): 227.

<sup>24</sup> Peter A. Furia and Russell E. Lucas, "Arab Muslim Attitudes toward the West: Cultural, Social, and Political Explanations," *International Interactions* 34, no. 2 (2008): 191.

<sup>25</sup> Paulo Z. Messitte, "The Politics of Anti-Americanism in France, Greece, and Italy," PhD diss., (New York University, 2004), 2.

<sup>26</sup> Blaydes and Linzer, "Elite Competition, Religiosity, and Anti-Americanism," 230.

<sup>27</sup> Dinorah Azpuru and Dexter Boniface, "Individual-level Determinants of Anti-Americanism in Contemporary Latin America," *Latin American Research Review* 50, no. 3 (2015): 112.

<sup>28</sup> Efe Tokdemir, "Winning Hearts and Minds (!) The Dilemma of Foreign Aid in Anti-Americanism," *Journal of Peace Research* 54, no. 6 (2017): 819-832.

the publics in multiple countries. However, an analysis of the relevant literature reveals that the US efforts in this regard have not yielded the desired outcomes. For example, intervening in elections to support democratization in developing countries<sup>29</sup> and support for women's representation in politics in countries going through a process of democratization, did not result in an increase in favorable opinion towards the US.<sup>30</sup> Contrary to the expectations, US-based student exchange programs, which are associated with the diffusion of liberal ideas and democratic practices within authoritarian states<sup>31</sup>, have only had a limited effect in cultivating favorable perceptions of the US beyond the elites and among the public.

Moreover, another traditional tool to foster pro-American sentiments and attitudes is foreign aid. As Fleck & Kilby argue, a remarkable increase in American aid after 9/11 and the War on Terror demonstrates that the US benefits from foreign aid as an instrument to renew its image.<sup>32</sup> Through a survey of citizens in 14 countries that receive US military aid, Allen et al. find that the overall positivity rate increases after military-aid contact with the US.<sup>33</sup> However, similar to other public diplomacy efforts of the US, such a strategy has not always given the desired outcomes and has even sometimes resulted in the feeding of anti-American opinion among individuals. For example, Tokdemir notes that American foreign aid can feed anti-American attitudes because it indirectly creates “winners and losers” in a society; losers within these countries may never benefit from such aid and thus may harbor strong anti-American opinions.<sup>34</sup>

### 2.1. Sources of Anti-Americanism in Turkish Public Opinion

While global trends influence Turkish public opinion towards the US, it also has unique characteristics in some cases. The country's geostrategic location between Europe and Asia; long-standing historical ties with the US; NATO membership; and internal dynamics are all influential for the public's view. Moreover, anti-American attitudes in Türkiye are embraced by nearly all segments of Turkish society; secular, nationalist, leftist, and Islamist traditions can share anti-American attitudes with different motivations.<sup>35</sup>

The scholarly literature has investigated anti-American sentiments among the Turkish public through what the US is and does as well as based on internal factors. Still, there are important gaps to fill in terms of the sources of attitudes towards the US in Türkiye. First, the literature mostly focuses on the demand side, as characteristics of the society are the main determinants of attitudes and behavior. Second, the literature focuses on negative attitudes toward the US, typically anti-Americanism, and does not delve deeply into individuals' positive opinions about the US or the factors that might potentially influence individuals' attitudes positively. The framework this paper presents regarding the dimensions of Turkish public opinion towards the US begins with evaluating the divergent root causes. The three

<sup>29</sup> Corstange and Marinov, “Taking Sides in Other People's Elections,” 656.

<sup>30</sup> Bush and Jamal, “Anti-Americanism, Authoritarian Politics, and Attitudes about Women's Representation,” 35.

<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of US-based exchange programs on liberalism and democracy in authoritarian countries, see Carol Atkinson, “Does Soft Power matter? A Comparative Analysis of Student Exchange Programs 1980–2006,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 6, no.1 (2010): 2.

<sup>32</sup> Robert K. Fleck and Christopher Kilby, “Changing aid regimes? US Foreign Aid from the Cold War to the War on Terror,” *Journal of Development Economics* 91, no. 2 (2010): 186.

<sup>33</sup> Michael A. Allen et al., “Outside the Wire: US Military Deployments and Public Opinion in Host States,” *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 2 (2020): 327.

<sup>34</sup> Tokdemir, “Winning hearts and minds (!),” 819-820.

<sup>35</sup> Aylin Güney, “Anti-Americanism in Turkey: Past and Present,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 3 (2008): 472; Ömer Taşpınar, “The Anatomy of Anti-Americanism in Turkey,” *Insight Turkey* 7, no. 2 (2005): 83; Efe Tokdemir, “Feels like Home: Effect of Transnational Identities on Attitudes towards Foreign Countries,” *Journal of Peace Research* 58, no. 5 (2021): 1034-1048.

primary dimensions of the Turkish public opinion towards the US can be categorized as political, economic, and security related. These three dimensions in fact take their roots from long-standing historical ties and have been shaped by different issues and events over time.

Firstly, the roots of the Turkish public's current view on the US date back to the early Cold War period. The US–Türkiye relationship entered a new phase with the Cold War, and since then, the Turkish public's perception of the US, its foreign policy, and the transatlantic alliance has been affected by the complex dynamics of the relationship over the decades.<sup>36</sup> The Truman Doctrine highlighted a common strategic interest between Türkiye and the US. Also, Türkiye became one of the beneficiaries of the Marshall Plan, which directed a large amount of economic foreign aid to the country.<sup>37</sup> Türkiye's participation in the Korean War in 1950 and the country's membership of NATO in 1952 marked critical junctures for Türkiye's relations with the US.<sup>38</sup>

Despite the intensifying partnership and converging interests between the US and Türkiye during the Cold War, relations suffered from major drawbacks, which shaped the Turkish public's opinion towards the US. The Jupiter missile crisis (1962-63), Johnson's letter (1964), and the Opium Ban (1971) constituted major turning points for the relationship as well as the formation of negative attitudes towards the US.<sup>39</sup> Following each of these events, there was a sharp increase in anti-American sentiments and anti-American protests in Türkiye.<sup>40</sup> It should be noted that most of the protests during this overall period came from left-wing groups. Criss argues that anti-American sentiments were widespread in the worldviews of the Turkish leftist groups, who regularly organized demonstrations against the US in the 1970s.<sup>41</sup>

Nevertheless, the roots of anti-Americanism during the Cold War years cannot be explained solely by left-wing motivations. The Cyprus dispute and the following arms embargo imposed by the US in response to the Turkish military operation on the island in 1974 also enflamed a nationalist-sovereign type of anti-Americanism in Türkiye. Criss contends that the roots of anti-Americanism stemmed from the Turkish endeavors to preserve national sovereignty.<sup>42</sup> In another leading article, Türkmen conceptualizes Turkish-based anti-Americanism within the definition and typology of Katzenstein and Keohane's work. Türkmen takes the idiosyncrasies of anti-Americanism in Türkiye into the category of sovereign nationalist anti-Americanism, where national identity is the most important political value behind the negative attitude.<sup>43</sup> In a similar vein, Grigoriadis and Aras argue that contemporary anti-American sentiments are primarily nationalist-sovereign, and the anti-Americanism in Turkish public opinion is coupled with an anti-US media landscape.<sup>44</sup> Such divergent motivations among the Turkish public sets the country apart from anti-American behavior elsewhere in the Middle East.

<sup>36</sup> Özgehan Şenyuva and Mustafa Aydın, "Turkish Public Opinion and Transatlantic Relations," in *Turkey's Changing Transatlantic Relations*, eds. Eda Kuşku Sönmez and Çiğdem Üstün (London: Lexington Books. 2021), 265-282.

<sup>37</sup> Güney, *Anti-Americanism in Turkey*, 472.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 475.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 477.

<sup>40</sup> Sellers G. Harris, *Troubled Alliance: Turkish-American Problems in Historical Perspective, 1945-1971 - Vol. 2* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1972), 125.

<sup>41</sup> Nur Bilge-Criss, "A Short History of Anti-Americanism and Terrorism: The Turkish Case," *The Journal of American History* 89, no. 2 (2002): 472-484; Nur Bilge-Criss, "Mercenaries of Ideology: Turkey's Terrorism War," in *Terrorism and Politics*, ed. Barry Rubin (London: Palgrave Macmillan. 1991), 127.

<sup>42</sup> Criss, "A Short History of Anti-Americanism," 472-484.

<sup>43</sup> Füsün Türkmen, "Anti-Americanism as a Default Ideology of Opposition: Turkey as a Case Study," *Turkish Studies* 11, no. 3 (2010): 342.

<sup>44</sup> Ioannis N. Grigoriadis and Ümit Erol Aras, "Distrusted Partnership: Unpacking Anti-Americanism in Turkey," *Middle East Policy* 30, no. 1 (2023): 122-136.

As seen above, anti-Americanism in Turkish public opinion overwhelmingly reflected the ideological polarization during the Cold War, but also included some geopolitical concerns. Yet, in the post-Cold War period, the geopolitical and security-related dimensions of anti-Americanism in Türkiye increased. The American war on terror, and specifically the invasion of Iraq in 2003 constituted a turning point for Turkish public perceptions of the US and its foreign policy decisions.

In the build-up to the invasion of Iraq, the US desired to gain support from the Turkish government. Such support involved allocating a large number of US troops to be based on Turkish soil. Yet, the decision by the Turkish Grand National Assembly in March 2003 against cooperating with the US or allowing US troops on Turkish soil was a clear sign of a negative change in the Turkish-American relationship. Meanwhile, the Turkish public also showed a strong objection to the upcoming US invasion of Iraq. According to the Pew Research Center Report in 2002, 83% of respondents were opposed to allowing US forces in Türkiye for the invasion of Iraq.<sup>45</sup> Turkish public perception of the US took on both a security-related and a political dimension for two reasons. Firstly, the Turkish public was worried that the American deployment of large military bases in Türkiye was against Turkish sovereignty and national security. Secondly, US actions during the Iraq War were considered by the Turkish public as clear signs of support for Kurdish self-determination both in Northern Iraq and even potentially in southeast Türkiye.

The war in Iraq indeed resulted in an increase in the activities of the PKK (*Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan* or *Kurdistan Workers' Party*). Türkiye has been struggling with PKK terrorism since the mid-1980s. US policy towards the PKK and the impact of that policy on US-Turkish relations and public opinion have undergone transformations in different periods. Despite its support for Türkiye's counterterrorism efforts during the 1990s, the US changed its policy during and in the immediate aftermath of the Iraq War. The US military and intelligence services provided little support to Ankara against the PKK – Iraqi insurgency and Al Qaeda in Iraq were their main focus. PKK-related complications during the Iraq War period led to a new crisis in bilateral relations, one which negatively influenced both elite and public opinion in Türkiye towards the US.<sup>46</sup> The Syrian civil war that started in 2011 marked another turning point in US-Türkiye relations. Since 2015, the US has built a close partnership with the PKK-linked YPG (*Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units*) against ISIS (*the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria*).<sup>47</sup> As Türkiye's main national security concerns have continued to revolve around PKK terrorism, the US decision has resulted in increasing anti-Americanism among the Turkish public.

Another turning point in the context of security-related dimensions of the anti-American view in Türkiye was the failed coup attempt of July 2016. The Turkish government has accused the US government of hosting the coup plotters such as Fetullah Gülen, the leader of the Gülenist movement, who has resided in the US since 1999. As other papers in this issue explore in detail, Türkiye's purchase of the Russian S-400 air defense systems in 2017 and the Pastor Brunson crisis between Ankara and Washington have further exacerbated bilateral

<sup>45</sup> "What the World Thinks in 2002," *PEW Research Center*, 2003, accessed date April 12, 2024. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2002/12/04/what-the-world-thinks-in-2002/>

<sup>46</sup> Richard Outzen, "Costly Incrementalism: US PKK Policy and Relations with Türkiye," *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace* 0, no. 0 (2024): 1-22.

<sup>47</sup> Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas, *Türkiye, the PKK, and U.S. Involvement: A Chronology* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2019), accessed date 21 April, 2024. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11380>

ties.<sup>48</sup> The growing military cooperation between the US and Greece in the past few years might have contributed to the Turkish public's perception of being surrounded by American military bases. Most recently, we would expect Washington's open political support for Israel's military operation over Gaza to further consolidate the negative attitudes towards the US among Turkish public opinion.

The negative views of the Turkish public towards the US and its policies have also been observed statistically. According to results from the Kadir Has University public opinion surveys between 2018 and 2022, respondents consistently rank the US as the biggest threat to Türkiye's national security. Similarly, most respondents think terrorism-related issues constitute the main problem in bilateral relations. In terms of the future of US-Türkiye ties, the majority of the respondents expect bilateral relations to either remain unchanged or get even worse.<sup>49</sup> Both the political and security-related dimensions of Turkish public opinion towards the US show that contrary to emotional, religious, or ideological reactions, anti-Americanism in Türkiye is directly related to the resentment of American policies that are viewed as a threat to the country's sovereignty and interests.

The third dimension of Turkish public opinion towards the US is economic. Since the Marshall Plan, the US has had close economic ties and cooperation with Türkiye in the scope of foreign aid, trade, and investment. Since the Cold War period, the US has played an important role in Türkiye's adaptation to the market economy. Even though the public's views on national security and political dimensions have typically seen a negative trend and fed anti-Americanism in Türkiye, the US global economic power and its economic ties with Türkiye have produced a rather positive perception. For example, Sadık found that the Turkish public has increasingly recognized the importance of bilateral trade with the US.<sup>50</sup> Despite moments of crises such as the Trump administration's decision to increase tariffs on Turkish steel and aluminum in August 2018 and implement sanctions against Türkiye's Defense Industry Agency in December 2020 under CAATSA<sup>51</sup>, bilateral economic ties have remained strong and resilient. American firms have been among the top investors to the Turkish economy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century alongside European firms. In 2022, Türkiye's exports to the US reached \$22 billion, while it imported goods and services worth \$19.5 billion from the US.<sup>52</sup> Unlike its trade with countries like Russia and China, Türkiye enjoys a trade surplus in its bilateral trade with the US.

### 3. Empirical Research Design

#### 3.1. Data

To examine the determinants of the variation in individuals' opinions towards the US in Türkiye, we conducted an online survey reaching out to 2,522 adults in 72 of the 81 districts in Türkiye, from April 20 to April 27, 2021. We utilized the Dynata Research Company's

<sup>48</sup> Cem Birol, "Contractual Origins of Anti-Americanism: Pew 2013 Results," *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace* 13, no. 2 (2024): 215-235; Seçkin Köstem, "Russian-Turkish Cooperation in Syria: Geopolitical Alignment with Limits," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 34, no. 6 (2023): 795-817.

<sup>49</sup> "Türk Dış Politikası Kamuoyu Algısı Araştırması 2023."

<sup>50</sup> Giray Sadık, *American Image in Turkey: US Foreign Policy Dimensions* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 81.

<sup>51</sup> "Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act of August 2017," *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, August 2, 2017, accessed date 29 August 2024. <https://ofac.treasury.gov/sanctions-programs-and-country-information/countering-americas-adversaries-through-sanctions-act-related-sanctions>

<sup>52</sup> "Republic of Türkiye," *Office of the United States Trade Representative*, 2023, accessed date August 29, 2024. <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/europe-middle-east/europe/turkey>



participant panels for the purpose of sampling, where the respondents were randomly selected from within those panels. Participants completed the survey in, on average, 9 minutes, with a standard deviation of 2.5, a minimum of 2, and a maximum of 24 minutes.

To acquire a robust sample, we excluded the participants who completed the survey in fewer than four minutes or more than 15 minutes. Additionally, we dropped the respondents who did not pass the three attention check questions. In each attention check question, we asked participants to select a specific choice, so that we could ensure they read the questions first. Our sample exhibits similarities in demographic features with the broader Turkish population in terms of gender (i.e., sample: 54% female, population: 51% female), age (i.e., sample median age: 34, population median age: 33), and ethnic identity (i.e., sample Kurdish citizen ratio: 9%; pro-Kurdish political party vote ratio in 2023 general elections: 8.8%). There is a lack of available census data to measure the ratio of ethnic Kurds in the population.

Nonetheless, our sample contains significantly more educated participants and a greater proportion of opposition supporters compared to the general population (2019 incumbent vote: 52%; sample incumbent vote: 29%). According to this, one can conclude that our sample is not nationally representative. Given the challenges posed by the lack of nationwide and high-quality internet access, it is not surprising to reach this result. However, given the similarities between sample vs. population means in terms of gender, age, and ethnic distributions, we have developed weights regarding political party preferences to align our predictions closer to the actual population parameters. To this purpose, we have used the results of the Turkish General Elections held in 2018 to generate the weights and conducted all our primary analyses anew, this time using political party weights.

### 3.2. Independent variables

Three independent variables form the foundation of our argument: demographic factors, political, and foreign policy attitudes. We constitute these variables based on particular dimensions. Firstly, in demographic variables, we examine people's age (continuous measure), gender (male vs. female), level of income (6-points scale), and education (9-points scale). Secondly, for political attitudes we include individual frequency of following news (factor analysis predicted scores), interest in voting (4-points Likert scale), anti-government sentiments (vote for opposition or not), religious affiliation (11-points thermometer), and ethnicity (Kurdish vs. others). Lastly, foreign policy attitudes of individuals cover divergent preferences toward foreign policy practices such as left-right nexus, national pride, isolationism, cosmopolitanism, and multilateralist tendencies, all measured in standard batteries reported in the Appendix. These three independent variables are the basis for assessing individuals' negative and positive attitudes towards the US over time and are determinants to understand the main motivations behind these attitudes.

### 3.3. Dependent variables

The dependent variables of this research comprise different dimensions that affect individuals' attitudes towards the US. Survey respondents within Türkiye were questioned about their attitudes towards the US in the context of these divergent dimensions. These dimensions are derived from the main sources of anti-Americanism in Türkiye and the key issues of Türkiye-American relations. Thus, the dependent variables of this research focus on a wide range of aspects of the US, including what it is, what it does, and its long-standing relations



with Türkiye. We used a 3-point Likert scale (negative-neutral-positive) to ask respondents which aspects affect their attitudes towards the US and then coded positive as 1, and neutral and negative as 0 in order to determine the factors that contribute to US-Türkiye relations. Each aspect is explained in detail.

*Historical Dimension of US-Türkiye Relations:* The historical ties between the two countries are the first dimension affecting individual negative and positive attitudes towards the US in Türkiye. We analyze the impact of individuals' demographic features, foreign policy, and political attitudes on the historical dimension of US-Türkiye relations. The differences in public opinion are embodied within these variables. One can expect that public perception against the US has developed in parallel with the historical political developments in Türkiye; plus, US foreign policy choices have also impacted individuals' attitudes.

*US Economic Power in the World:* The influence of US economic power over Turkish public opinion can be characterized in two ways. First is the US role in Türkiye's marketization and development process. Since the Marshall Plan, Türkiye has received development aid from the US, which has increased economic ties and cooperation between the two countries. Second, is the US's economic power in the world. Hence, we expect that US economic power and its role in the Turkish economy have also shaped public opinion in Türkiye.

*Trade Relations between US-Türkiye:* Consistent with the global economic power of the US, we argue that Turkish public opinion recognizes the importance of trade relations between the US and Türkiye.

*The Position of the US regarding Türkiye's Fight against the PKK:* US position towards PKK terrorism and Türkiye's counterterrorism practices have substantial influence over public opinion. In line with the strong objection to US forces in Türkiye during the Iraq War, US support for the YPG forces in Syria has escalated the anti-American attitude in the Turkish public. Thus, we argue that what the US does in the context of the PKK issue is a strong determinant of understanding Turkish public opinion toward the country.

*Erdoğan-Biden Relationship:* The individual level relations between the leaders of the US and Türkiye, Biden and Erdoğan respectively, might have also influenced Turkish public opinion vis-à-vis the US. Four particular issues came to the agenda for US-Türkiye relations and shaped the Erdoğan-Biden relationship in recent years. These issues are as follows: Türkiye's purchase of Russian-made S-400 missiles and the following US sanctions; US support for the YPG in Syria; the Eastern Mediterranean dispute over the extraction of natural resources; and Biden's views on Türkiye's democratic backsliding during Erdoğan's rule.<sup>53</sup> Given these contemporary issues, we argue that leader-to-leader relations have also influenced public opinion toward the US.

*American Democracy:* Among the main explanations for hostility towards the US has been a rejection of its political system of democracy.<sup>54</sup> Given that the US has been a democratic success story for more than two centuries and has spread such ideals to the world, it is important to test the effect of regime type on individual attitudes. We argue that both the US democratic political system and its ideal to spread democracy worldwide have influenced the opinions of the different segments of Turkish society.

<sup>53</sup> Galip Dalay, "US-Turkey Relations will Remain Crisis-Ridden for a Long Time to Come," *Brookings*, January 29, 2021, accessed date April 18, 2024. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/us-turkey-relations-will-remain-crisis-ridden-for-a-long-time-to-come/>

<sup>54</sup> Juan Cole, "Anti-Americanism: It's the Policies," *The American Historical Review* 111, no. 4 (2006): 1121.

*US Military Supremacy:* US military supremacy is expected to shape Turkish public opinion due to both national security concerns and the dynamics of the transatlantic alliance. The fact that the two countries have recently had disagreements over geopolitical issues while maintaining their alliance has generated mixed sentiments among the public. While some individuals support the alliance and view US military supremacy as a guarantee for stability and security, others perceive it as a threat to Türkiye’s security and interests.

*American Culture/Civilization:* The spread of American values and lifestyle as well as ideas associated with American culture through movies, television shows, news, and other sources have had an impact on individuals from various socio-economic conditions in Türkiye. Here, we argue that the widespread dissemination of such ideas and cultural values may lead to a fragmentation in public attitudes toward the US given the ideological predisposition of Turkish citizens.

Table 1. Questions to Measure Dimensions of pro-American Attitudes

	Positive	Negative	Neither Positive Nor Negative
Historical background of US-Türkiye relations			
Trade relations between US and Türkiye			
Interpersonal relations between Erdoğan and Biden			
US acts regarding Türkiye’s fight against terrorism			
The fact that US is a democratic regime			
The fact of US military supremacy in the world			
The fact that US is the greatest economy in the world			
American culture and civilization			

#### 4. Results

In our research model, we applied a logistic regression given our dependent variable is in binary fashion, to show which dimensions influence the Turkish public opinion towards the US. The findings indicate that Turkish public opinion is influenced by multiple factors related to both countries’ characteristics and foreign policies, as well as bilateral relations between the US and Türkiye. It is also observed that three independent variables related to individuals’ demographic features and political and foreign policy attitudes have shown variety among aspects. In this section, we discuss our findings in detail.

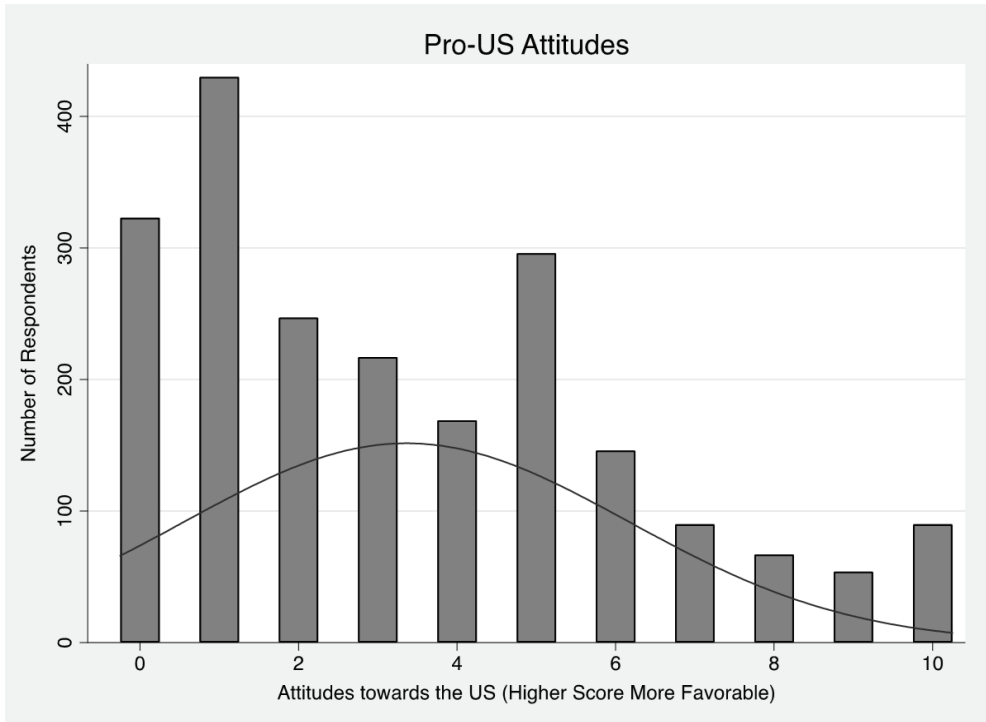


Figure 1. General Attitudes of Participants towards the US

To begin with a macro-analysis, Figure 1 provides a general picture of Turkish public opinion toward the US. The results indicate that the probability of exhibiting anti-American attitudes is high within the general perception of the population. As seen in Figure 1, while around 30% of respondents scored 1, 2 and 3, indicating a very negative attitude towards the US, more positive opinions were less common, with only around 8% of respondents giving scores of 8, 9 and 10. Yet, this picture alone cannot reveal the dimensionality regarding the sources of negative attitudes. Moreover, unlike negative attitudes, one should also explain what makes the US more favorable in the eyes of a relatively negative public opinion. Therefore, we require further analyses to understand why the Turkish public demonstrates positive opinions of the US.

In Table 2, we present the results of an empirical model explaining the sources of positive attitudes towards the U.S employing a logistic regression model. We report the findings for each dependent variable in separate columns, namely the contribution of various dimensions towards positive attitudes towards the US. We focus on eight dependent variables, with each variable being estimated using a single model. This model incorporates demographic factors, political and foreign policy attitudes as variables. The results of this estimation are presented in Figures 2-8.

Table 2. Pro-US Components

Dependent Variables:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	History	Culture	Military	Trade	Economy	Democracy	Biden	Terrorism
Age	0.016** (0.005)	-0.005 (0.005)	-0.011* (0.005)	0.004 (0.005)	-0.011* (0.005)	-0.001 (0.005)	0.005 (0.006)	0.009 (0.007)
Female	0.436*** (0.123)	0.447*** (0.105)	0.165 (0.103)	0.157 (0.105)	0.150 (0.098)	0.102 (0.098)	0.649*** (0.141)	0.695*** (0.154)
Income	0.090* (0.040)	0.101** (0.036)	0.063 (0.035)	0.102** (0.035)	0.046 (0.033)	0.029 (0.034)	0.060 (0.045)	0.149** (0.050)
Education	0.205** (0.064)	-0.006 (0.051)	0.024 (0.049)	0.096 (0.051)	0.015 (0.046)	0.131** (0.048)	0.173* (0.075)	0.225** (0.077)
News Following	-0.062 (0.081)	0.036 (0.068)	0.108 (0.065)	-0.026 (0.066)	0.128* (0.062)	-0.053 (0.060)	-0.157 (0.091)	-0.106 (0.106)
Interest in Pols	0.322** (0.102)	0.108 (0.079)	-0.053 (0.074)	0.283*** (0.080)	-0.123 (0.071)	0.063 (0.071)	0.223* (0.110)	0.250* (0.122)
Anti-Gov	0.168 (0.136)	0.361** (0.118)	0.307** (0.115)	0.238* (0.119)	0.141 (0.110)	0.345** (0.111)	-0.120 (0.158)	0.004 (0.174)
Religious	0.056* (0.025)	-0.007 (0.021)	0.009 (0.021)	0.038 (0.021)	0.008 (0.020)	-0.039* (0.020)	0.101*** (0.030)	0.075* (0.033)
Kurd	0.020 (0.217)	0.232 (0.180)	0.177 (0.168)	0.218 (0.173)	0.092 (0.163)	0.169 (0.162)	-0.065 (0.242)	0.442 (0.248)
Left-Right	0.078** (0.028)	0.083*** (0.025)	0.036 (0.023)	0.059* (0.023)	0.028 (0.022)	0.044 (0.023)	0.116*** (0.031)	0.109** (0.036)
National Pride	0.043 (0.063)	-0.083 (0.055)	-0.062 (0.051)	0.015 (0.054)	-0.017 (0.050)	-0.077 (0.050)	0.138 (0.079)	0.054 (0.075)
Isolationist	0.091 (0.052)	0.270*** (0.048)	0.255*** (0.047)	0.022 (0.044)	0.277*** (0.044)	0.226*** (0.043)	-0.052 (0.059)	0.132* (0.063)
Cosmopolitist	0.341*** (0.056)	0.229*** (0.048)	0.088* (0.044)	0.156*** (0.046)	0.096* (0.043)	0.082 (0.043)	0.254*** (0.063)	0.328*** (0.069)
Multilateralist	-0.085 (0.062)	-0.036 (0.058)	0.107 (0.059)	0.023 (0.058)	0.081 (0.057)	0.209*** (0.057)	-0.074 (0.073)	-0.260*** (0.072)
Constant	-7.274*** (0.743)	-3.540*** (0.604)	-2.561*** (0.572)	-4.443*** (0.584)	-1.920*** (0.538)	-3.403*** (0.547)	-6.637*** (0.853)	-7.632*** (0.955)
Observations	1964	1964	1964	1964	1964	1964	1964	1964

Standard errors in parentheses, \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001

Figure 2 illustrates the impact of US-Türkiye historical relations on individuals' positive attitudes toward the US. The study revealed that factors such as individuals' age, income, gender, education, voting interest, religious tendencies, ideological stance, and cosmopolitan ideas, influenced how they assess the role US-Türkiye historical relations play in their attitudes towards the US. The probability of expressing a positive attitude towards historical ties is notably high when participants' age, income, education, and religious level increase. For example, the impact of US history on the probability of exhibiting a positive attitude towards the US increases from approximately 15% to 35% as the age of the participants increases. At the same time, as participants' income and education levels increase, the impact size increases from approximately 15% to 25% for income levels and from around 10% to over 30% for education levels when the influence of historical relations is considered. Female participants are 25% more likely to show positive attitudes than men.

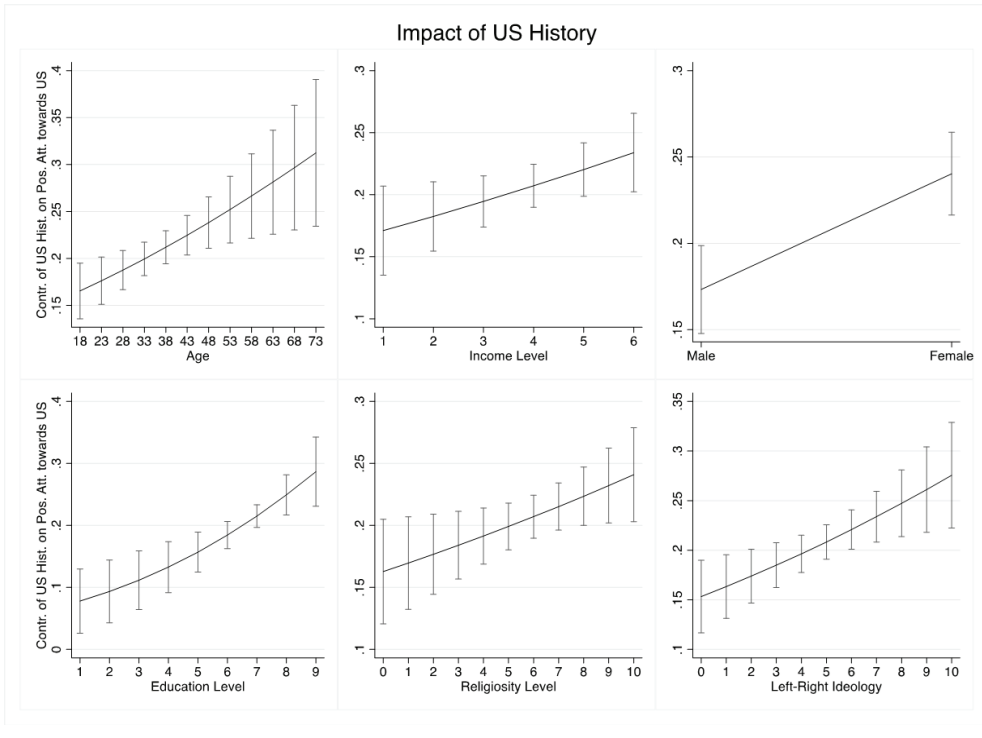


Figure 2. Impact of US History

The religiosity variable indicates that individuals with a higher level of religiosity tend to hold more positive attitudes towards the US when the impact of historical ties between the two countries is considered. Specifically, 10% of those with the lowest level of religiosity display positive attitudes, while 30% of those with the highest level of religiosity display positive attitudes. Lastly, the ideological disposition revealed a clear trend. As one moves to the right on the ideological spectrum, the likelihood of individuals displaying positive attitudes increases; particularly, 35% of those on the far-right exhibit more positive attitudes in the influence of historical relations.

In Figure 3, we present the substantive findings regarding how individuals' positive attitudes towards the US are influenced by American culture and civilization. The results indicate that such impact is conditioned on participants' gender, income level, anti-government stances, ideological orientation, isolationist and cosmopolitan foreign policy attitudes. The predicted probability of American culture and civilization making a positive contribution towards attitudes about the US increases with the individuals' income and anti-government stance. Also, female participants hold a more positive attitude towards the US in the context of American culture. Similar to historical relations, the likelihood of positive opinion is higher as one moves right in the ideological spectrum.

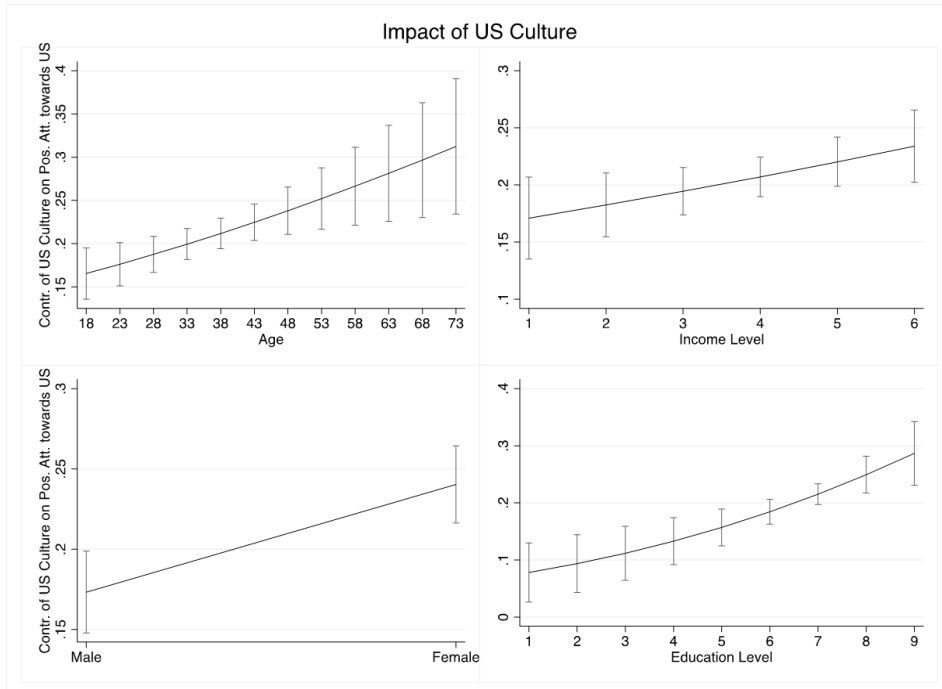


Figure 3. Impact of US Culture and Civilization

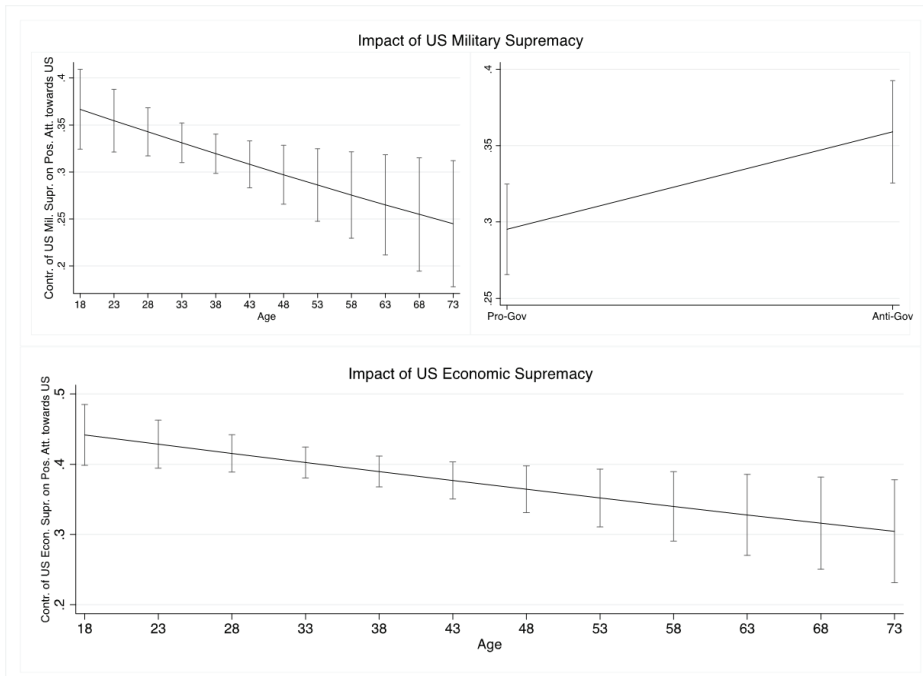


Figure 4a-b. Impact of US Military Supremacy and US Economic Supremacy



The effect of US military supremacy on individuals' positive attitudes towards the US is conditional on individuals' age, anti-government stance, isolationist and cosmopolitan tendencies. We report the substantive results in Figure 4a. The results here indicate that as individuals age, they tend to express more anti-American attitudes once US military's perceived superiority is taken into account. For example, the predicted probability of expressing a positive attitude towards the US in the context of the country's military supremacy is approximately 35% among the youngest participants, while this attitude decreases to approximately 15% among the oldest individuals. Also, individuals who hold opposing views of their government are more likely to hold a positive attitude towards the US under the influence of US military supremacy. The predicted probability of holding a positive attitude towards the US is around 40% among individuals with an anti-government stance compared to those with a pro-government stance.

Regarding the influence of US economic supremacy, our results indicate that individuals' age, frequency of following the news, and isolationist behavior have statistically significant effects on their positive attitudes toward the US. Figure 4b shows that younger participants are more likely to hold a pro-American view considering US economic supremacy in the world. While the probability of holding a positive opinion is approximately 25% among the oldest participants, this number increases to around 45% for the younger group.

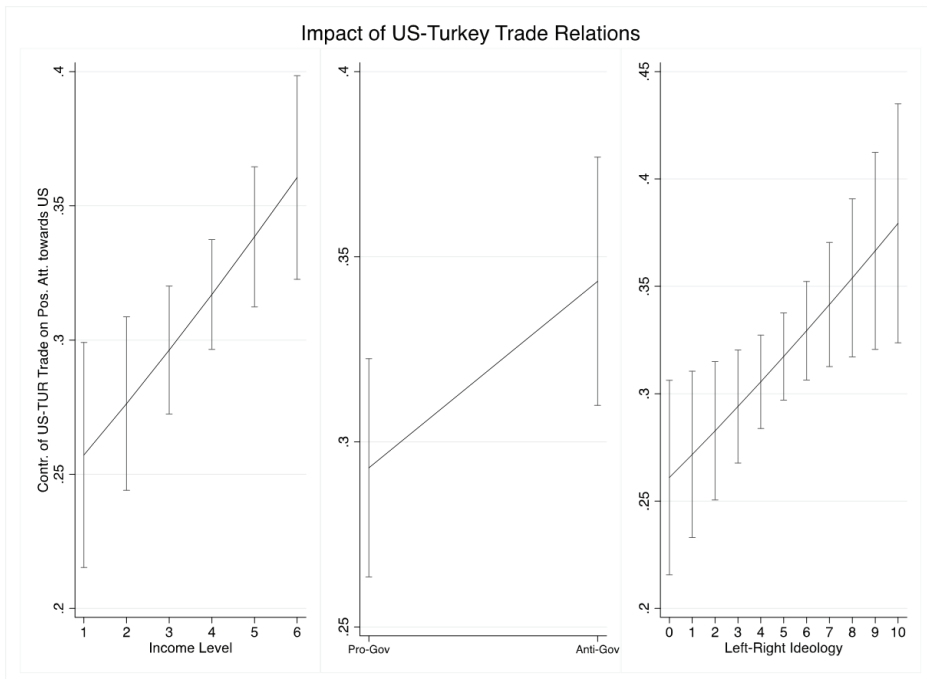


Figure 5. Impact of US-Türkiye Trade Relations

Next, we examine the impact of US -Türkiye trade relations on Turkish public opinion toward the US. Our results report that such impact is conditioned on individuals' income level, interest in politics, anti-government stance, ideological positions, and cosmopolitan

attitudes in foreign policy. In Figure 5, we present that the probability of showing a positive attitude toward the US under the influence of perceived US-Türkiye trade relations increases from approximately 25% to 35% with increasing income. Additionally, individuals with an anti- government stance in Türkiye are likely to exhibit a positive attitude towards the US up to 35%. This number decreases by 25% among those with a pro-government stance. The predicted probabilities of holding a negative attitude towards the US are higher among the left-wing participants. Those on the far left of the ideological spectrum have a probability of a positive attitude of about 25%, while those on the far right have a probability of approximately 45% when it comes to the impact of US-Türkiye trade relations.

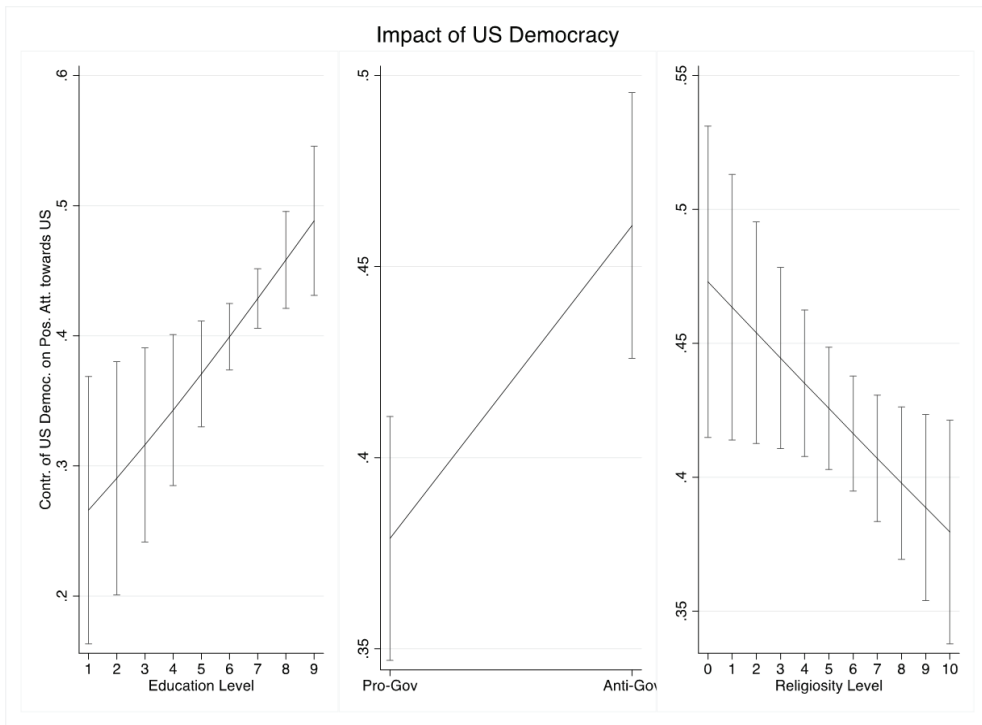


Figure 6. Impact of US Democracy

In Figure 6 we present that the impact of American democracy and the country’s political system on Turkish public perception of the US is conditioned on the level of education, anti-government sentiments, religiosity, and isolationist and cosmopolitan foreign policy attitudes. The predicted probability of a positive attitude is approximately 20% for individuals with the lowest education level, while it rises to around 50% for those with the highest education level. Opposite views of individuals towards their government also increase the likelihood of a positive attitude towards the US regarding perceived US democracy. Participants with anti-government stances are 45% more likely to express a positive attitude towards the US. Also, when individuals’ level of religiosity increases, the probability of holding a negative attitude towards the US increases when the impact of US democracy is considered. Those

who identify themselves as least religious have a positive attitude probability of about 50%, while those who identify themselves as the most religious have a probability of approximately 35%.

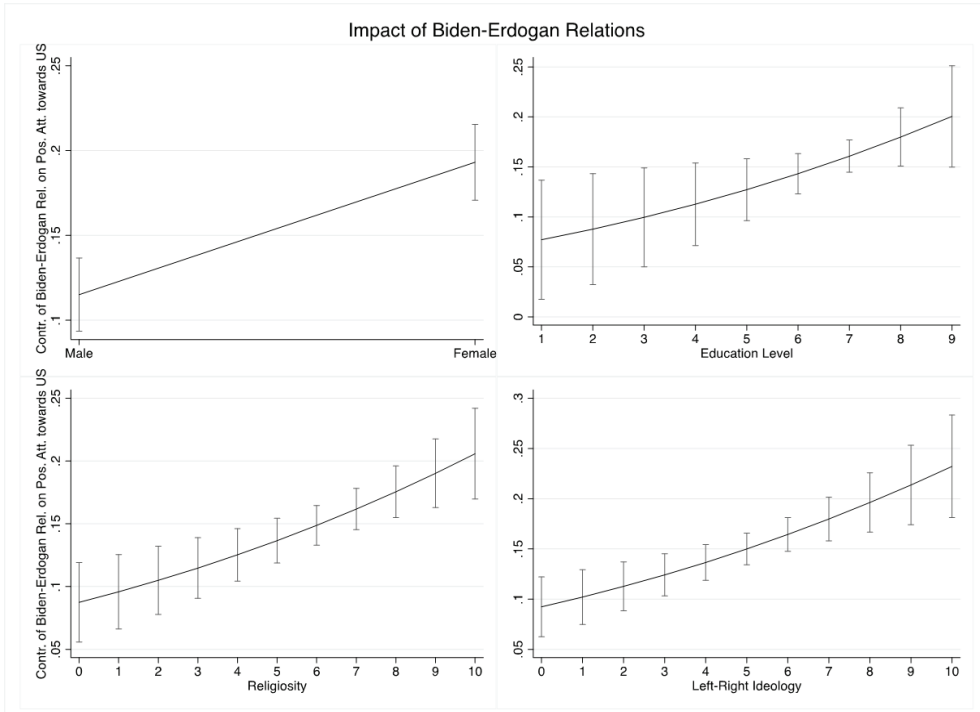


Figure 7. Impact of Biden – Erdoğan Relations

In the context of Biden-Erdogan relations, we found that the gender, level of education, religiosity, ideological position, and cosmopolitan foreign policy attitudes of the participants were significant predictors of their attitudes towards the US. In Figure 7, we report that the predicted probability of holding a pro-American attitude increased when the level of education and the number of female participants increased. Furthermore, the level of religiosity and a right-wing ideological position also demonstrated a likelihood of a positive attitude under the influence of leader-to-leader relations. When the leader-to-leader relations are asked of the participants, females have around 20% probability of holding a positive attitude towards the US. In comparison, the likelihood of showing a positive attitude towards the US is around 10% among male participants. While the probability of showing a more positive view is about 10% at the lower education level, it increases to around 25% at the highest level. Also, at the level of religiosity, the probability of a positive attitude under the influence of Biden-Erdogan relations dynamics ranges from approximately 10% for those with the lowest religiosity level to approximately 25% for those with the highest religiosity level. The ideological shift from left to right among participants also increased positive attitudes toward the US from 10% on the far left to about 25% on the far right.

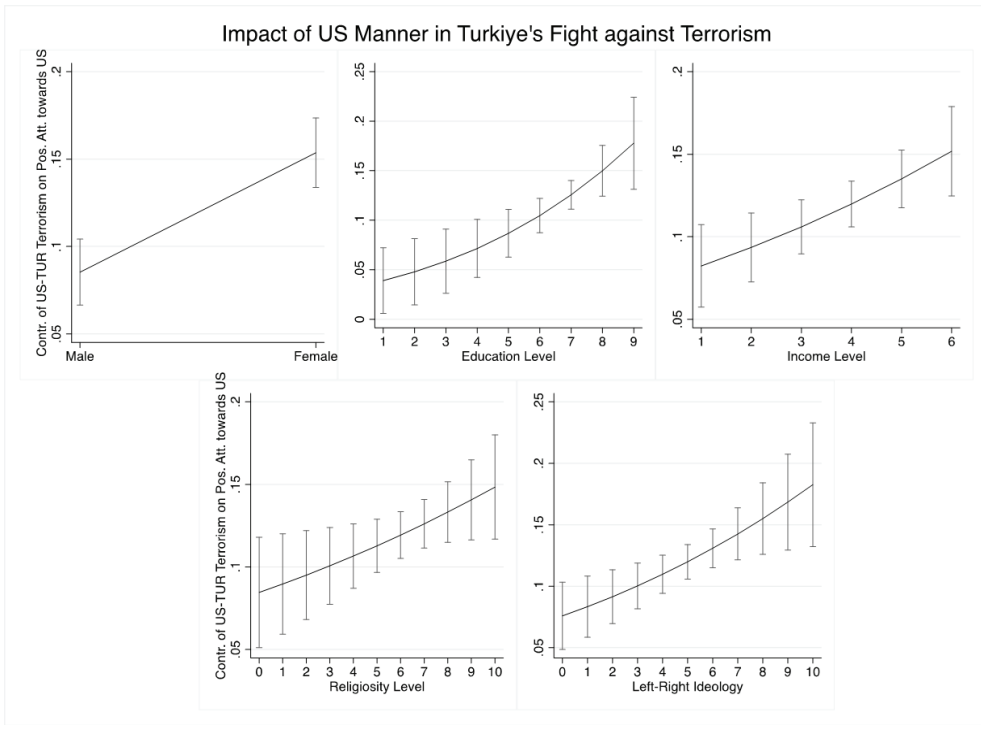


Figure 8. Impact of US Manner in Tukey’s Fight against Terrorism

Lastly, in the context of the impact of the US position in Türkiye’s counter-terrorism efforts on individuals’ likelihood of positive opinion towards the US, we found that individuals’ gender, level of income and education, interest in polls, level of religiosity, ideological position, and cosmopolitanism, isolationist, and multilateralist attitudes in foreign policy are conditional on such influence.

For example, female respondents are more likely to hold a more positive view of the US than male respondents. Indeed, 20% of female participants expressed a positive opinion about the US when the US policy on Türkiye’s fight against the PKK was asked of them. This probability dropped below 10% for male respondents. When the level of income and education increase, the probability of expressing a positive attitude towards the US regarding the impact of US policy on PKK terrorism increases. Moreover, the predicted probability of individuals with the highest religiosity level expressing a positive attitude towards the US is approximately 20%. In comparison, those with the lowest religiosity level show a likelihood of approximately 5%. In the ideological spectrum, the likelihood of showing a positive view towards the US is around 20% among participants who identify themselves as far right. In contrast, the probability of left-wing participants holding a positive attitude is around 5%.

### 5. Conclusion

The literature on attitudes towards the US generally examines the demand side of public opinion. Scholars focus on anti-American attitudes to make sense of countries’ foreign policy objectives. However, we contend that individual attitudes towards the US are multifaceted

and are affected by the US itself and its foreign policies. Thus, we attempted to answer the following question: What are the determinants of the variation in individuals' attitudes towards the US in Türkiye? This question is essential to understand how the US produces divergent attitudes among different layers of the Turkish society. Also, it provides insights into Türkiye's long-standing relationship with the US and its changing foreign policy dynamics by revealing the Turkish public's dynamics.

Our empirical findings support our argument that focusing on the supply side of anti-Americanism in Türkiye is essential. In this study, our empirical model indicates that the eight dependent variables, which represent the US dimensions of Turkish public opinion, exert a significant influence on individuals, shaping their opinions in accordance with their demographic characteristics and political and foreign policy attitudes. Moreover, the findings also reveal that despite the general anti-American sentiment within the society, there is a great variation of causes, which policy-makers should take into account. Looking into the future, we believe that the next step could be to examine Turkish public opinion towards other major powers and especially the European Union, Russia and China. Investigating Turkish public opinion towards other great major powers could allow us to present a comparative dimension to explain why the same individuals have different or similar attitudes towards these countries. Adopting a comparative perspective can also lead us to test if individuals in Türkiye adopt a more structured and comprehensive perspective towards the US compared to other great powers. Moving beyond the Turkish case, our strategy also has implications for the formation of attitudes towards the US in other countries, especially those that have ongoing foreign policy crises with the US. Therefore, the argument can be tested in other contexts.

Finally, the article has implications for US public diplomacy in Türkiye as well as other countries. Most importantly, Washington should put higher effort into developing policies that aim to attract support from different segments of the society. While the US position on the YPG and the PKK will continue to negatively shape individual attitudes, the historical and economic dimension of the bilateral relationship can especially be highlighted by policymakers to improve the American image in the eyes of the Turkish public. The overall decline of US hegemony can be expected to shape different segments of the Turkish public differently. Still, our results indicate that the growing US military presence in Türkiye's close neighborhood (i.e. Greece) will trigger concerns about Türkiye's national security and sovereignty across different layers of the Turkish society. Similarly, the outcome of the upcoming US presidential elections is likely to have a conjunctural effect on the public opinion. Our results have a significant implication for Turkish policy makers as well. Because negative attitudes towards the US are common across different segments of the Turkish society, it is generally risk-free and even beneficial for Turkish politicians to develop an anti-American discourse. Still, it would be wrong to assume that such anti-American rhetoric would always work for domestic political purposes – contrarily, our results demonstrate that the Turkish public may demonstrate positive attitudes towards the US in various dimensions.

All in all, this article introduced a novel approach to understand the complex dynamics of the Turkish public opinion towards the US. While there are undoubtedly more factors at play in shaping public opinion towards the US and other major powers, this study opens a new avenue for future research by focusing on the effect of countries' particular characteristics and policies on individuals.

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**Data Availability Statement:** The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Harvard Dataverse at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/RKZI7Y>

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## The Alliance in the Storm: Geopolitical Representation of the United States in the Turkish Parliament during Détente

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### Abstract

*This article analyzes how the geopolitical representation of the United States in Turkish political discourse changed during the 1960s and 1970s in the context of deep crises between the two countries, such as the Cyprus question, the opium issue, and the US arms embargo on Türkiye. Within the framework of critical geopolitical theory, it uses the concept of “geopolitical representation.” It examines the changes in the geopolitical representation of the United States in Turkish political life through practical geopolitics. To this end, it evaluates the debates, speeches, and correspondence made by the representatives of the ruling and opposition parties and members of the government in the Turkish Grand National Assembly between 1964 and 1979, within the context of the crises in Turkish-American relations, particularly within the foreign policy framework. It is argued that while the alliance between Türkiye and the United States and Türkiye’s membership in NATO were seen as important symbols of Türkiye’s sovereignty and enjoyed unwavering support in the 1950s, tensions with the US, Türkiye’s “strategic partner,” in the 1960s and 1970s led to notable shifts in the Turkish parliament’s narrative. As a pioneer of anti-NATO and anti-US rhetoric, the Workers’ Party of Türkiye (TİP) played a prominent role in shaping parliamentary discussions.*

**Keywords:** Turkish-American relations, détente, Cyprus question, US arms embargo, critical geopolitics

### 1. Introduction

The construction and reproduction of state identity over time is realized through the representational practices of state and non-state actors. This constitutes one of the significant factors influencing the foreign policy-making process. Therefore, analyzing such changes in the geopolitical representational practices of political elites can help to understand both a country’s state identity construction and its foreign policy orientations in a certain period—in this case, those of Türkiye during the détente era of the 1960s and 1970s.

Common perceptions of threat in the face of Cold War rivalries constituted the most important factor bringing Türkiye and the United States (US) closer together. In the 1950s and early 1960s, Turkish-American relations were not marred by difficulties. From Washington’s point of view, Türkiye, as a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and a country in a strategic position, was a crucial ally of the US against Soviet influence in the

eastern Mediterranean and Middle East. Conversely, for Ankara, the US was a vital factor in ensuring Türkiye's security.<sup>1</sup> However, the relationship between the two countries, primarily established on grounds of security concerns during the Cold War, reached an impasse during the period of détente, due to domestic, regional, and international factors.

During the 1960s and 1970s, both countries faced significant challenges, including but not limited to the removal of Jupiter missiles from Türkiye, concerns regarding opium, the Johnson Letter, Türkiye's military intervention in Cyprus in 1974 to protect the Turkish Cypriot community and the subsequent US arms embargo have all been recognized as significant milestones in the alliance.<sup>2</sup> The Johnson Letter and the arms embargo contributed to a rise of anti-American sentiment in Türkiye, prompting the country to independently terminate the 1969 Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) and various associated agreements. Additionally, Türkiye declared that all US facilities within its borders would be placed under "provisional status."<sup>3</sup>

The era of détente had a significant impact on regional dynamics, particularly in the Middle East. During this period, Türkiye and the US faced numerous challenges in the region. One notable example was Türkiye's refusal to allow the US to use its military bases to support Israel during the Arab-Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973.<sup>4</sup> Despite these tensions, relations improved, particularly in the 1980s, as détente came to an end and the "Second Cold War"<sup>5</sup> unfolded internationally.

Based on this backdrop, this article seeks to answer how the geopolitical representation of the United States in Turkish political discourse evolved during the détente period and what impact this evolution had on Turkish foreign policy decisions, particularly in the context of major crises such as the Cyprus conflict, the opium issue, and the US arms embargo. Following critical geopolitical theory, the concept of "geopolitical representation" is used in this study. Tuathail and Agnew argue that geopolitical representations are narratives created and used by powerful actors to frame international issues in ways that justify their policies and actions. They emphasize that these narratives are not neutral; they are actively constructed using political language, imagery, and symbols to represent the world in particular ways. Such representations shape perceptions of issues and influence policy decisions and international relations on the global stage.<sup>6</sup> According to Mamadouh and Dijkink, "Geopolitical representations become more explicit but also more divisive when important decisions have to be taken or a crisis occurs."<sup>7</sup> They also add that "Major changes in the geopolitical context generally bring the reformulation of geopolitical visions, a re-articulation of geographical representations that is necessary to acknowledge and justify

<sup>1</sup> Ayşe Ömür Atmaca, "The Geopolitical Origins of Turkish-American Relations: Revisiting the Cold War Years," *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace* 3, no. 1 (2014): 20.

<sup>2</sup> Çağrı Erhan, "ABD ve NATO'yla İlişkiler," in *Türk Dış Politikası: Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne Olaylar, Belgeler, Yorumlar Cilt I: 1919-1980*, ed. Baskın Oran, (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2001); Mustafa Taner, "Swinging Pendulum of Turkish-American Defense Relations: From the Opium Crisis to Intensified Military Cooperation, 1971-1989," in *Turkish-American Relations since 1783*, eds. Tuğba Ünlü Bilgiç, Bestami S. Bilgiç (London: Lexington Books, 2023), 59.

<sup>3</sup> Laurence Stern, *The Wrong Horse: The Politics of Intervention and the Failure of the American Diplomacy* (New York: Times Books, 1977), 155.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Robellet Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East: Great Power Conflict and Diplomacy in Iran, Turkey, and Greece* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 426.

<sup>5</sup> Fred Halliday, *The Making of the Second Cold War* (2nd edition), (London: Verso, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> Gearóid Ó Tuathail and John Agnew, "Geopolitics and Discourse: Practical Geopolitical Reasoning in American Foreign Policy," *Political Geography* 11, no. 2 (1992): 194.

<sup>7</sup> Virginie Mamadouh and Gertjan Dijkink, "Geopolitics, International Relations and Political Geography: The Politics of Geopolitical Discourse," *Geopolitics* 11, no. 3 (2006) 357.

foreign policy changes.”<sup>8</sup> Such representational practices can be studied through the foreign policy discourse of state officials, academic/semi-academic analyses, writings and speeches of politicians and journalists, geopolitical discourses of various political actors, and even popular media.

Tuathail and Dalby propose a division of geopolitics into three distinct but interconnected areas: formal geopolitics; practical geopolitics; and popular geopolitics. This categorization aims to understand how geopolitical knowledge and discourses are produced, disseminated, and consumed at different levels of society. Formal geopolitics refers to the academic study and theorization of geopolitical issues, while practical geopolitics involves the application of this knowledge by policymakers, and popular geopolitics refers to its dissemination and interpretation through the media and public discourse. The aforementioned knowledge involves the scholarly work of academics, theorists, and researchers, who analyze global political arrangements, strategies, and outcomes. It often involves the publication of theories and models in academic journals, books, and conferences that contribute to the scholarly discourse on geopolitical issues. Practical geopolitics is concerned with the application of this knowledge by state actors and policymakers. This includes how leaders, governments, and military strategists use geopolitical concepts to make decisions, shape foreign policy, and justify their actions to domestic and international audiences. Practical geopolitics can be seen in the speeches of politicians, the formulation of state policies, and the implementation of diplomatic or military strategies. Popular geopolitics refers to the representation and perception of geopolitical issues in popular culture and the media. This includes how movies, television shows, news media, video games, and other cultural products represent international politics, conflicts, and crises.<sup>9</sup>

In this context, this study examines the changes in the geopolitical representation of the US in Turkish political life through practical geopolitics in order to understand how geopolitical knowledge and discourse are produced and disseminated at the state level. It does so by evaluating the debates, speeches, and correspondence made by the representatives of the ruling and opposition parties and members of the government in the Turkish Grand National Assembly between 1964 and 1979, within the framework of the crises in Turkish-American relations, especially in the context of foreign policy. Accordingly, it is divided into two parts. The first part discusses the developments in the 1960s and explains how the opposition to the US was conducted in the Turkish National Assembly under the leadership of the Workers’ Party of Türkiye (*Türkiye İşçi Partisi*, TİP). The second part analyzes the debates in the parliament after the dissolution of the TİP in the 1970s. It is argued in this context that the TİP influenced the debates in the Turkish parliament by evaluating Türkiye’s relations with the US through dependency. These debates continued into the 1970s. The international conditions during the détente period of the Cold War and the deep crises between the two countries created an environment for a change in the geopolitical representation of the US in the Turkish parliament.

## 2. Alliance in Question

After World War II, Türkiye faced a challenging geopolitical landscape due to its proximity to the Soviet Union. The US administration became interested in Türkiye after the Soviet

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Gerardoid Ó Tuathail and Simon Dalby, *Rethinking Geopolitics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 4-5.

Union's territorial claims on the country in 1939.<sup>10</sup> This led to a cooperation between Washington and Ankara to counter the Soviet Union. Hence, it can be argued that the Turkish-American alliance originated based on deeply rooted ideological concerns.

In the 1950s, Turkish-American relations underwent significant transformations driven by shifting geopolitical dynamics and strategic imperatives. With the onset of the Cold War, Türkiye emerged as a crucial ally for the US in the containment of Soviet influence in the Eastern Mediterranean and the broader Middle East region. The signing of the Truman Doctrine in 1947 solidified American support for Türkiye, positioning it as a “bulwark against communist expansionism.”<sup>11</sup> The subsequent implementation of the Marshall Plan provided Türkiye with substantial economic aid, facilitating its post-war reconstruction efforts and fostering closer ties with the US. Moreover, the establishment of NATO in 1949 further solidified the strategic partnership between Türkiye and the US, with Türkiye becoming a member of the alliance in 1952. Throughout the 1950s, military cooperation between the two deepened, as evidenced by the establishment of American military bases in Türkiye and the provision of military assistance to bolster Türkiye's defense capabilities.<sup>12</sup> As Uslu, Bilge Criss and Ünlü Bilgiç have all noted, the roots of anti-Americanism in Türkiye go back to the period between 1945 and 1960, fuelled in particular by public reaction to the aid agreement that followed the Truman Doctrine. These were the years that were initially marked as the golden years of Turkish-American relations. Critics of the time accused the government of making political and economic concessions to the US that were reminiscent of the infamous capitulations of the Ottoman period. There were fears that instead of becoming an equal ally, Türkiye was being downgraded to a US colony, with Turkish affairs managed to suit American rather than Turkish interests. Many also accused America of cultural imperialism. These feelings were particularly strong among left-wing groups, for whom the American presence was a negation of a sovereign and independent Türkiye.<sup>13</sup>

However, despite public opinion between 1947 and 1964, Turkish political elites, regardless of their party affiliation, supported Türkiye's relations with the US and especially its NATO membership in their parliamentary speeches, stressing that this relationship made Türkiye part of the “Western and free world” and that the US and NATO were seen as the “symbol” and “guarantee” of Türkiye's independence. During this period, there were no significant differences between the opposition and the government, especially on foreign policy issues. Members of Parliament from both the ruling and opposition parties stressed the importance of NATO and the US alliance for Türkiye, and almost all parliamentary speeches on foreign policy referred to the foreign policy of the Atatürk era and the principle of “peace

<sup>10</sup> Kamuran Gürün, *Türk-Sovyet İlişkileri: 1920-1953*, (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1991), 276-311.

<sup>11</sup> Behlül Özkan argues that the Soviets did not “demand” territory or military bases from Turkey in 1945. The perceived Soviet threat was instrumental in rallying Turkish public support for a pro-Western foreign policy after World War II. In addition, this perceived threat served as a crucial tool for shaping domestic policy and suppressing dissent. Similarly, Melvyn Leffler asserts that, despite the rhetoric about Soviet expansionism toward the south, that the Soviet demands on Turkey included a significant defensive element. See; Behlül Özkan, “The 1945 Turkish-Soviet Crisis,” *Russia in Global Affairs* 18, no. 2 (2020): 156-187; Melvyn P. Leffler, “Strategy, Diplomacy, and the Cold War: The United States, Turkey, and NATO, 1945-1952,” *The Journal of American History* 71, no. 4 (1985): 807-825.

<sup>12</sup> Ayşe Ömür Atmaca, “Old Game in a New World: Turkey and the United States from Critical Perspective,” (PhD diss. Middle East Technical University, 2011), 82.

<sup>13</sup> Nasuh Uslu, *Türk-Amerikan İlişkileri* (Ankara: 21. Yüzyıl Yayınları, 2000); Nur Bilge Criss, “A Short History of Anti-Americanism and Terrorism: The Turkish Case,” *The Journal of American History* 89, no. 2 (2002): 472-482; Tuğba Ünlü Bilgiç, “The Roots of Anti-Americanism in Turkey, 1945-1960,” *Bilgi* 72 (2015). For a contemporary discussion on Anti-Americanism, see: Cem Birol, “Contractual Origins of Anti-Americanism: Pew 2013 Results,” *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace* 13, no. 2 (2024): 215-235.



at home, peace in the world.”

In 1962, following the Cuban missile crisis, the US removed Jupiter missiles from Türkiye without prior consultation with Ankara. This event marked a significant crisis in the relationship between Türkiye and the US.<sup>14</sup> Although the Turkish government representatives mildly and implicitly criticized the decision of the US to withdraw the Jupiter missiles from its territory without consulting them, there was no strong opposition to the alliance. This is likely due to the considerable military and economic aid Türkiye was receiving from Western countries, particularly the US owing to its membership in NATO. Government officials stated that the withdrawal of the Jupiter missiles was not related to the Cuban missile crisis. They claimed that the decision to withdraw the missiles had been made prior to the crisis and that the issue did not diminish Türkiye’s strategic importance. Instead, the decision was related to technological developments, and Jupiter missiles were replaced by Polaris submarines.<sup>15</sup>

Yet, the Cold War was not a monolithic period. The golden years of the Türkiye and the US came to an end during the era of détente. The term “détente” was widely used in the 1960s and 1970s to describe the efforts made by the US, the Soviet Union, and their respective allies to improve diplomatic, economic, and cultural relations, in order to mitigate the intense ideological and military competition that characterized the Cold War.<sup>16</sup> The détente years also marked a pivotal period in Turkish political history characterized by significant socio-political transformations, ideological contestations, and state interventions. Following the military coup of 1960, Türkiye experienced a series of political upheavals, including the rise of left- and right-wing movements, student activism, and the consolidation of state power.

The 1960 military coup, led by the National Unity Committee (*Milli Birlik Komitesi*, MBK), overthrew the government of Prime Minister Adnan Menderes and initiated a period of military tutelage. A new constitution was adopted in 1961 and aimed to establish a more liberal and democratic political order, albeit under the watchful eye of the military. The emergence of new political actors, including the Justice Party (*Adalet Partisi*, AP) led by Süleyman Demirel, signaled a shift in Turkish politics towards competitive electoral contests.<sup>17</sup>

Changes in the world and in the Cold War conditions were reflected in the discourse of the Turkish political elite. The 1960s witnessed the emergence of diverse ideological currents and social movements that challenged the status quo and sought to articulate alternative visions for the Turkish society. Left-wing groups, inspired by Marxist and socialist ideologies, gained momentum, particularly among urban intellectuals, students, and workers. Organizations such as the TİP and Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Türkiye (*Devrimci İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu*, DİSK) mobilized support for radical social and political change, advocating for labor rights, land reform, and anti-imperialism.<sup>18</sup>

Conversely, right-wing forces, rooted in nationalist, conservative, and Islamist traditions, also exerted influence in Turkish politics. The rise of the National Order Party (*Milli Nizam Partisi*, MNP) and the National Salvation Party (*Milli Selamet Partisi*, MSP) reflected the appeal of Islamic identity and traditional values among segments of the population. These

<sup>14</sup> Aylin Güney, “Anti-Americanism in Turkey: Past and Present,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 3 (2008): 472.

<sup>15</sup> William Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy since 1774* (3rd edition), (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 99-100.

<sup>16</sup> Mustafa Taner, “Swinging Pendulum of Turkish- American Defense Relations,” 59.

<sup>17</sup> Feroz Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 136-138.

<sup>18</sup> Meliha Benli Altunışık and Özlem Tür, *Turkey: Challenges of Continuity and Change* (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2005), 36.

movements sought to counter the perceived secularist and Westernizing tendencies of the state, positioning themselves as defenders of Turkish nationalism and Islamic heritage.<sup>19</sup>

The role of the military in Turkish politics remained paramount throughout the 1960s and 1970s, with successive coups in 1971 and 1980 reinforcing the influence of the armed forces. The military justified its interventions as necessary measures to preserve national unity, stability, and secularism, often intervening in response to perceived threats from left-wing or Islamist movements. However, the legacy of military tutelage also hindered the consolidation of democratic institutions and civil liberties, leading to cycles of political instability and repression.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the strategic alignment between Türkiye and the US, Turkish-American relations faced several diplomatic challenges and political tensions during the 1960s and 1970s. The rise of nationalist and leftist movements in Türkiye, coupled with periodic military interventions and political upheavals, strained the domestic political landscape, and tested the resilience of the bilateral partnership.

Furthermore, the presence of regional conflicts and geopolitical competition in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean added further complications to Turkish-American relations. The Cyprus conflict and related events, such as the Johnson Letter and the US arms embargo, created deep mistrust and suspicion between the US and Türkiye, straining relations throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The American response to Türkiye's military involvement in Cyprus in 1974 underscored the complex task of reconciling strategic objectives with international principles and norms, illustrating the nuanced dynamics inherent in Turkish-American relations.

In the 1960s, TİP and its chairman, Mehmet Ali Aybar, played a significant role in the anti-American discourse. National independence and anti-imperialism were among the themes that the deputies of TİP focused on in their speeches. In parliamentary speeches, national independence was predominantly defined through NATO membership and relations with the US. Furthermore, discussions of relations with the US often included a focus on anti-imperialism.

After the 1965 elections, the initial action of TİP involved submitting a written inquiry to the government. In this inquiry, TİP requested a list of documents signed between the US and the Turkish Republic, highlighting the unusual nature of the political relations between the two countries. İstanbul member of parliament Altan stated that 52 confidential bilateral agreements had been signed between the US and Türkiye, unbeknownst to the Parliament.<sup>21</sup> Turhan Feyzioğlu (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) acknowledged that while they did not necessarily agree with TİP's perspective, the issue warranted discussion in Parliament.<sup>22</sup> Prime Minister Demirel, under pressure from TİP and the public, clarified that none of the bilateral agreements had been finalized during the Justice Party's tenure. He refuted TİP's accusations of Türkiye being a puppet of the US, asserting that he had safeguarded Türkiye's interests by not allowing any alterations to existing agreements that would be detrimental to Türkiye's rights. He accused TİP of inciting nationalist sentiments by opposing NATO and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), arguing that these agreements were signed

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 36-37.

<sup>20</sup> William Hale, *Turkish Politics and the Military*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 313-323.

<sup>21</sup> Millet Meclisi, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 2, Volume 7, Session 110 (13.07.1966), 695-696.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 702.

to fortify a collective defense against communism and that Türkiye had been sovereign and independent since its inception.<sup>23</sup>

TİP Chairman Aybar also frequently drew attention to Türkiye's membership in NATO, emphasized the Turkish War of Independence and Atatürk's foreign policy, and openly took a stance against the US. For example, at the General Executive Board meeting of his party on 15 July 1967, he said: "The American war budget is around 60 billion dollars. For 20 years, Türkiye has been included in this enormous machine of domination, exploitation, and war at the command of American imperialism. For twenty years Türkiye has been in the zone of influence of American imperialism. There are American military bases in Türkiye. There are military delegations. There are CIA games. And most of our armed forces are linked to the Pentagon through NATO."<sup>24</sup>

During that era, the Turkish left primarily focused on Türkiye's transition from favoring the West in the bipolar era to aligning with American imperialism. This shift marked a departure from the longstanding principles of neutrality and non-alignment upheld since the Republic's inception. Furthermore, Türkiye was failing to support oppressed nations and the Third World on an ideological level. This reliance on the US hindered Türkiye's efforts to democratize, preventing the internalization of democratic values and institutions despite its rapid integration with Western European entities. Instead of pursuing its own agenda, Türkiye was redirecting its resources, energy, savings, and time to fulfill NATO and US interests.<sup>25</sup>

The Cyprus question should also be analyzed in this context. As the Turkish government prepared to intervene in the island, a letter was sent by the US President Lyndon B. Johnson to Turkish Prime Minister İsmet İnönü in June 1964. The letter stated that a unilateral intervention by Türkiye in the island could lead to a war between the Turkish and Greek states and that it was unacceptable for the two, as both NATO members, to engage in a war. Johnson pointed out that Türkiye should consult its allies before taking a decision to intervene. He also suggested that this war could also lead to Soviet intervention in Türkiye and that NATO would be reluctant to defend it in such a situation. It was stated that the military equipment provided to Türkiye by the US would not be allowed to be used in this intervention.<sup>26</sup> The Johnson Letter was one of the reasons for Türkiye's withdrawal from the decision to intervene in 1964.

The attitude of the Turkish left in this period was also directly related to Atatürk's foreign policy. According to the leftists, NATO membership started a new period of colonization for Türkiye. Accordingly, they viewed the Cyprus problem, just like other issues, as a result of one-sided loyalty to the US and NATO. One of the tasks of NATO, as an imperialist occupation army, was seen as handing over of the island of Cyprus to Greece through Enosis and to continue its existence under the leadership of the West.<sup>27</sup>

Türkiye's excessive pro-American and pro-NATO attitude was seen as tying its hands and feet in the Cyprus issue and preventing Türkiye from achieving the desired results. From this point of view, the alliance with the US and NATO membership, which was considered

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 712-715.

<sup>24</sup> Mehmet Ali Aybar, *Bağımsızlık, Demokrasi, Sosyalizm*, (İstanbul: Gerçek Yayınevi, 1968), 579.

<sup>25</sup> Barış Doster, "Türkiye'de NATO Karşıtlığının Tarihsel ve Siyasal Kökenleri," *Orta Doğu Analiz* 4, no. 40 (2012): 33.

<sup>26</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson and İsmet İnönü, "President Johnson and Prime Minister İnönü: Correspondence between President Johnson and Prime Minister İnönü, June 1964, as released by the White House, January 15, 1966," *Middle East Journal* 20, no. 3 (1966): 386-393.

<sup>27</sup> Serpil Güvenç, "Socialist Perspectives on Foreign Policy Issues: The Case of TİP in 1960s," (Master's Thesis, Middle East Technical University, 2005), 146, 152-154.

as one of the greatest achievements of Turkish foreign policy and as a symbol of Türkiye's "independence" in the first half of the 1960s, came to be considered as the most important sign of Türkiye's political and economic dependence on the US and NATO in the second half of the 1960s.

When the Johnson Letter was published in the newspapers on 13 January 1966 by Cüneyt Arcayürek,<sup>28</sup> it had a cold shower effect on Turkish public opinion and the Parliament. On the one hand, the Johnson Letter caused a serious increase in security concerns, and on the other hand, it led to a major identity crisis.

As mentioned above, the leftist groups, which had been explicitly opposing the government due to the democratic environment created by the 1961 Constitution, began to openly criticize the government over the Johnson Letter. On 5 January 1966, Tarık Ziya Ekinci, speaking on behalf of TİP in response to Parliament member Mehmet Altınsoy's motion for a parliamentary investigation on Cyprus under Article 88 of the Constitution, stated that there was no legitimate government in Cyprus due to the government's violation of the treaties, and demanded that this should be declared by the government. He said that if Türkiye was attacked by Greece because of the Cyprus issue, NATO would not be on Türkiye's side and therefore the foreign policy should be revised and that TİP's solution to the Cyprus issue was based on peace. He also remarked:

In addition, we sincerely wish that the Cyprus problem should be resolved peacefully and within the principles of peace. In order to achieve this, we call upon the parties directly concerned with Cyprus, namely Türkiye, Greece, and the representatives of the Turkish and Greek Cypriot communities in Cyprus, to negotiate this issue at a round table conference in the presence of the United Nations Representative and to find a favorable solution to this issue. However, I believe that if they do not want to engage in such negotiations, and if they go in a direction that violates the treaties, and if our Union or our compatriots there are violated, we should definitely know and definitely decide that this will be considered as an act of war.<sup>29</sup>

On 2 February 1966, Urfa member of parliament, Behice Boran, speaking on behalf of TİP at the parliamentary session, demanded an investigation into how the letters had been leaked to the press. Boran stated that the Johnson Letter contained issues such as independence, sovereignty, the functioning of NATO, and vital issues such as the weapons purchased through bilateral agreements. That İnönü could not respond to this foreign intervention with the firmness they expected, was disappointing. Boran also said that the Johnson Letter made it clear that the NATO alliance would not protect Türkiye from a possible Soviet attack, and that NATO was defending US interests, not collective security. She therefore called for a return to Atatürk's foreign policy of not allowing any foreign influence and not entering into military alliances. Muzaffer Karan, who spoke on behalf of TİP during the budget negotiations, stated that Türkiye's relations with NATO and the US should be reconsidered.<sup>30</sup>

In this context, another problem related to the alliance with the US was the US/NATO bases in Türkiye. In the parliament, TİP opposed national independence and anti-imperialism on the axis of the US and the military bases established in Türkiye, and TİP Chairman Aybar, on behalf of the TİP group, criticized the government program read out by Süleyman Demirel on foreign policy. He said that after the death of Atatürk, Türkiye had quickly fallen under the

<sup>28</sup> Cüneyt Arcayürek, "İşte Johnson'un Mektubu," *Hürriyet*, January 13, 1966.

<sup>29</sup> Millet Meclisi, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 2, Volume 2, Session 31 (05.01.1966), 231.

<sup>30</sup> Millet Meclisi, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 2, Volume 2, Session 40 (02.02.1966), 530-531.

influence of the West and that this contradicted Kemalism, and he made striking statements about the US bases as follows:

(...) Today, 35 million square meters of land in Türkiye are under the sovereignty of the US. (...) No citizen, no matter what position he occupies in the state, can set foot on these lands, which have been turned into bases of the American state by bilateral agreements, without the permission of the Americans. Turkish policemen, Turkish officers, Turkish commanders, Turkish judges, Turkish deputies, Turkish ministers cannot enter the American bases in our country. The planes and missiles that take off from these bases, without our knowledge and without the approval of the Grand Assembly, can expose our country to grave dangers at any time. The American military and civilian personnel in our country enjoy privileges similar to diplomatic immunity. Our judicial independence and freedom, which is one of the basic elements of national independence, is being violated before our eyes.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, on this issue, Karan claimed that NATO and US personnel working in these bases were exempt from Turkish laws and that this situation casted a shadow over Türkiye's independence: France opposes this stance because it believes that NATO's thermo-nuclear weapons will be used for American purposes. Norway and Denmark, although NATO states, have not authorized the establishment of bases on their territory. There is not a single American soldier on the territory of these states.<sup>32</sup>

In their speeches on foreign policy, TİP deputies emphasized the importance of cooperation with Third World countries instead of the American alliance. According to them, the alliance with the US and Türkiye's membership of NATO had a great impact on the failure to solve the Cyprus problem in Türkiye's favor. On the one hand, NATO membership prevented Türkiye from acting independently in the Cyprus issue and on the other hand, it caused Türkiye to lose the support of the Third World countries. Furthermore, Türkiye's once inspiring image, earned through its successful war of liberation, has been tarnished by its affiliation with NATO and its subordination to American authority. Therefore, during the negotiations on the resolution of the Cyprus problem in the United Nations, it was said that Türkiye had not received the support of these countries and was left alone in solving the problem, and it was argued that relations with the Third World countries should be developed instead of NATO.<sup>33</sup>

In fact, the speeches of TİP deputies in and out of the parliament during this period represent a significant change of geopolitical representation of the United States in Turkish political discourse. While in the 1950s, the US and NATO were the biggest symbols of Türkiye's independence and its Western and democratic character, after 1965, NATO became a symbol and even an instrument of Türkiye's one-sided dependence on the "imperialist" US, especially in the context of Cyprus. TİP parliamentarians did what no other political party had done before and questioned Türkiye's relations with the West, especially with the US. This anti-American and anti-NATO opposition of TİP in parliament had a practical counterpart, of course. In 1967, when the CHP was the main opposition party during the first Demirel government, it set up a commission to discuss NATO membership and the report it produced discussed the disadvantages of the Atlantic Alliance.

The international youth movement's stance towards the Vietnam War contributed to the growth of anti-American and anti-NATO sentiments in Türkiye. In 1967 and 1968, protests

<sup>31</sup> Millet Meclisi, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 2, Volume 1, Session 7 (07.11.1965), 176.

<sup>32</sup> Millet Meclisi, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 2, Volume 4, Session 55 (24.02.1966), 469.

<sup>33</sup> Millet Meclisi, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 2, Volume 2, Session 28 (27.12.1965), 27-33.

against NATO, the US, and the 6th Fleet persisted in the country without interruption. Among the young people who attacked the leftist youth responsible for throwing the American sailors into the sea and even went so far as to pray in front of the US ships moored in Dolmabahçe, there were many names who became prominent in right-wing politics in the following years, serving as MPs and ministers. In 1969, in an event that went down in history as “Bloody Sunday,” the attack by nationalist, conservative and theocratic youth on the left-wing students’ protest against the famous US 6th Fleet enabled the socialists to once again expose the relations of the Turkish right with the US and NATO.<sup>34</sup>

As Türkiye entered the 1970s with foreign and domestic crises, it was shaken again by the military memorandum of 12 March 1971. As a result of the decisions taken after the memorandum, TİP was dissolved in 1972 and its leaders were arrested.<sup>35</sup> Although TİP lost its voice in the Parliament after the 1971 memorandum, the alliance with the US and the NATO issue continued to be discussed in Parliament in the 1970s, arguably due to TİP’s having frequently raised its opposing views over the previous years.

The Cyprus issue, opium crisis, military bases, NATO’s flexible defense policy and the 1975 arms embargo imposed by the US were the hottest foreign policy issues debated in the Parliament. Although Türkiye had not intervened in the island in the 1960s, the Turkish government intervened militarily in Cyprus in July 1974. The second Cyprus crisis in 1974 marked a new era in Turkish-American relations. With the impact of the détente between the two superpowers and the strong anti-American feeling in the country after the Cyprus crisis, Türkiye, for the first time, wanted to reduce its dependency on the US and improve its relations with the Soviet Union. As then Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit put it: “... the sources of imminent threat to Türkiye have changed considerably in recent years. Türkiye does not see the Soviet Union as a threat.”<sup>36</sup>

In fact, although the US administration opposed the arms embargo by emphasizing Türkiye’s geopolitical importance, it began to impose an arms embargo on Türkiye as a result of the decision taken by the US Congress on 5 February 1975. Türkiye’s first reaction to this embargo was to declare the Turkish Federated State of Cyprus on 13 February 1975. Later, Prime Minister Ecevit decided to lift the opium ban, freeze the status of US bases, and cancel the 1969 defense treaty with the US. Following the election of Jimmy Carter as the US President, the arms embargo was lifted in October 1978.<sup>37</sup>

The impact of the US arms embargo on Turkish politics was profound. Türkiye, which was almost entirely dependent on NATO and the US for its defense industry, felt almost completely defenseless in economic and security terms. Economic and military cooperation agreements, previously seen as a great success, were now seen as the cause of a failing economy and political instability.

The economic burden caused by the arms embargo, the US military support to Greece while imposing an arms embargo on Türkiye, and the bases issues were among the most important issues on the agenda of the subsequent parliamentary meetings. For example, on 17 February 1976, Cevat Önder, a member of Parliament from the Democratic Party

<sup>34</sup> Güney, “Anti-Americanism in Turkey,” 474.

<sup>35</sup> Özgür Mutlu Ulus, *The Army and the Radical Left in Turkey: Military Coups, Socialist Revolution and Kemalism* (London and New York: IB Tauris, 2011), 90.

<sup>36</sup> Bülent Ecevit, “Turkey’s Security Policies,” *Survival* 20, no. 5 (1978): 203.

<sup>37</sup> Baskın Oran (ed.), *Türk Dış Politikası: Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne Olgular, Belgeler, Yorumlar, Cilt 1: 1919-1980*, (İstanbul: İletişim, 2001), 708-711.



(*Demokrat Parti*, DP), declared that foreign policy was in crisis, and openly criticized the government over NATO, the US arms embargo, and bases. On the other hand, he asked whether the Nationalist Front government was approaching the Communist bloc as a reaction to the West.<sup>38</sup> On 20 February 1976, Fehmi Cumalioğlu, speaking on behalf of the MSP group, stated that Türkiye's membership in NATO and CENTO was approved by the MSP group and that they believed that the NATO alliance retained its value. Describing the US Congress's decision on the arms embargo as "hostile behavior that is incompatible with the rules of friendship and alliance," Cumalioğlu said that the government had approached the decision with restraint.<sup>39</sup>

In a softer tone, Adana MP Mehmet Can, speaking on behalf of the CHP, accused NATO of supporting Greece, and described Türkiye's position in NATO as "not very positive." Describing Türkiye as "the cheapest guardian of NATO's southern flank," Can said that Türkiye was not considered European in this context. Can stressed that instead of proposing to leave NATO, relations with NATO and the US should be reviewed and any gaps should be filled, the alliances should be put on a new platform, and the number of Turkish forces in the NATO alliance should be reduced.<sup>40</sup>

However, these criticisms were more cautious on the government side. Speaking on behalf of the Republican Reliance Party (*Cumhuriyetçi Güven Partisi*, CGP), Konya MP Vefa Tanır said that they valued the NATO alliance and believed that it would continue to maintain its value. He said that the embargo was incompatible with friendship, but that it had been responded to with the closing of the bases.<sup>41</sup> Defense Minister Ferid Melen, who took the floor next, said that the government believed that NATO maintained its value, but that it had to accept the withdrawal of Greece from NATO's military wing, and that the arms embargo had led to a weakness in NATO's southern wing.<sup>42</sup>

On 22 February 1976, during discussions on the budget of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Hasan Esat Işık, speaking on behalf of the CHP group, stated that Turkish-Greek relations were at the root of the problems in foreign policy and accused the government of having remained silent for too long. According to Işık, the closure of the bases was nothing but a show of strength.<sup>43</sup> Özer Ölçmen of the DP group, who spoke after Işık, said that the debate on NATO membership was no longer a monopoly of the left and that the government was hiding the truth from the nation.<sup>44</sup> Foreign Minister İhsan Sabri Çağlayangil then took the floor and said that it should be discussed whether the conditions that led to the creation of NATO still exist or not, but that all previous governments, including the CHP, which was the most critical of NATO at the time, did not think of leaving NATO. On the issue of military bases, Çağlayangil stressed that from now on there would be no dual facilities, but only Turkish facilities managed by Türkiye.<sup>45</sup>

The end of détente and the beginning of the "Second Cold War" between the US and the Soviet Union, following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Iranian Revolution in 1979, once again strengthened the Turkish-American alliance. It is important to note that

<sup>38</sup> Millet Meclisi, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 4, Volume 15, Session 58 (17.02.1976), 196.

<sup>39</sup> Millet Meclisi, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 4, Volume 15, Session 61 (20.02.1976), 690.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 693.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 702.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 709.

<sup>43</sup> Millet Meclisi, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 4, Volume 16, Session 63 (22.02.1976), 252-253.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 270-271.

the military intervention in Türkiye on 12 September 1980 did not have a negative impact on the relationship. After the military coup, unlike Türkiye's European allies, the US did not criticize the military government. The US confirmed that American aid to Türkiye would not be interrupted. As a result, Türkiye began to change its foreign policy, taking into account American sensitivities. Consequently, Türkiye withdrew its veto on Greece's accession to the military wing of NATO. On 29 March 1980, Türkiye and the US signed a new Defense and Economic Cooperation Agreement (DECA).<sup>46</sup> The DECA negotiations aimed to maintain a strong Turkish-American bilateral defense relationship and preserve US military facilities in Türkiye. As a result, the Turkish-American Defense Council was established in 1981. The level of US military aid during this period was the highest ever, except for the Korean War era.

### 3. Conclusion

Türkiye's aspiration to integrate into the West was institutionalized through its NATO membership and alliance with the US after World War II. The nation's desire to be included in the free and democratic world was acknowledged, and its political, economic, and security concerns were addressed through the Truman Doctrine, Marshall Plan, and membership in NATO and the Council of Europe during the Cold War.

The Turkish-American alliance and Türkiye's NATO membership were seen as crucial symbols of Türkiye's independence, receiving unconditional support in the 1950s. However, crises with the US, Türkiye's "strategic ally," during the 1960s and 1970s led to significant changes in its geopolitical representation of the United States in the Turkish Parliament.

Critical geopolitics argues that state identity is constructed and reproduced over time through representational practices of state and non-state actors. This is a crucial factor that influences the foreign policy-making process. Therefore, analyzing changes in the representational practices of political elites helps us understand Türkiye's state identity construction and foreign policy orientations during this period.

While the anti-American and anti-NATO discourse that grew as a result of the crises of the 1960s and 1970s, which were defined as "national issues," highlighted Türkiye's dependence on the US and NATO, it was TİP that pioneered this discourse in parliament in the 1960s. Therefore, TİP held a significant position in guiding the debates in parliament as the pioneer of the anti-NATO and anti-US discourse. Looking back at the 1970s, it is evident that TİP's discourse broke the taboo of speaking out against NATO and the alliance with the US. This discourse was subsequently adopted by other political parties, albeit in different tones. It is noteworthy that only opposition parties voiced the anti-American discourse, while the ruling parties defended NATO membership, albeit with cautious criticism. Following the Cyprus crisis, representatives of the ruling parties spoke cautiously in defense of the Turkish-American alliance and Türkiye's NATO membership, without the unconditional commitment of the 1950s. The major foreign policy crises of the détente period, such as the Cyprus crisis and the arms embargo, affected Türkiye's perception of the US and NATO, leading governments to seek alternatives in the economic, security, and foreign policy fields.

In the 1970s, the practical implications of the dependence/independence dichotomy were most evident through the Cyprus Operation, lifting the opium prohibition and regulating powers and responsibilities over US bases. During this period, the ruling parties attempted

<sup>46</sup> Dankwart A. Rustow, *Turkey: America's Forgotten Ally* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1987), 104-105.

to improve relations with the USSR, which was seen as a potential threat by some and an alternative by others. They also aimed to create a foreign policy discourse that was both “Western” and “non-Westernist.” However, during this period and the subsequent Cold War, Türkiye had no alternative to the US and NATO, both economically and in terms of security.

During the détente period of the Cold War, Türkiye experienced crises with NATO allies Greece and the US. Additionally, the country diversified its democratic representation, which led to increased criticism of the US. Despite this criticism, the US remained a reliable security ally for the ruling political parties due to the economic conditions during the 1960s and 1970s, as well as Türkiye’s founding philosophy of aligning itself with the West. It can be argued that the notion that Türkiye is obligated to pursue a “multilateral foreign policy,” frequently voiced during the Özal, Cem, and Davutoğlu eras, has its roots in the change of the US’s geopolitical representation in Turkish political discourse during the 1960s and 1970s.

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## Where is the Anchor? Explaining the Endurance of the American-Turkish Partnership, 1927-2024

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### Abstract

*Once considered a model partnership, the American-Turkish relationship now elicits ambivalence among scholars and policymakers, calling into question the fundamental interests and assumptions that once undergirded the relationship. Critics attribute the negative trends in the relationship to geostrategic and value-based incompatibilities, but relatively few have examined both factors longitudinally across the entire relationship. This paper does not aim to provide a grand theory of American-Turkish relations. Instead, its goal is to develop a framework illustrating the vital role that strategic, ideational, and domestic political factors have played in shaping macro-level outcomes in the partnership's cohesion at various junctures. Overall, our paper identifies the positive role of foreign policy bureaucratic elites on both sides acting as an "invisible hand" providing an anchor for the relationship even in the absence of other commonalities. Yet, we also observe the weakening of this hand in recent times as both countries become domestically transformed.*


**Keywords:** Turkish-US Relations, Foreign Policy, Alliance Politics, Elites

### 1. Introduction

Forged in the early years of the Cold War, the American-Turkish relationship remains an enduring one that has weathered many challenges. There is, however, a growing sense of frustration shared among their respective policymakers and scholars, who now increasingly call into question the entire premise of the relationship. Inquiries like "Who lost Turkey?" proliferated as early as the mid-2000s in the wake of Turkey's growing divergence with the US regarding Iraq and the enervating pace of its EU accession efforts.<sup>1</sup>

The negative trajectory of the relationship prompted discussions over an axis shift in Turkey's fundamental orientation, including a perceived decline in Turkey's commitment to the Western alliance and closer relations with Russia. Western ambivalence towards Turkey is fueled by its perceived gravity in world politics as a "swing state" that can help to make

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<sup>1</sup> Phillip H. Gordon, Ömer Taşpınar, and Soli Özel, "Introduction: Who Lost Turkey?" in *Winning Turkey: How America, Europe, and Turkey Can Revive a Fading Partnership* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 1–6.

or break the liberal international order.<sup>2</sup> Even the most charitable interpretations express concerns that a strategically autonomous Turkey may be a challenge for the international order.<sup>3</sup> There have even been advocates of Turkey's expulsion from NATO.<sup>4</sup>

Turkish gravamen against the US, meanwhile, underscores that the US has often let Turkey down by ignoring its concerns over its security, territorial integrity, and relations with third parties.<sup>5</sup> Turkish disenchantment with the US peaked with the July 15th coup attempt, after which Turkish decision-makers, such as the Minister of Interior Affairs, Süleyman Soylu, decried the US as a terrorist state due to its alleged support of the putsch.<sup>6</sup> Since then, Turkey purchased S-400 missiles from Russia, cooperated with Russia across numerous geopolitical theaters, and even considered the possibility of becoming a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. More strikingly, in 2024, Erdoğan attended in person the BRIC summit in Russia while expressing an aspiration to become a member.<sup>7</sup>

Given its contradictions and vicissitudes, the American-Turkish relationship, therefore, appears to have no singular determinant, making any satisfactory and holistic attempt at theorizing the vicissitudes of the relationship a difficult task. To wit, we undertake this task in the present article, offering a stylized longitudinal examination of American-Turkish relations from 1927 to 2024, inquiring into the combination of factors that influence the “partnership cohesion” of the American-Turkish relationship across different periods. Instead of relying on a specific theoretical tradition, we offer a framework of analysis, contending that a combination of i) geostrategic interests, ii) ideational convergence/divergence among elites, and iii) domestic decision-making environments are responsible for the quality of the partnership in any given period.

Firstly, geostrategic alignment is a crucial factor since common threat perceptions and military goals beget coordination. Secondly, the presence of ideational bonds appear to be a crucial factor influencing the level of cooperation between the two states over time, especially the feelings of solidarity between elites.<sup>8</sup> Finally, decision-making contexts are capable in shaping the incentive structure around foreign policy decisions through imposing various political costs on incumbent leaders, undermining legislative processes or simply forcing issues on the foreign policy agenda.<sup>9</sup> We argue that it is the variation or fluctuations in these three factors across time that shapes/determines the quality or cohesion of the partnership

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Kliman and Richard Fontaine, “Global Swing States: Brazil, India, Indonesia, Turkey, and The Future of International Order,” *The German Marshall Fund Policy Paper*, November 1, 2012, accessed date October 10, 2024. <https://www.gmfus.org/publications/global-swing-states-brazil-india-indonesia-turkey-and-future-international-order>.

<sup>3</sup> See, Mustafa Kutlay and Ziya Öniş, “Turkish foreign policy in a post-western order: strategic autonomy or new forms of dependence?” *International Affairs* 97, no. 4 (2021): 1085–1104.

<sup>4</sup> See, Aurel Sari, “Can Turkey be Expelled from NATO? It's Legally Possible, Whether or Not Politically Prudent,” *Just Security*, October 15, 2019, accessed date December 11, 2024. <https://www.justsecurity.org/66574/can-turkey-be-expelled-from-nato/>

<sup>5</sup> For a summary of Turkish discourses about its disappointment with the US, see Nicholas Danforth, “Frustration, Fear, and the Fate of U.S.-Turkish Relations,” *German Marshall Fund of the United States*, no. 11 (2019): 1-4; Richard Outzen, “Costly Incrementalism: U.S. PKK Policy and Relations with Türkiye,” *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace* 14, no. 1 (2024): 1-22.

<sup>6</sup> “Turkish minister says U.S. behind 2016 failed coup – Hürriyet,” *Reuters*, February 5, 2021, accessed date December 20, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/middle-east/turkish-minister-says-us-behind-2016-failed-coup-hurriyet-idUSKBN2A41NE/>

<sup>7</sup> “President Erdoğan attends BRICS summit amid outreach,” *Daily Sabah*, October 23, 2024, November 11, 2024. <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/president-erdogan-attends-brics-summit-amid-outreach>

<sup>8</sup> See, Didem Buhari Gülmez, “The Resilience of the US–Turkey Alliance: Divergent Threat Perceptions and Worldviews,” *Contemporary Politics* 26, no. 4 (2020): 475–492; William Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy Since 1774* (New York: Routledge, 2014): 107-108; Tarık Oğuzlu, “Testing the Strength of the Turkish–American Strategic Relationship through NATO: Convergence or Divergence within the Alliance?” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 15, no. 2 (2013): 207–222.

<sup>9</sup> See, Robert D. Putnam, “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games,” *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (1988): 427–460.



between the two sides. We also identify the role of bureaucratic elites in the foreign policy realm on both sides acting as an “invisible hand” providing an anchor for the relationship and shielding the cohesion of the partnership from collapsing. We see this cohesion as “the ability of member states to agree on goals, strategy, and tactics and coordinate activity directed toward those ends.”<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Framework

Each of these components has received extensive individual attention in the literature, but holistic theoretical approaches are rarer by comparison and have generally appeared in the guise of Neoclassical Realist models, which ascribe ultimate causal heft to geostrategic factors.<sup>11</sup> We think, however, that such a model would have considerably less explanatory power in our case as we believe the relationship is also predicated on fluctuating ideational affinities and domestic political developments. Furthermore, our takeaway from the application of the above three factors is that there exists a bureaucratic inertia within the foreign policy and security establishments of the two states shielding the partnership. Even when national interests diverged because of geostrategic, ideational, or domestic political reasons, this bureaucratic inertia acts like an “invisible hand” steadying the relationship.

Our conceptual framework combines ideational and domestic elements alongside geostrategic ones without analytically privileging any variable. When applied to the history of the partnership, the framework posits that common ideological affinities among American and Turkish decision-makers are important for the survival of the relationship. The favorability of domestic decision-making environments and the congruency of American and Turkish national interests are also a necessary condition for the advancement of a more fulfilling alliance relationship featuring higher degrees of cooperation.

We identify three degrees of partnership cohesion, corresponding to five macro-periods across the history of the relationship. These cover a spectrum of a “deep partnership,” observable in the early years of the Cold War and from 1980 to 2012; a “limited partnership” to define periods of discursive coordination without practical policy coordination; and a “transactional partnership” at a bare minimum. We note that the concepts we employ to explain the degree of partnership cohesion exist on an ordinal scale to help achieve the analytical goals of the study. The specific terminology was selected to evoke imaginings of American-Turkish relations on a continuum.

The American-Turkish relationship prior to the formalization of the countries’ alliance relations encapsulates the logic of a limited partnership because one can point to a generally positive relationship that did not necessarily translate into any meaningful institutional collaboration. The ideational commonalities among American and Turkish elites in the interwar period offered the way to a more positive relationship, but one that did not initially contain the prerequisite of strategic exigency to facilitate a military alliance.

American-Turkish relations experienced two periods of a deep partnership. The first of

<sup>10</sup> Ole Holsti, Terrance Hopmann, and John D. Sullivan, *Unity, and Disintegration in International Alliances: Comparative Studies* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1973), 16.

<sup>11</sup> Recent examples include, Ali Şevket Ovalı and İlkin Özdikmenli, “Ideologies and the Western Question in Turkish Foreign Policy: A Neo-classical Realist Perspective,” *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace* 9, no. 1 (2020): 105-126; Oya Dursun-Özkanca, *Turkey–West Relations: The Politics of Intra-Alliance Opposition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Lenore Martin, “Constructing a Realistic Explanation of Turkish–US Relations,” *Turkish Studies* 23, no. 4 (2022): 765-783; Tanrı Oğuzlu and Ahmet Kasım Han, “Making Sense of Turkey’s Foreign Policy from the Perspective of Neorealism,” *Uluslararası İlişkiler* 20, no. 78 (2023): 59-77.

these, strategic partnership, captures the period in which Turkey and the US became formal allies. American and Turkish elites converged in their ideational preferences, and elites found themselves being able to pursue constructive relations due to favorable decision-making environments. Far more importantly, however, geostrategic priorities ensured cooperative and functional relations across a variety of foreign policy challenges, as well as a willingness to work in tandem on key strategic issues even in instances when national interests diverged. The strategic partnership label applies to much of the American-Turkish relationship during the early Cold War.

The second pinnacle in the Turkish-US partnership took the form of a model partnership. We purposefully borrow this term, which was coined by the Obama administration in 2009 to signal the growing cooperation between Turkey and the US at a time when both sought to project commonly held values to the Middle East and beyond.<sup>12</sup> This is not to suggest that a model partnership should be construed as a paragon of perfect cooperation and harmony—it was not—but simply to convey that the alliance featured strategic commonalities and relatively fewer domestic obstacles, as well as a strong ontological component in which Turkey's democracy was promoted as an exemplar for the Middle East. Finally, lacking obvious ideational or material commonalities, American-Turkish relations have at times exhibited a “transactional” character marked by a proclivity towards *quid pro quo* arrangements due to the absence of any facilitating factors in the relations.

We divided the breadth of the relationship by assigning an intuitive value to partnership cohesion in each period depending on the observable presence of favorable or negative conditions on both sides. For our purposes, the presence of an overall positive factor is coded as “1,” negative ones are coded as “-1,” while the absence of any decisive factor either way receives a neutral “0.” Values from every category in each period are then added to determine a final value along the range of -3 to 3 (most positive) to indicate the nature of the partnership. Using this scale, we can offer a general assessment about the robustness of the partnership in each period as presented in Table 1 below.

We limit ourselves to several discreet points in time and illustrate our argument by way of drawing examples, analogies, and statements from influential members of the foreign policy elites in both countries from a variety of primary and secondary sources. We have selected five periods: the period from the establishment of bilateral diplomatic relations and its aftermath (1927-1945); the first decade following the end of WWII to the military intervention of 1960 in Turkey; the ensuing period up to the resolution of the Arms Embargo following Turkey's intervention in Cyprus (1961-1979); a long era (1980-2012) encompassing the duration of the 1980 military coup in Turkey and its decision to allow for the return of Greece to NATO until the decline of the American-Turkish partnership subsequent to the Gezi Park protests; and the rise of authoritarianism in Turkey covering the final period from 2013 to 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Namik Tan, “Turkish – U.S. Strategic Partnership,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (2010): 15.

Table 1. Partnership types and cohesion values in selected years, 1927-2024

Partnership Type	Time Period	Convergence of Geostrategic Interests	Elites' Shared Ideational Bonds	Favorability of Domestic Decision-Making Environment	Overall Value
Limited Partnership	1927-1945	0	1	0	N/A pre-alliance
Strategic Partnership	1946-1960	1	1	1	3
Transactional Partnership	1961-1979	0	0	-1	-1
Model Partnership	1980-2012	1	1	1	3
Transactional Partnership	2013-2024	0	-1	-1	-2

Our framework is distinct in several ways. First, it values the agency of individual actors and decision-makers in shaping the outcomes of the relationship. Secondly, the framework helps to situate changes in Turkish-US relations within the broader global transformations that link foreign policy to changes in state-society relations. Finally, and most importantly, the framework helps to explain why the relationship can simultaneously endure while often being overshadowed by incompatibilities. Differences over geostrategic issues, meanwhile, result in short-term periods of fluctuation in which we can observe a weaker partnership. While our framework broadly identifies partnership outcomes across five relatively long periods, we recognize that it is possible to conceive of additional partnership types and cohesion scores within distinct micro-periods.

#### 4. “Limited Partnership” (1927-1945)

The trajectory of the relationship in this seminal period lends support to our argument that the ideational affinities between the elites of both sides appear to have facilitated a mutually positive outlook and established a basis for substantial commercial and cultural relations. Yet, as we argue below, relations failed to take off due to the absence of a shared geostrategic vision between the two states and the presence of domestic decision-making constraints on elites—in this case, the US Congress.

##### 4.1. Ideational Bonds

This period is exemplary of many of the regularities and continuities that mark American-Turkish relations, suggesting a decisive role for the perceptions and evaluations of prominent foreign policy elites on both sides. While Turkey’s founding elite enthusiastically supported a close relationship with the US, the efforts of figures like Mark Bristol and Joseph Grew, who came to admire many aspects of Turkey and its leadership, developed an appreciation of the vision promised by the nascent republic, highlighting the importance of shared values albeit with some reservations.<sup>13</sup>

Three principles stand out: the new Turkish Republic’s dynamic efforts towards achieving modernization and Westernization, its anti-Communism, and favorable disposition towards eventual democratic governance. The impressions of US diplomats were crucial because they

<sup>13</sup> Waldo C. Heinrichs, *American Ambassador: Joseph C. Grew and the Development of the US Diplomatic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986): 384. Grew is an important figure because he had arrived in Lausanne with a lukewarm attitude towards Turks (oriental trope) but was gradually won over, with his time in Turkey being an evident success.

were cognizant of the image of “The Terrible Turk” in the popular Western imagination and sought to disabuse the public of such views. American civil society actors, like Asa Jennings, for instance, noted that “Turkish leaders are most sincere in their efforts to modernize and develop their country.” He observed that because Turkish leaders have failed to advertise their successes, it must fall on their mission to cultivate in the United States a “better understanding ... of the accomplishments of the Turkish Republic.”<sup>14</sup> Ambassador Grew, meanwhile, devoted considerable attention to the breadth and pace of modernization efforts in Turkey. Some American observers were generous in drawing parallels between the American and Turkish Revolutions.<sup>15</sup> Turkey’s relentless drive for modernization and state-building along European lines cultivated a strong appreciation for Atatürk. For instance, Grew would go on to compare the American and Turkish revolutions and even likened Atatürk to George Washington as a courageous leader working tirelessly towards progress.<sup>16</sup> As part of Fox Film’s Movietone, Atatürk addressed American audiences and had nothing but praise for the US as a progressive nation devoted to scientific advancement, highlighting Turkey’s desire to foster friendly relations.<sup>17</sup> The Turkish leadership also found a common cause with the US with respect to upholding the international *status quo* and reinforcing Turkey’s Western character, underscoring Turkey’s inevitable linkages with Europe and the West.<sup>18</sup> Ideational convergence also manifested itself when Turkey became the second country after the US to ratify the Kellogg-Briand Pact.<sup>19</sup>

Grew’s impressions of Turkey’s domestic and foreign policies also indicate a strong convergence of ideas with respect to political organization. One area where these sentiments are expressed relates to anti-communism. While Turkish-Soviet relations were undeniably friendly in the early years of the Republic, and Turkey owed much to the aid transferred by the Bolsheviks, Turkey behaved pragmatically.<sup>20</sup> Grew speculated that Atatürk entertained closer relations with the Soviet Union out of expediency rather than genuine sympathy. As Grew succinctly stated, “Turkey knows on which side her bread is buttered,” and it was natural for Turkey to seek friendly relations with the Bolshevik regime despite abhorring communism at home.<sup>21</sup>

As far as the trajectory of the Turkish regime was concerned, despite Atatürk’s aspirations for a multi-party parliamentary democracy, the Turkish regime failed to achieve such a transition. There was a fundamental tension between these aspirations and realities on the ground. Grew thought the pace of reforms was too fast and too top-down rather than being a result of a natural and grassroots process.<sup>22</sup> It is not surprising that Grew was skeptical of whether Atatürk’s reforms would be embraced by the people of rural Anatolia. His final assessment, nevertheless, expresses both sympathy for the trajectory and the ultimate purpose of the Turkish Revolution.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>14</sup> See, Barış Ornarlı, *The Diary of Ambassador Joseph Grew and the Groundwork for the US-Turkey Relationship* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars and Publishing, 2023), 77-79.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 222-223, 290-293.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-78, 144-145, 229.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 198-204.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>19</sup> Yücel Güçlü, “The Basic Principles and Practices of the Turkish Foreign Policy Under Atatürk,” *Belleten – Türk Tarih Kurumu* 54, no. 241 (2000): 963.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 161-168

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 235-236.

<sup>23</sup> See, Ornarlı, *The Diary*, 247.

In view of the favorable sentiments expressed in the US about Turkey, and particularly its decision-makers, and likewise Turkey's overall positive sentiments towards the US, the relationship showcased ideational affinities. This leads us to identify a positive point in favor of the relationship.

#### 4.2. Geostrategic Interests

While American diplomats seem to have developed unambiguous ideational convictions about Turkey, their assessment of Turkey's foreign policy reveals a general ambivalence largely stemming from Turkey's anomalous position as a state with grievances towards the prevailing international order, but one that unmistakably shifted towards an alignment with the West.<sup>24</sup>

Consistent with Grew's findings, Turkish decision-makers also saw the Soviet Union as a helpful partner that was similarly shunned by European powers.<sup>25</sup> Grew attributed Turkey's signing of the Treaty of Friendship with the Soviet Union in 1925 as an alignment of expediency. Unlike the Soviet Union, however, the Turkish Republic did not behave like a revisionist power, focusing instead on using diplomacy and working within the boundaries of international law.<sup>26</sup> Turkey primarily dedicated its energies to securing itself against revisionist powers like Italy, restoring its sovereign control over the Turkish Straits, and exploring alliance options.<sup>27</sup> These policies largely coincided with American interests, too. Yet, geographic remoteness, US absence from the League of Nations, and isolationist foreign policy did not facilitate a deeper partnership, leading us to assign a score of "0" on the geostrategic dimension of the partnership.

#### 4.3. Decision-making Context

Early American-Turkish relations were somewhat stunted by domestic politics and civil society dynamics. From the Turkish purview, the one-party government led by the Republican People's Party (CHP), founded by Atatürk, was largely insulated from the rest of society. There was also a great deal of consensus around fulfilling Turkey's immediate foreign policy goals and establishing close ties with the US. It is, therefore, more pertinent to examine the issues from the US perspective. Special interest groups in the US, such as the Committee Opposed to the Ratification of the Treaty of Lausanne (a precursor to the Armenian National Committee of America, or ANCA) and other lobbies, were primarily opposed to a normalization of ties between the US and Turkey. Armenian groups were notably influential in attempting to keep the relations disengaged and blocking attempts to ratify the Treaty of Lausanne.<sup>28</sup>

The US failure to ratify Lausanne remains a sore spot for the relationship even today but was not regarded as such contemporarily as the two countries were able to reach a *modus vivendi* by signing a lucrative trade deal.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, obstructionism in the US was to

<sup>24</sup> See, Seckin Baris Gülmez, "Turkish Foreign Policy as an Anomaly: Revisionism and Irredentism through Diplomacy in the 1930s," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 1 (2017): 30–47.

<sup>25</sup> See, Samuel J. Hirst, "Anti-Westernism on the European Periphery: The Meaning of Soviet-Turkish Convergence in the 1930s," *Slavic Review* 72, no. 1 (2013): 32–53.

<sup>26</sup> See, Gülmez, "Turkish Foreign Policy as an Anomaly, 30–47.

<sup>27</sup> Selim Deringil, *Turkish Foreign Policy During the Second World War: An 'Active' Neutrality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 71–89.

<sup>28</sup> Şuhnaz Yılmaz, *Turkish-American Relations, 1800-1952* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 114.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

such a degree that Congress delayed the appointment of Grew as ambassador to Turkey by a year. Yet, neither the legislature nor societal impulses negatively impacted the inception of the relationship, as the US government often reminded their Turkish counterparts.

In formulating their ultimate national interests, elites from both countries seemed to have lacked the geostrategic expediency but also a sufficiently receptive domestic legislature (US) conducive to a strong partnership in this period. This largely stemmed from the US's relative distance from, and reluctance to engage in, distant conflicts, and its foreign policy elites were primarily constrained by a domestic political context adverse to an activist US foreign policy. Meanwhile, Turkey's elites enjoyed greater flexibility in terms of domestic politics, but fear of revisionist great powers pushed Turkey to prioritize regional friendship agreements such as the Balkan Pact (1934) and Saadabad Pact (1937) signed between a collection of Balkan and Middle Eastern states respectively, none of which alleviated Turkey's security concerns.

Overall, a domestic-institutional convergence score of 0 is once again appropriate. The overall tally in the pre-alliance phase of the relationship suggests a limited partnership with a cohesion score of 1.

## 5. Strategic Partnership at the Inception of the Cold War, 1946-1960

Despite its wartime neutrality, the Turkish leadership gradually aligned with the Western allies, obtaining modest amounts of military equipment during WWII, and finally declared war on the Axis in February 1945 to become one of the founding members of the UN.<sup>30</sup> While geostrategic concerns largely dominated this era, the ideological dimension of the Cold War served to strengthen the ideational bonds between Turkey and the US, especially with Turkey's transition to parliamentary democracy. Yet, this was also a period when nascent anti-Americanism appeared for the first time.<sup>31</sup> Though, these sentiments were hardly influential given the foreign policy preferences of the Democrat Party (DP) government. It would, however, be a mistake to reduce the relationship to a purely military and strategic arrangement, or to attribute Turkish democratization to a fulfilment of American expectations, since democracy was not a *sine qua non* for US cooperation, and Turkey's democratization lay primarily with domestic and leadership factors.<sup>32</sup>

### 5.1. Ideational Bonds

In the immediate aftermath of WWII, the US was yet to share Turkey's concerns *vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union. After an initial hesitation at the end of WWII, in 1946, the mood in the US Department of State and the Joint Chiefs of Staff seemed to indicate a growing concern over communist expansionism in Turkey's neighborhood.<sup>33</sup> Since Turkey was the sole country governed by a friendly regime in the region, its loss would have been problematic. Moreover, it would have meant the end of the Westernizing influences and trajectory of Turkey. The death of the Turkish ambassador to Washington, DC, Münir Ertegün, presented the US with

<sup>30</sup> See, Deringil, *Turkish Foreign Policy*, 178-179.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Eray Alim, "Turkey's Post-Colonial Predicament and the Perils of Its Western-Centric Foreign Policy (1955-1959)," *Middle Eastern Studies* 58, no. 6 (2022): 972-988; Tuba Ünlü Bilgiç, "The Roots of Anti-Americanism in Turkey 1945-1960," *Bilig*, no. 72 (2015): 251-280.

<sup>32</sup> Nicholas L. Danforth, *The Remaking of Republican Turkey. Memory and Modernity since the Fall of the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 14-18; See, also Hakan Yılmaz, "Democratization from Above in Response to the International Context," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 17, (1997): 1-38; Paul Kubicek, "Turkey's Inclusion in the Atlantic Community: Looking Back, Looking Forward," *Turkish Studies* 9, no. 1 (2008): 21-35.

<sup>33</sup> George McGhee, "Turkey Joins the West," *Foreign Affairs* 32, no. 4 (1954): 617-630; George Harris, *Troubled Alliance: Turkish-American Problems in Historical Perspective, 1945-71* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public, 1972).



an opportunity to communicate a symbolic show of support for Turkey and other states in the region opposed to the Soviet Union. The deceased ambassador was brought to Istanbul in April 1946 aboard the USS Missouri, the very warship on which Japan had accepted defeat, receiving significant attention and approval from the Turkish public, much to the chagrin of the Soviet Union.<sup>34</sup> Seeing the developments in Greece and the possible risk that a communist takeover could pose for Turkey and the broader region, President Truman elected to extend a military-economic assistance program to support democracies against authoritarian threats—in this case, Greece and Turkey.

In other words, Turkey's perception as an emerging democracy mattered, and the "American government was smiling broadly on this phenomenon of a freely and democratically elected government in the Middle East."<sup>35</sup> Not only did Turkey transition to a multiparty democracy, as Grew had anticipated, but the Turkish foreign policy elite was also able to communicate its intentions to be a respectable international actor sharing the same values as the US. Writing for *Foreign Affairs* in 1949, the Turkish Foreign Minister, Necmettin Sadak, highlighted the common pacific vocations of both nations, underscoring the urgency of Turkish admission to NATO in view of Stalin's designs on Turkish territories.<sup>36</sup>

The Truman Doctrine was also crucial as it served as a template for the Marshall Plan, which Turkey would also join. Both instruments were readily and enthusiastically endorsed by Turkey's now opposition party, CHP, which was a proponent of Western values and supported an alliance with the US and the newly emerging elites of the DP. The DP's leadership, representing an agrarian elite, sympathized not only with the US as a democratic and anti-communist power, but also with the knowledge that their cooperation would be essential for Turkey to jumpstart large-scale investments as well as infrastructure projects. Adnan Menderes, Turkey's prime minister then, summed up Turkey's position on the US: "Whatever America does by us is all right."<sup>37</sup> Celal Bayar as president echoed the sentiments by expressing his desire to transform Turkey into "a little America."<sup>38</sup>

Turkey's image as a democracy was not recognized without qualification, but this did not work against an ideational convergence among elites. The US appeared skeptical of the democratic credentials of the DP leadership, noting Turkey's stagnant economy and Menderes' rising authoritarianism by the late 1950s. Nevertheless, for example, Ambassador Fletcher Warren enthusiastically endorsed Menderes as a necessary ally and argued that large-scale change would require some degree of authoritarianism.<sup>39</sup> Ironically, opposition members in Turkey and journalists across the political spectrum harangued both the DP government over its perceived monopoly on Turkey's relationship with the US and the US for not being committed to democracy in Turkey, nor in the world at large—a sentiment driven by American support for dictatorships in the third world.<sup>40</sup> The future CHP leader and Prime Minister, Bülent Ecevit, not only pointed to American hypocrisy towards the

<sup>34</sup> Süleyman Seydi, "Making a Cold War in the Near East: Turkey and the Origins of the Cold War, 1945–1947," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 17, no. 1 (2006): 123.

<sup>35</sup> "Interview with Daniel Oliver Newberry, Economic/Commercial Officer, Istanbul Consulate (1952-1956)," in *American Diplomats in Turkey: Oral History Transcripts (1928-1997.) – Vol. I*, ed. Rifat N. Bali, *American Diplomats in Turkey: Oral History Transcripts (1928-1997.) – Vol. I* (Istanbul: Libra Kitap, 2011.).

<sup>36</sup> Necmeddin Sadak, "Turkey Faces the Soviets," *Foreign Affairs* 27, no. 3 (1949): 449–561.

<sup>37</sup> Adnan Menderes quoted in Norman Stone, *The Atlantic and its Enemies: A History of the Cold War* (London: Penguin, 2011), 457.

<sup>38</sup> Malik Müftü, *Daring and Caution in Turkish Strategic Culture: Republic at Sea* (London: Palgrave, 2009), 30.

<sup>39</sup> Bali, *American Diplomats*, 100.

<sup>40</sup> Ünlü Bilgiç, "Anti-Americanism," 272-273.

third world but also drew attention to the democratic deficits within the US, such as the ongoing policies of segregation in the US.<sup>41</sup> These reservations are not surprising considering the US's reluctance to let the 1960 military intervention in Turkey sour bilateral relations, especially when the military offered assurances to the US that there would be a transition back to democratic rule.<sup>42</sup> With or without a full commitment to genuine democratic virtues then, a shared commitment to democratic governance and opposition to communism leads us to assign a one-point positive score in favor of the partnership's cohesion.

## 5.2. Geostrategic Interests

From Turkey's point of view, NATO successfully contained Soviet expansionism in Europe, ensuring a degree of stability. However, the situation in the Middle East was less stable as Britain and France withdrew from the region and pro-Soviet Arab nationalist regimes emerged. Hence, Turkey looked favorably on greater US involvement in the region and energetically pursued a foreign policy designed to bring containment to the region. Turkey was also encouraged by the US to attend the meetings of the Non-Aligned Movement, whose members Turkish leaders thought were naïve due to their decision to promote a third way at a time of intense bipolar competition. In fact, Turkey's close relations with the West and its unwavering support for the US and other NATO allies, including colonial powers like Britain and France, tended to undermine Turkish diplomacy in the then emerging third world.

Turkey's geostrategic importance was not immediately appreciated by US decision-makers in the aftermath of WWII. However, Soviet expansionism in Europe, especially its support for the communist side in the Greek civil war, the blockade of Berlin, its intervention in Czechoslovakia, and Turkey's decision to send troops halfway around the world to defend South Korea against the aggression from the North helped overcome the initial skepticism towards Turkey joining NATO in 1952. For Turkey, an alliance with the US was a panacea to the threat posed by the Soviets and could provide aid to build up its economy, infrastructure, and military.<sup>43</sup> In the words of a longtime observer of Turkey, joining NATO was indeed "Turkey's most important foreign policy change since the 1920s"<sup>44</sup> and came to be considered as a strategic step in anchoring Turkey in the West.

From the US perspective, Turkey, as a friendly status-quo-oriented country threatened by the Soviet Union and occupying an important geostrategic real estate, came to be considered as the most critical country after Israel<sup>45</sup> and a "bulwark" against the Soviet Union.<sup>46</sup> Turkey, moreover, was considered as being essential in consolidating containment by denying the Soviet Union access to the Mediterranean (thanks to its control over the Turkish Straits) as well as limiting its reach in the Middle East.

Yet, despite the apparent convergence of their geostrategic interests concerning the international security order and the Cold War in Europe, both countries had different priorities with respect to developments in the Middle East. Prime Minister Menderes was wary of Arab socialism in the Middle East, which he saw as an instrument that would facilitate the expansion of communism. He spoke against the nationalization of the Suez Canal and supported NATO-

<sup>41</sup> Danforth, *The Remaking of Republican*, 66-68.

<sup>42</sup> Glenn W. LaFantasie, *Foreign relations of the United States, 1958-1960. Eastern Europe; Finland; Greece; Turkey Volume X, Part 2 1958/1960* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1993), 858-859.

<sup>43</sup> Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy since 1774*, 89-90.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>45</sup> Bali, *American Diplomats*, 132.

<sup>46</sup> Harris, *Troubled Alliance*, 56.

like alliances, such as the Baghdad Pact and CENTO, for the defense of the Middle East against Soviet intrusion.<sup>47</sup> He followed policies supportive of France with respect to Algeria and voted against Algerian self-determination at the UN in 1954.<sup>48</sup> In Egypt, meanwhile, the Turkish ambassador was declared *persona non grata* in 1954 on account of Turkey's seeming anti-regime attitudes. These were policies that diverged from those of the US that were more lenient towards Nasser's Egypt. Furthermore, the US had worked closely with the Soviet Union to compel Britain, France, and Israel to withdraw from Egypt.

Despite this lack of American-Turkish convergence on the specifics of the containment of the Soviet Union in the Middle East, broader geostrategic commonalities symbolized in Turkey's inclusion into NATO leads us to assign a one-point positive cohesion score for this period. Not surprisingly, this is also the period that often has been referred to as a honeymoon in the partnership.

### 5.3. Domestic Constraints

The subsequent development in the relationship, namely Turkey's close alignment with the US and its inclusion in NATO, occurred under more favorable decision-making circumstances in both countries. The role of ethnic lobbies in the US was subdued compared to before WWII. Meanwhile, Harry Truman's initiative to extend aid to Greece and Turkey, largely expressed in the language of democracy and resistance to communism, was readily approved by Congress.<sup>49</sup> Arguably, Turkey's reputation had also improved considerably. For instance, President Bayar's trip to the US early in his tenure as president was well received by not only the American public but also by members of the Armenian and Greek communities in the US as they helped in preparations for a ticker-tape parade in New York for Bayar.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, the newly elected DP and the now-in-opposition CHP displayed remarkable consistency on foreign policy issues, including their Western orientation and preference for an alliance with the US.<sup>51</sup>

Since domestic institutions and political processes favored a fertile ground for continued cooperation in both countries, we ascribe a one-point positive cohesion score on the domestic institutional dimension in this period as well, culminating in an overall partnership cohesion of three points. We, hence, label this period as a strategic partnership.

## 6. Transactional Partnership During Détente, 1960-1979

American-Turkish relations arguably reached their nadir in the 1960s-70s. None of the dimensions under analysis favored a deepening of the relationship. Arguably, Cold War dynamics and NATO barely served as the institutional adhesive for the relationship since American attitudes towards Turkey's security and interests in Cyprus called into question the robustness of the alliance. This was also a period when Turkey's relations with the Soviet Union improved, especially with respect to Soviet-supported developmental projects. Turkey's domestic politics and society also grew into a distinctly anti-American and defiant

<sup>47</sup> Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy since 1774*, 91–95.

<sup>48</sup> Eyüp Ersoy, "Turkish Foreign Policy toward the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62)," *Turkish Studies* 13, no. 4 (2012), 683–695.

<sup>49</sup> See, Dennis Merrill, "The Truman Doctrine: Containing Communism and Modernity," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2006): 27–37.

<sup>50</sup> Personal correspondence with Seyfi Taşhan, then a member of the Turkish Press Corps and part of Bayar's entourage during his visit to the United States.

<sup>51</sup> See, Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy*, 88.

stance.<sup>52</sup> Across the political spectrum, the “Western Question” took hold of Turkey.<sup>53</sup>

### 6.1. Ideational Bonds

In this period, US and Turkish policy elites came to view one another with suspicion as fundamental strategic divergences and domestic political factors played a significant part in downgrading the value of the alliance. In Turkey’s case, undercurrents of anti-imperialism and pro-decolonization contributed to anti-American sentiments. Meanwhile, US attitudes were shaped by Turkey’s perceived undermining of Western unity due to the Cyprus issue. These sentiments were further aggravated by the growing sensitivity in the US, especially during the Carter administration, towards human rights and quality of democracy at a time when Turkey was facing domestic instability.

Widespread anti-American sentiments during the late 1960s were driven by opposition to the war in Vietnam around the world and were echoed in Turkey among the left and university activists.<sup>54</sup> Left-wing journalism and student activists expressed a general concern for Turkey’s national sovereignty and sought to undermine what they saw as pro-American right-wing governments of the 1960s and ‘70s in Turkey.<sup>55</sup> Americans were thus depicted as warmongering imperialists who treated Turkey like a client state undermining Turkish sovereignty and interests. Yet, it would be difficult to say that the governing elite was a committed anti-imperialist and anti-American actor. On the other hand, once a suitable international conjuncture appeared, specifically during Détente, in which East-West relations warmed, this elite did not hesitate to promote relations with the Soviet Union and the Non-Aligned Movement, also calling for a reduction of Turkey’s dependence on the US by advocating economic and military industrial self-sufficiency. One striking ideational divergence in this period was Turkey’s decision in 1964 to adopt five yearly economic development plans and import substitution industrialization policies, inspired by Soviet notions of economic management.

The US elites’ ideational disposition, meanwhile, did not seem to directly clash with Turkey. American decision-makers were cognizant of the fact that despite immense pressure from domestic political actors, Turkey was not likely to abandon its NATO relationship. However, American diplomats in Turkey noted concerns about its democracy suffering due to the 1960 military coup, although the perpetrators were adamant about their commitment to NATO as well as their willingness to swiftly restore parliamentary democracy.<sup>56</sup> The unstable period that followed showcased anti-Americanism among student activists and clashes between left- and right-wing groups and Turkish security forces. American diplomats noted that despite its commendable anti-Communist efforts, repressive measures to this end might serve to galvanize pro-communist and anti-American sentiments.<sup>57</sup>

According to our framework, American-Turkish relations in this period exhibited conspicuous divergences concerning ideational matters, hence the cohesion score of 0. American failure to support Turkey’s legitimate security concerns in Cyprus encouraged

<sup>52</sup> Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy*; 108.

<sup>53</sup> See, Ovalt and Özdikmenli, “Western Question,” 105-126.

<sup>54</sup> Nur Bilge Criss, “A Short History of Anti-Americanism and Terrorism: The Turkish Case,” *The Journal of American History* 89, no. 2 (2002): 477.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 473-474, 478.

<sup>56</sup> Çağrı Erhan, “ABD ve NATO ile İlişkiler [Relations with USA and NATO],” in *Türk Dış Politikası 1. Cilt* [Turkish Foreign Policy, Volume 1], ed. Baskın Oran (Ankara: İletişim, 2001), 681-715.

<sup>57</sup> Bali, *American Diplomats*, 128-129.

Turkish decision-makers to pursue foreign policy autonomy and improve relations with the Soviet Union. Likewise, anti-American sentiments otherwise, generally limited to various societal groups reached Turkey's foreign policy agenda. From the American standpoint, meanwhile, Turkey's domestic instabilities elicited concerns. Moreover, the US was adamant about signaling opposition to any disunity in NATO as a result of a Greek-Turkish conflict over Cyprus.

## 6.2. Geostrategic Factors

Fears about the Soviet Union ironically undermined American-Turkish relations by creating disunity over security priorities, leading to Turkish interests seeming to be brushed aside in the eyes of the Turkish decision-makers. The Cuban Missile Crisis was, infamously, resolved with a diplomatic backchannel through which the USSR agreed to immediately withdraw its missile installation from Cuba in exchange for the US withdrawing the Jupiter IRBMs from Turkey. While averting further escalation, American willingness to make such a deal with the Soviet Union without consulting the Turkish side infuriated Turkish decision-makers and intensified their fears over abandonment.<sup>58</sup>

While relations were reeling from Cuba, Turks also felt betrayed by the American dismissal of Turkey's core interests in Cyprus. Citing the need to preserve NATO unity, US President Lyndon Johnson sent a threatening and highly controversial letter to Prime Minister İnönü to the effect that should Turkey engage in any unilateral action over Cyprus, it could no longer count on the support of its NATO allies in the event of a Soviet intervention. Objections over Turkey's potential use of NATO weapons against Greek Cypriots strengthened Turkish convictions that Turkey needed to develop military capabilities and relations independent from the US.

Disillusionment led Turkey to explore alternatives and make overtures to the Soviet Union. Ironically, though, pragmatism and realism also pushed the US to concomitantly pursue détente with the Soviet Union, from which Turkey would derive material benefits in the form of developmental assistance as well as securing the tacit neutrality of the Soviet Union in 1974 when Turkey intervened in Cyprus. Not only was the US preoccupied with the Watergate Scandal, but Turkey was able to conclude a second round of military operations on the island. The domestic backlash against Turkey's intervention engendered powerful ethnic lobbies in the US to issue an arms embargo on Turkey, as discussed below. Yet, the embargo did not last long, suggesting that both sides remained keen to sustain the relationship against all odds, hence the assignment of a score of 0.

## 6.3. Domestic Constraints

This period of the relationship is one that witnessed the intense influence of domestic political factors. The Cuban Missile Crisis and President Johnson's letter provoked significant domestic resentment in Turkey across all echelons of politics and society. In response, İnönü had expressed in an interview deep personal resentment and distrust towards the US while alluding to the possibility of distancing Turkey from the alliance, famously declaring that, "A new kind of world then come into being on a new pattern, and in this new world Türkiye will

<sup>58</sup> See, Nur Bilge Criss, "Strategic Nuclear Missiles in Turkey: The Jupiter Affair, 1959–1963," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 20, no. 3 (1997): 97–122.

find herself a new place.”<sup>59</sup> Societal backlash reverberated in daily life from universities to a variety of left-wing and other (violent) political activists. Such activists attempted to kidnap US sailors, assassinate the US ambassador, regularly aired their grievances in protests, and, most dramatically, set ablaze the American ambassador’s car!

Even traditionally pro-American and conservative politicians began raising objections to the US and had to acquiesce to their constituents. Anti-Americanism became a cudgel to be used by opposition elements against ruling governments.<sup>60</sup> Due to a coup by memorandum, Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel eventually resigned on account of his inability to govern effectively. His successor, Nihat Erim, appointed by the military, complied with President Richard Nixon's demands to curtail opium production in Turkey.<sup>61</sup> Instituted in June 1971, the ban was controversial and contributed to Erim’s eventual resignation. Ecevit would repeal the opium ban in 1974.<sup>62</sup> Relations would further deteriorate as Turkey intervened in Cyprus in 1974. Conversely, domestic constraints appeared in the US as the rising Armenian and Greek lobbies pushed for an arms embargo to be placed on Turkey.<sup>63</sup>

Since the domestic decision-making environment was unfavorable for both states to promote cooperation, we conclude that a score of -1 is appropriate for this dimension. Likewise, for the breadth of the period, we tabulate a total score of -1 points for the American-Turkish partnership cohesion score, hence why we argue that the partnership was transactional in this period. We note, however, that transactionalism did not undermine the fundamental necessity and endurance of the relationship. The arms embargo, put in place in 1975, would be short-lived. By 1976, the embargo was partially lifted, and it was removed completely in 1978. Kassimeris writes that maintaining Turkey’s military capacity was a conscious desire on the part of the US executive; in this case, the invisible hand of the bureaucracy seemed to favor a close strategic relationship with Turkey.<sup>64</sup> In fact, the positive reorientation of foreign policy in the US towards Turkey in this period can only be explained through the purposeful intervention of foreign policy elites in the US and Turkey.<sup>65</sup> While later developments like the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Islamic revolution in Iran served to re-anchor the relationship, the force behind the initial push can only be found in what approximates to a bureaucratic inertia in favor of maintaining the partnership.

## 7. Model Partnership: The Resurgence of American-Turkish Relations (1980-2012)

The final years of the Cold War saw a return to normalcy in the relationship, while the end of the Cold War would pave the way for increased Turkish-US cooperation. With the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, détente gave way to a period of escalation in American-Soviet relations, also known as the Second Cold War.<sup>66</sup> The strong partnership cohesion

<sup>59</sup> “Turkey Ready to Quit Alliance,” *New York Times*, April 17, 1964, accessed date December 20, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/1964/04/17/archives/turkey-ready-to-quit-alliance.html>

<sup>60</sup> See, Füsün Türkmen, “Anti-Americanism as a Default Ideology of Opposition: Turkey as a Case Study,” *Turkish Studies* 11, no. 3 (2010): 329–345.

<sup>61</sup> Kyle T. Evered, “A Proxy Geopolitics of Poppies, Peasants, and National Sovereignty: Turkey’s Rhetorical Resistance to America’s War on Drugs,” *Political Geography* 98, (2022): 6.

<sup>62</sup> Baskın Oran, “Relations with USA and NATO,” ed., *Turkish Foreign Policy, 1919-2006: Facts and Analyses with Documents* (Utah: The University of Utah Press, 2010), 422–424.

<sup>63</sup> See, James F. Goode, *The Turkish Arms Embargo: Drugs, Ethnic Lobbies, and U.S. Domestic Politics* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2020).

<sup>64</sup> Christos Kassimeris, “The Inconsistency of United States Foreign Policy in the Aftermath of the Cyprus Invasion: The Turkish Arms Embargo and its Termination,” *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 26, no. 1 (2008): 91-114.

<sup>65</sup> Seyfi Taşhan, “Turkey and the Atlantic Alliance,” *NATO Review* (1977): 28-31.

<sup>66</sup> See, Fred Haliday, *The Making of the Second Cold War* (New York: Verso, 1986).



parameters in American-Turkish relations in this period carried over into the post-Cold War period. This was a new and dynamic time for the relationship since neither state would be bound by the constraints of the Cold War. While the US experienced its unipolar moment, so too did Turkish foreign policy endeavor to expand into new vistas by way of moving from geopolitical marginality to centrality. American-Turkish relations exhibited the greatest ideational convergence in this period, and the two countries experienced some of their most cooperative relations since Turkey's early years in NATO—a veritable second honeymoon.

### 7.1. Ideational Affinities

Turkey entered this period in the throes of yet another military coup that sought to purge Turkey of the violent left-right-wing clashes and accompanying instability. The intervention came as a wave of democratization in southern Europe spread and human rights gained prominence in American foreign policy. Fortunately, after a brief hiatus, Turkey returned to parliamentary democracy and embarked on liberalizing reforms with the goal to eventually join the European Communities. In 1987, it applied for membership and extended to its citizens the right to appeal to the European Court of Human Rights.

The end of the Cold War proved even more auspicious since the US's unrivaled position in global affairs instigated its desire to reform the international order by promoting human rights and liberal democracy globally. Turkey and the US significantly aligned in terms of these goals and found ample opportunities to cooperate, especially during the Clinton administration. Additionally, in close coordination with the US, the Turkish Armed Forces assumed important NATO and UN peacekeeping missions across conflict regions around the world, ranging from enforcing the Dayton Accords in Bosnia to heading a UN peacekeeping operation in Somalia.

The US elites and foreign policy establishment shared and actively supported Turkish efforts to join the EU in the 1990s.<sup>67</sup> Americans urged their European counterparts to be fair with Turkey, advocating progress in Turkish integration pending human rights reforms in Turkey. It was with this conviction that the US supported Turkey's accession to the Customs Union in 1996.<sup>68</sup> The US became an ardent supporter of Turkey's EU membership bid, too. So much so that some EU leaders, like Jaques Chirac, voiced concerns that the US was meddling in EU affairs.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, at a key moment, Clinton's personal diplomacy helped to broker a deal between Prime Minister Ecevit and the EU, paving the way for Turkey to become an EU candidate country at the Helsinki Summit in December 1999,<sup>70</sup> an important development in terms of bringing the US and Turkey towards a shared ideational commonality. This was accompanied by the efforts of the US State Department to convince opposition in Congress to have the 1999 OSCE summit held in Istanbul.

Turkey implemented important human rights and democratizing reforms in the form of Constitutional amendments and the revision of its anti-terror laws. This was also

<sup>67</sup> Nathalie Tocci, "Let's talk Turkey! US influence on EU-Turkey relations," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 25, no. 3 (2012): 399-419.

<sup>68</sup> Notable officials from the State Department, such as Deputy Secretary Strobe Talbot, Assistant Secretary Mark Grossman, and ambassadors Mark Parris, Nicolas Burns, and Stuart Eizenstaat "were heavily engaged in constant behind-closed-doors advocacy in favor of Turkey's EU candidacy." See, Tocci, "Let's talk Turkey," 402.

<sup>69</sup> See, Ian Black, Michael White, and Giles Tremlett, "Angry Chirac puts Bush in his place: French president publicly carpets the US leader for pressing Turkey's case for EU membership," *The Guardian*, June 29, 2004, accessed date December 29, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/jun/29/eu.nato>

<sup>70</sup> Tocci, "Let's talk Turkey!" 402-403.

accompanied by the liberalization of the Turkish economy, a process that had started in the 1980s and culminated in 2004 with the EU recognizing Turkey as a “functioning market economy.”<sup>71</sup> These developments became reflected in Turkey’s foreign policy priorities. Turkey became more inclined towards building political, economic, and cultural relations with its neighboring regions, showcasing features of a trading state rather than continuing its security-oriented “Cold-Warrior” disposition.<sup>72</sup> Turkey sought to be a bridge between East and West and aspired to present itself as a viable model of economic development and advanced democracy,<sup>73</sup> clearly qualities that strengthened the ideational convergence between the US and Turkey.

Interestingly, Turkey would eventually be presented as a model, not necessarily for its Western character, but as a functioning Muslim democracy. In the aftermath of 9/11, the US’s emerging neo-conservative elite reasoned that democratizing authoritarian regimes in the Muslim world could be a panacea to the root causes of anti-American sentiments and terrorism. By then, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) had established itself as the Turkish government and was all too happy to spread the new gospel as it also coincided with its image as a moderate Islamic movement seeking to liberalize Turkey.<sup>74</sup> Taşpınar notes that this was the first time that the US wanted to use Turkey not for its geostrategic qualities but for “what it was.”<sup>75</sup> Democracy promotion and liberalism dominated Turkey’s foreign policy agenda as a projection of Ahmet Davutoğlu’s “Zero Problems with Neighbors Policy.”<sup>76</sup> For Turkey, this would be an opportunity to grow its presence in the Middle East. Arguably, it was this conviction, along with the transformation of Turkey’s elite and institutional makeup, that compelled Turkey to pursue a more activist foreign policy in the Middle East.

Such an agenda also coincided with the US’s efforts to support stability in the Middle East. Upon election, President Barack Obama’s first international visit (after Canada) was to Turkey. Obama, moreover, addressed the Turkish Parliament in April 2009, emphasizing the importance not only of common security concerns in the region, but also of their shared “common values... as democracies.”<sup>77</sup> American-Turkish cooperation reached new heights due to the Arab Spring and the common desire to initially democratize, but later topple, Bashar Assad’s regime in Syria.<sup>78</sup> We can infer a strong ideational affinity between the foreign policy executives of both countries during this period and assign a score of 1 to the 1980-2012 period.

<sup>71</sup> Ziya Öniş, “Turgut Özal and his Economic Legacy: Turkish Neo-Liberalism in Critical Perspective,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no.4 (2004): 113–134; Directorate-General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations, “Turkey Regular Report 2004,” *European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations*, November 27, 2004, accessed date December 21, 2024. [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/turkey-regular-report-2004\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/turkey-regular-report-2004_en)

<sup>72</sup> See, Kemal Kirişci, “The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy: The Rise of the Trading State,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 40, (2009): 29-56.

<sup>73</sup> Berdal Aral, “Dispensing with Tradition? Turkish Politics and International Society during the Özal Decade, 1983-93,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 1 (2001): 72–88.

<sup>74</sup> Gerald Knaus, “Islamic Calvinists. Change and Conservatism in Central Anatolia,” *European Stability Initiative (ESI)*, September 19, 2005, accessed date June 13, 2024. [http://www.esiweb.org/pdf/esi\\_document\\_id\\_69.pdf](http://www.esiweb.org/pdf/esi_document_id_69.pdf).

<sup>75</sup> Ömer Taşpınar, “The Anatomy of Anti-Americanism in Turkey,” *Brookings Institute*, November 16, 2005, accessed date October 13, 2024. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-anatomy-of-anti-americanism-in-turkey/>

<sup>76</sup> Behlül Özkan, “Turkey, Davutoglu, and the Idea of Pan-Islamism,” *Survival* 56, no. 4 (2014): 132-133.

<sup>77</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by President Obama to The Turkish Parliament,” *Office of the Press Secretary*, April 6, 2009, accessed date October 13, 2024. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-obama-turkish-parliament>

<sup>78</sup> Henri J. Barkey, “Syria’s Dark Shadow Over US-Turkey Relations,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (2016): 26.

## 7.2. Geostrategic Interests

Nothing signaled a return to American-Turkish geostrategic alignment after détente than the signing of the Defense and Economic Cooperation Agreement (DECA) between Turkey and the US in March 1980. This agreement sought to subsume all existing Turkish-US military aid and defense cooperation agreements under a common framework. The same year, Turkey assented to Greece's return to NATO's integrated military structure. While the two countries did not overtly participate in any joint operations, Turkey was among the countries to support the Mujahadeen in Afghanistan in their struggle against the Soviet invasion. Moreover, Turkey was able to expand its military capabilities through its first-time acquisition of F-16s and, eventually, their co-production locally.

The aftermath of the Cold War could have led to a severe undermining of American-Turkish relations since, without the Soviet Union, NATO no longer had an existential threat to justify its *raison d'être*. Surprisingly, however, NATO would continue to bind the Western alliance together, now under a new mission of intervening in conflicts in or near Europe as an alternative platform for the US to reshape the international order. Turkey, for its part, remained committed to NATO and duly supported its membership expansion. Overall, at least initially, American-Turkish national interests converged with respect to preserving the rules-based international order and committing to the preservation of extant borders and sovereignty. Yet, regional politics constituted a strain on the partnership. Turkey experienced several rounds of tensions with Greece, including the crisis in 1996 over uninhabited islands in the Aegean that brought the two countries to the brink of war. The US was compelled to mediate between the two NATO allies. Furthermore, Turkey in the 1990s fought an insurgency led by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) that caused widespread human rights violations leading to extensive criticisms in Congress, complicating weapons procurements for Turkey.<sup>79</sup>

However, these issues did not preclude Turkey from participating in multilateral initiatives, such as providing troops for various UN and NATO missions abroad.<sup>80</sup> Turkey was also supportive of the removal of the Saddam Hussain regime in Iraq. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, the US was able to forge a coalition to remove the Iraqi army from Kuwait. President Turgut Özal, after overcoming resistance from the military, was able to lend Turkey's support to dislodging Saddam from Kuwait. However, Saddam's defeat culminated in the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq that complicated Turkey's fight against the PKK, straining relations between the two allies. Yet, this strain was repaired when the US assisted Turkey in apprehending the leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, in Kenya in 1999 and began to share actionable intelligence with Turkey for its fight against the PKK in northern Iraq in 2007.

American-Turkish geostrategic cooperation was considerable in the 1990s. It would, however, be a mistake to ignore the fact that there were also problems. In the case of Iraq, the lost revenue from sanctions on Iraq was considerable. It was also politically exhausting as successive Turkish governments would have to spend political capital in parliament to pass resolutions extending the US and UK's use of Turkish airspace and Incirlik to continue operations over Iraq. Turkey was also gravely concerned with the US's increasing involvement in conflicts in the Middle East and rising American unilateralism. Perhaps the biggest issue

<sup>79</sup> Şükrü Elekdağ, "2 1/2 War Strategy," *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs* 1, no. 4 (1996): 1-12.

<sup>80</sup> Uğur Güngör, "United Nations Peace Operations and the Motivations that Lie at the Root of Turkey's Involvement," *SAM Papers*, no. 11 (2015): 1-46.

was that the two countries did not develop a common threat perception, even on matters of global terror, which constituted the US's primary security concern after September 11. The fallout from the conflict sowed the seeds for future discord between Turkey and the US as it paved the way for, among other things, greater operational space for the PKK and affiliates.

Despite its unambiguous support for the US and participation in its operations against Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, Turkey opposed a second invasion of Iraq, as did an overwhelming majority of the international public. Turkey's decision to decline participation in the conflict left a bitter taste among US decision-makers. Bush II would express that Turkey failed to rise to the occasion when the US needed its support the most.

Relations took another severe hit the same summer when the US apprehended Turkish Special Forces members, detaining them with sacks covering their heads. Despite the furor that the incident provoked in Turkey, both sides managed to overcome the crisis and bad feelings. Nevertheless, US involvement in the region and the decision to cooperate with local Kurdish militias and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) were met with hostility. Even though Turkey would become a major stakeholder in the region and develop cordial relations with the KRG, the US could never reassure Turkey to the effect that it had no intentions of facilitating Kurdish independence. Yet, we also identify a strong convergence of material interests between Turkey and the US throughout this broad period, paradoxically despite objections to American unilateralism in the Middle East. This was also the period when in 2009-10 Turkey was elected to serve as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council with US's active support, a first since 1961. Hence, we argue that a 1-point score on the geostrategic convergence dimension is appropriate for this period.

### 7.3. Domestic Constraints

In the 1990s, foreign policy elites in both countries were able to pursue positive agendas toward one another despite some constraining factors. In the US context, ethnic lobbies would attempt to increase pressure on Turkey, pushing for Congress to recognize the displacement and deaths of Ottoman Armenians in 1915 as a genocide. Human rights watchdogs also mounted pressure to reduce Turkey's access to high-tech weapons because of their concerns over human rights abuses in Turkey and the intensification of repressive practices in the early 1990s against the Kurds—a sentiment shared by EU states. Turkish decision-makers lamented the power of ethnic lobbies in the US. While there were domestic obstacles, supportive figures also exerted themselves. Turkey being able to host the 1999 OSCE Summit in Istanbul, mentioned above, perfectly encapsulates this dynamic. The joint chairs of the Congressional Committee on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) wanted the State Department to find an alternative location for the Summit because of Turkey's human rights violations. The Assistant Secretary of State, Mark Grossman, convincingly argued that showing solidarity with Turkey would hasten its democratic reforms. Furthermore, upon assuming the co-chairmanship of the CSCE, newly elected Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell, a veteran of the Korean war and a Native American, took a more constructive approach than his predecessor, arguing Turkey was valuable as an ally deserving support to remedy its democratic deficits.<sup>81</sup>

Furthermore, Turkey improving its relations with Israel and winning the support of the

<sup>81</sup> Kemal Kirişci, "U.S.–Turkish relations: new uncertainties in the renewed partnership," in *Turkey in World Politics: An Emerging Regional Power*, eds. Barry Rubin and Kemal Kirişci, (Colorado: Lynne Reiner, 2001), 142–143.

Israeli Lobby offset anti-Turkish sentiments in Congress.<sup>82</sup> From Turkey's perspective, a host of domestic security, economic, and social problems led to a succession of weak coalition governments in the 1990s that pursued a variety of foreign policy agendas ranging from developing relations with the West to fostering ties to the Ummah. There was arguably a silver lining to these issues as Turkey's foreign policymaking came to rest on two additional, and independent from the government, pillars in the form of the largely pro-American military and foreign ministry. These institutions embodied the interests of Turkey's secular elites, focusing respectively on developing relations with the US, Israel, and the EU. Turkey's secular elites surmised that maintaining cooperation with the US and developing relations with Israel would ultimately give them more space for foreign policy maneuvering, including support for countering calls in the US for the recognition of the Armenian genocide.<sup>83</sup>

This formulation functioned well until 2003, when Turkey was called up to participate in the Second Gulf War. Given the mounting resistance to US unilateralism, not only was Turkish society wholly hostile to Turkey's military participation in a US-led conflict, but virtually none of Turkey's principal foreign policy institutions or veto actors took a decisive role in the decision-making. The then-fledgling AKP government failed to pass the March 1<sup>st</sup> motion in parliament, giving the Turkish legislature a rare decisive role on a significant foreign policy decision.<sup>84</sup>

In the meantime, the emergence of the AKP represented the consolidation of Islamists in mainstream Turkish politics, which occurred at the expense of Turkey's secular elites' pro-Western and status-quo-oriented foreign policy. The AKP government reined the bureaucracy by attempting to reengineer the Turkish Ministry of Affairs through hiring practices that favored loyalists and also shifted the burden of foreign policymaking to missionary agencies over which the government had greater control.<sup>85</sup> Having secured a majority in the parliament, the AKP would go on to infiltrate and pacify other veto institutions like the judiciary and the military, resulting in a foreign policy agenda focusing primarily on domestic political priorities.<sup>86</sup>

None of these developments undermined American-Turkish relations. In fact, Turkey was not alone in undergoing bureaucratic transformation. US foreign policy elites traditionally favored a largely pro-Atlanticist disposition, often exercising restraint and generally preferring multilateralism and cooperation with NATO allies during the Cold War.<sup>87</sup> The post-Cold War international system presented US elites with an opportunity to reinforce US leadership and recreate the world in its own image.<sup>88</sup> Crucially, the US foreign policy establishment had

<sup>82</sup> Meliha Altunışık, "The Turkish-Israeli Rapprochement in the post-Cold War Era," *Middle Eastern Studies* 36, no. 2 (2000): 172–191.

<sup>83</sup> Ersel Aydınli and Onur Erpul, "Elite Change and the Inception, Duration, and Demise of the Turkish-Israeli Alliance," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 17, no. 2 (2021): 8.

<sup>84</sup> Baris Kesgin and Juliet Kaarbo, "When and How Parliaments Influence Foreign Policy: The Case of Turkey's Iraq Decision," *International Studies Perspectives* 11, no. 1 (2010): 19–36; Samet Yilmaz, "A Government Devoid of Strong Leadership: A Neoclassical Realist Explanation of Turkey's Iraq War Decision in 2003," *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace* 10, no. 2 (2021): 197–212.

<sup>85</sup> See, Rahime Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm, "The Sociology of Diplomats and Foreign Policy Sector: The Role of Cliques on the Policymaking Process," *Political Studies Review* 19, no. 4 (2021): 558–573; Berkay Gülen, "Turf Wars in Foreign Policy Bureaucracy: Rivalry between the Government and the Bureaucracy in Turkish Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 18, no. 4 (2022): 1–20.

<sup>86</sup> Aydınli and Erpul, "Elite Change," 2, 11–12.

<sup>87</sup> See, Priscilla Roberts, "The transatlantic American foreign policy elite: its evolution in generational perspective," *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 7, no. 2 (2009): 163–183. Perhaps the sentiment was shared by the Atlantic Community. See, Ivo H. Daalder, "The End of Atlanticism," *Survival* 45, no. 2 (2003): 147–166.

<sup>88</sup> Straight from the horse's mouth: See, George H. W. Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Alfred A.



been shifting towards a neo-conservative agenda since the 1980s and consolidated itself under the Bush II administration. As discussed above, this group sought to reengineer the Middle East and the broader Muslim world. Within this design, Turkey was showcased as a model democracy that other states should emulate. This provoked the ire of secular Turks because the US legitimized the rising conservative elite by highlighting Turkey's religious identity alongside its democracy while overlooking ontological commonalities like Turkey's Western orientation and secularism. Turkish-US relations would henceforth be placed on an identitarian path shaped by an elite with little memory of the Cold War or cognizance of their common geostrategic interests. The Neocon elites' unilateralism and disregard for the international order they purported to lead, as well as Turkey's growing independent foreign policy in the Middle East, reflect these domestic changes and would have negative repercussions after 2012.

In the post-Cold War period, Turkey-US relations exhibited signs of cooperation despite tensions over local/regional geostrategic issues of significance to Turkey. Ideationally, both countries converged on principles concerning the significance of democracy. The US was congenial and supportive of Turkey's engagement with the West. While domestic politics initially militated against further cooperation given Congressional disapproval and the state of Turkey's domestic politics, the former was pacified by Turkey's improving reputation and its flourishing relations with Israel. In the years to follow, and with the changing preferences of US foreign policy elites and the emergence of a new elite in Turkey, the US began to champion Turkey as a Muslim-majority democracy that could act as a model for the Muslim world. We judge that both states' foreign policy-making environments were amenable to cohesive partnership, hence why we assign a positive 1 point to this dimension. Despite occasional differences in their geostrategic interests, the period spanning the late Cold War until the early 2010s can be described, with a general cohesion score of 3, as a model partnership. After all, this was the period when two US presidents, Clinton and Obama, got to address the Turkish parliament, an unprecedented event suggesting the depth of the partnership. Conversely, Demirel, as President, made four "working visits" to the US, an unusual frequency, and a sign of close cooperation.

## 8. The Present-Day Transactional Partnership, 2013-2024

Contemporary American-Turkish relations are unstable due to ideational divergences and conflicting local geostrategic priorities. Ironically, this period had started off on a strong footing. In practice, however, Obama's model partner approach to relations panned out very differently. As Turkey's commitment to EU-driven reforms weakened, American assessments of Turkey became unfavorable.<sup>89</sup> American support for Kurdish proxies in Syria, of course, constituted the primary source of Turkish gravamen.

### 8.1. Ideational Bonds

It is hard to argue that both sides have diametrically opposed values, yet one can observe a palpable lack of ideational convergence. Anti-American sentiments were hardly new or unique in past decades, but in this period, Turkish public opinion became strikingly hostile

Knopf, 1998), 564.

<sup>89</sup> Ahmet K. Han, "From 'Strategic Partnership' To 'Model Partnership': AKP, Turkish-US Relations and The Prospects Under Obama," *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, no. 23 (2010): 77-112.



towards the US.<sup>90</sup> Foreign policy elites echoed these sentiments. Erdoğan, for instance, often highlights the common interests of NATO allies but has regularly repeated the invective that the world is “bigger than five,” often questioning why the US is involved in conflicts near Turkey.<sup>91</sup> Turkey’s decision-makers are not alone in making contradictory remarks, as American and other discourses about Turkey’s standing vary greatly across issue domains. Turkey is a compliant NATO member one day, working with the Russians another, and at other times, an advocate of a foreign policy exceptionalism sometimes labelled neo-Ottomanism that pushes its own regional foreign policy agenda with little coordination with its transatlantic allies.<sup>92</sup> On the US side, it is not unusual to come across commentaries demanding Turkey’s expulsion from NATO. Meanwhile, Trump did not hesitate to threaten Erdoğan with destroying the country’s economy, and the US Congress set into motion Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) sanctions on Turkey, clearly practices that are difficult to reconcile with a strong sense of alliance bonds.

American-Turkish ideational convergence, especially over the rules-based international order, is waning. In Turkey’s case, one must note the obvious ideational and discursive shift in Turkish foreign policy. While Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, had presided over a period of excellent cooperative relations with the US, his tenure as Prime Minister was notably less auspicious. Davutoğlu’s Pan-Islamist worldview, fueled by geopolitical theories from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, eventually led to Turkey adopting a sectarian and extremist foreign policy. Rather than promoting regional stability or zero problems with neighbors per his Strategic Depth doctrine, Davutoğlu seemed far more interested in promoting a bloc of Ikhvanist states under Turkey’s aegis.<sup>93</sup>

Democracy became another source of divergence. Despite retaining a functional electoral democracy, Turkey’s democratic credentials dipped to a point that its ontological anchor to Western-style democracy is considered to be tenuous.<sup>94</sup> Turkey’s dimming accession prospects fueled resentment towards the EU in Turkey. This dynamic played an important role in Turkey’s slide towards authoritarianism and reversal of the democratic gains of the previous decade, sometimes referred to as “de-Europeanization.”<sup>95</sup> Particularly since 2016, the EU has largely abandoned efforts to encourage Turkey to re-democratize and has opted for a more transactional and less ontological engagement.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Efe Tokdemir, Melike Metintaş, and Seçkin Köstem, “A Multi-Dimensional Evaluation of Turkish Public Opinion towards the United States,” *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace* 14, no. 1 (2024): 1-24.

<sup>91</sup> On the significance of the “World is bigger than five,” See, Kutlay and Öniş, “Turkish Foreign Policy in a Post-Western Order,” 1094. Erdoğan uttered on October 12, 2023: “Bay Amerika, Amerika nere Akdeniz, İsrail, Filistin nere? Ne işin var senin orada?” [“Mr. America, where is America, where is the Mediterranean, Israel, and Palestine? What are you up to there?”]. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, “President Erdoğan: ‘If we do not help Palestine win, the law of the strong and the oppressor will prevail,’” *Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Communications*, December 12, 2024, accessed date December 20, 2024. <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/english/haberler/detay/president-erdogan-if-we-do-not-help-palestine-win-the-law-of-the-strong-and-the-oppressor-will-prevail>

<sup>92</sup> For a discussion of foreign policy exceptionalism and neo-Ottomanism, See, Lerna K. Yanık, “Constructing Turkish “exceptionalism”: Discourses of liminality and hybridity in post-Cold War Turkish foreign policy,” *Political Geography* 30, no. 2 (2011): 80-89.

<sup>93</sup> Behlül Özkan, “Turkey’s Imperial Fantasy,” *New York Times*, August 28, 2014, accessed date December 20, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/29/opinion/ahmet-davutoglu-and-turkeys-imperial-fantasy.html>

<sup>94</sup> See, Kemal Kirişçi and Amanda Sloat, “The Rise and Fall of Liberal Democracy in Turkey: Implications for the West,” *Brookings Institution*, February 02, 2019, accessed date December 13, 2024. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-rise-and-fall-of-liberal-democracy-in-turkey-implications-for-the-west/>

<sup>95</sup> See, Senem Aydın-Düzgüt and Alper Kaliber, “Encounters with Europe in an Era of Domestic and International Turmoil: Is Turkey a De-Europeanizing Candidate Country?” *South European Society and Politics* 21, no.1 (2016): 1–14.

<sup>96</sup> Beken Saatçioğlu, “The European Union’s Refugee Crisis and Rising Functionalism in EU-Turkey Relations,” *Turkish Studies* 21, no. 2 (2020): 169–187.

In the case of the US, one could speak of an authoritarian and leader-based solidarity that briefly existed between Erdoğan and President Donald Trump during the latter's first term. However, Biden maintained a distance from Erdoğan, and his decision to exclude him from the Summit of Democracies in 2021 symbolized the deep ideational divergence. Following the Gezi Park protests in 2013, criticisms over Turkey's democracy and rule of law seemed to wax. The attempted overthrow in July 2016 of the Turkish government by the followers of a cult leader based in the US elicited no immediate reaction, unlike Putin who was quick to denounce the attempted coup. This slow reaction raised concerns in Turkey that the US was hedging its bets for a new government and led even to bitter accusations of American involvement, going as far as a minister calling the US a terrorist state.<sup>97</sup> From close alignment as late as 2012, American-Turkish ideational commonalities disappeared; hence we assign a score of -1 in the ideational convergence score in the post-2012 period.

## 8.2. Geostrategic Interests

Turkey and the US arguably maintained strong geostrategic commonalities well into the early 2010s. It soon became clear that a period that began with a joint effort to subdue the Assad regime would experience such a transformation that Turkey would come to prevaricate on Finnish and Swedish accession to NATO, which was in direct contradiction with Turkey's traditional foreign policy practices. It sought, instead, to leverage its position as a veto actor to extract military-economic concessions from the US as well as the two NATO membership candidates. These developments came on the heels of Turkey's decision to purchase S-400s from Russia, throwing such doubt into Turkey's dependability that the US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, called Turkey "our so-called strategic partner."<sup>98</sup> On the Turkish side, the US's decision in 2014 to cooperate with the People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria to combat ISIS engendered similar reactions. Turkey views these organizations as natural offshoots of the PKK, and continued US patronage is viewed with outright hostility, constituting, perhaps, the most fundamental conflictual issue in the relationship.

Against this background, Turkey's new governing elites' hedging policy aims to avoid overcommitting to what it considers to be an unreliable US, thereby aspiring to enhance its strategic autonomy. The logic of Turkey's strategic autonomy promotes the belief that Turkey is powerful and exercises considerable regional influence, and that it should keep its alignment options open instead of suffering the consequences of entrapment.<sup>99</sup> Perhaps these sentiments are a natural symptom of what appears to be an emerging (lop-sided) multipolarity in which alignments are more malleable and flexible.

Aiding this geostrategic confusion is the attitude of recent US administrations, particularly the Trump administration, which had a restrained attitude towards Russia and dismissive attitude towards NATO compared to the traditional US foreign policy establishment.<sup>100</sup> Given the positive sentiments expressed between Erdoğan and Trump, their common populist discourses, and their predilections for personal diplomacy conducted via non-institutional

<sup>97</sup> "Turkish minister says U.S. behind 2016 failed coup,"

<sup>98</sup> "U.S. Secretary of State Nominee Calls NATO Ally Turkey a 'So-called Strategic Partner'," *Reuters*, January 19, 2021, accessed date December 20, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/us-secretary-state-nominee-calls-nato-ally-turkey-so-called-strategic-partner-2021-01-19/>

<sup>99</sup> Mehtap Kara, "Turkish-American Strategic Partnership: Is Turkey Still a Faithful Ally?" *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 23, no. 2 (2023): 432.

<sup>100</sup> See, Joyce P. Kaufman, "The US perspective on NATO under Trump: lessons of the past and prospects for the future," *International Affairs* 93, no. 2 (2017): 251-266.

channels, American-Turkish relations seemed to align not on geostrategic principles, but more so on a kind of affinity based on strong-man rule.<sup>101</sup>

The Biden administration, meanwhile, has exhibited a comparatively tougher stance on Turkey, but the real noteworthy development is in the return of geostrategic commonalities. Turkey supports NATO expansion, desires the maintenance of the territorial status quo in its neighborhood, and is apprehensive of Russian expansionism. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 acted as a catalyst for renewed Western security cooperation, but American-Turkish cooperation failed to transcend transactionalism. In a break from established practice, Turkey resisted Finnish and Swedish accession to NATO for some time and maintained ties with Russia, all the while denouncing Russian attempts to undermine Ukrainian sovereignty. The Biden administration, in turn, displayed willingness to work with Turkey on occasions and managed to reach a *modus vivendi* to ensure Sweden's NATO membership in exchange for greenlighting the sale of F-16s to Turkey. The partnership's cohesion score on the geostrategic dimension is therefore best defined as 0 in this period.

### 8.3. Domestic Constraints

In Turkey, foreign policy institutions traditionally favoring strong relations with the US have been all but severed from foreign policymaking. Turkey's traditional foreign-policy bureaucracy has become far more insulated from potential sources of constraints. In the US, meanwhile, Congress retains its strong influence and has been punitive towards Turkey. Even without Congress, however, the Biden administration's foreign policy establishment evaluated Turkey as an overall unreliable partner. Turkey's democratic regression is a part of the problem, too, playing into the hands of Congress and ethnic lobbies in undermining the relationship. These perceptions bear significance because domestic congressional obstruction appears to be the most pressing issue in the relationship, rather than fundamental divergence of interests. It was Congress's decision to deny Turkey an opportunity to acquire SAMs during the early years of the Syrian Civil War that ultimately pushed Turkey to pursue alternative sources and was the catalyst for Turkey's preference for alternative systems like the S-400, as admitted by Trump.<sup>102</sup> Slapped with CAATSA sanctions because of its insistence on the adoption of S-400s, Turkey was removed from the F-35 program despite being a major contributor and has not been able to muster any support in favor of lifting the sanctions. If domestic decision-making environments did not impede relations at the start of the period, it had become abundantly clear by 2020 that institutions like Congress present the most formidable obstacles. Hence, a cohesion score of -1 is appropriate for the decision-making environment dimension. We conclude that the current period is a transactional one with an overall total partnership cohesion score of -2.

### 9. Conclusion

Like in the aftermath of Turkey's intervention in Cyprus and the Congressional decision to impose sanctions on Turkey, current American-Turkish relations appear to be at an impasse. Given the bleak assessment above, the natural answer to our original inquiry may be that

<sup>101</sup> Mehmet Yegin and Salim Çevik, "From Biden to Trump: Waning Turkish-American Relationship Demands Greater European Engagement," *SWP Comment*, no. 54 (2024): 5.

<sup>102</sup> Cagan Koc and Margaret Talev, "Trump Says Obama Treated Erdogan Unfairly on Patriot Missile," *Bloomberg*, June 29, 2019, accessed date June 21, 2024. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-06-29/erdogan-says-no-setback-on-missile-system-deliveries-from-russia>

the “anchor” is gone! There is, nevertheless, a silver lining: not unlike in the second half of the 1970s, American and Turkish authorities are exploring ways to overcome some of the most outstanding problems in the relationship, such as the S-400/F-35 debacle.<sup>103</sup> There is an unmistakable mutual interest in a *modus vivendi*. Inevitably, our framework suggests *via negativa* the continued functioning of the bureaucratic “invisible hand.” The reason for this is evident: if not any other factor, Turkey’s geographical real estate value and NATO membership supply the invisible hand with a *raison d’être*. In this vein, it will be interesting to see if this “hand” succeeds in assisting both sides to meet the challenges likely to emerge from the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria.

Reducible neither to a geostrategic, threat-based logic, nor to ontological conceptions, the American-Turkish relationship has endured a wide range of international and domestic challenges in a span of almost 100 years. The goal of this research was to revisit the enduring relationship to illustrate the influence of geostrategic, ideational, and domestic politics/decision-making factors and discuss their impact on the relationship at various junctures. These factors help us better understand the dynamics behind the so-called “ups and downs” of the relationship. Even during the honeymoon periods early in the Cold War and then during the late 1990s and early 2000s, the American-Turkish partnership was far less harmonious than is generally assumed. Conversely, we also observed that during periods when there were ideational drift, geostrategic vagaries, and domestic political challenges to the partnership these were cushioned by an entrenched culture dating back to the days of Ambassador Grew. This culture manifested itself among foreign policy decision-makers and elites on both sides prioritizing the preservation of the relationship no matter the countervailing trends. We called this the invisible hand of the bureaucracy, or “bureaucratic inertia.”

Moving forward, with Donald Trump assuming the presidency again in 2025, US foreign policy will likely shift towards a personalistic style that eschews institutional linkages in favor of leader-based diplomacy. This means that even if it may be possible to improve US-Turkish cooperation on matters of common interest, the strength of the bureaucratic inertia will be limited, if not eroding. Moreover, we may expect significant ideational divergences and an ever-weakening of the ontological bonds between the two states since Trump may be inclined to downgrade alliance relations and promote transactionalism with all states at large, not just Turkey! On the other hand, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan may nurture closer relations with China and Russia under the guise of a quest to achieve strategic autonomy. Time will tell whether the steady hand of bureaucratic inertia will still be able to preserve the partnership.

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<sup>103</sup> Laura Kelly, “Congress cheers Biden’s Turkey gambit in Russia tug-of-war,” *The Hill*, September 25, 2024, accessed date October 2, 2024. <https://thehill.com/policy/international/4899653-us-turkey-relations-s400-f35/>

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## Abstracts in Turkish

### **Birbirlerini Zorlayan Dostlar: Türkiye-ABD İlişkileri**

*(Challenging Friends: Türkiye-U.S. Relations)*

Lenore G. Martin

#### **Özet:**

Bu makale, ABD-Türkiye ilişkisini sekteye uğratan temel gerilimlerin kökenlerini analiz etmektedir. Bu gerilimler, ABD'nin Kuzey Suriye'de IŞİD'e karşı kara gücü olarak PYD/YPG/YPJ'ye destek vermesinden, Türkiye'nin Rusya'dan S400 füze savunma sistemi satın almasından, Türkiye'nin Rusya ve İran'dan enerji ithalatına, ABD'nin Fethullah Gülen'i iade etmeyi reddetmesine ve Washington'un AKP hükümetinin antidemokratik eğilimlerine yönelik şikayetlerine kadar uzanmaktadır. Makale, bu meselelerin bazılarıyla ilgili olarak neden ve nasıl karşılıklı öfke ve güvensizlik ortaya çıktığını, diğer bazı konuların ise neden daha az tepki doğurduğunu, beş bütünlüklük değişkeni temel alan bir paradigma aracılığıyla irdelemektedir: Türkiye'nin askeri ve ekonomik kabiliyetleri; özellikle enerji olmak üzere doğal kaynaklarının mevcudiyeti; AKP rejiminin meşruiyetine yönelik tehditler ve toplumun etnik-dini bütünlüğüne yönelik tehditler. Bu paradigma ışığında makale, ABD ve Türkiye arasında daha sağlam bir ortaklık kurulması için fırsatları artırabilecek önlemler önermektedir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Ulusal Güvenlik, NATO, Terörizm, Türkiye-ABD İlişkileri

### **Maliyetli Adım Adım Yaklaşım: ABD'nin PKK Politikası ve Türkiye ile İlişkiler**

*(Costly Incrementalism: U.S. PKK Policy and Relations with Türkiye)*

Richard Outzen

#### **Özet:**

Yabancı Terör Örgütü olarak tanımlanan PKK'ya yönelik ABD politikası, kırk yıl boyunca önemli ölçüde değişmiş ve bu değişim, ABD'nin eylemleri ile Türkiye'nin tepkilerinin etkileşimi temelinde belirgin bir dönemleştirmeyi yansıtmıştır. Zaman içinde Washington, Türkiye'nin PKK karşıtı operasyonlarını doğrudan müdahalede bulunmadan desteklemiş; PKK'ya karşı yürütülen mücadelenin içinde yer alarak aktif biçimde yardımcı olmuş; PKK faaliyetlerini görmezden gelmiş veya dolaylı olarak onaylamış ve hatta Suriye'de ve bölge genelinde PKK'yı doğrudan araçsallaştırarak desteklemiştir. ABD'nin PKK'ya yönelik değişen tutumu, El Kaide (AQ) ve onun uzantısı olan Irak ve Şam İslam Devleti (IŞİD) tehdidinin ABD'nin Ortadoğu politikasının merkezine oturduğu döneme denk gelmiştir. Bu süreç, ABD-Türkiye ilişkilerini ve bölgedeki diğer konuları AQ/IŞİD'e karşı yürütülen mücadeleye tabi kılan kademeli bir yaklaşımı temsil etmektedir. İkili işbirliği, bu yaklaşım, düşük güven düzeyi ve "al-ver" mantığının ilişkiye hâkim olmasıyla zarar görmüştür. Bu makale, ABD'nin PKK politikasının tarihini, mevcut dinamiklerini ve gelecekteki muhtemel seyrini, ABD-Türkiye ikili ilişkileri bağlamında ele almaktadır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Ulusal güvenlik, NATO, Terörizm, Amerikan Dış Politikası, Türk-Amerikan İlişkileri

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## Ortadoğu’da Türkiye ve ABD: İttifak Değişimi İçin Bir Vaka Analizi

*(Turkey and the US in the Middle East: A Case for Alliance Change)*

Meliha Altunışık

### Özet:

Türkiye-ABD ilişkileri, Ortadoğu bağlamında son yıllarda önemli ölçüde değişim göstermiştir. Soğuk Savaş döneminde ortak tehdit algıları ve stratejik bakış açıları üzerine inşa edilen bu uyum, 1991 Körfez Savaşı’nın ardından belirli konularda yaşanan farklılaşmalarla belirginleşmiştir. Son dönemde ikili ilişkiler, Ortadoğu’da zaman zaman düşmanca bir görünüme bürünmüştür. Türkiye’nin artan bölgesel hedefleri ve gelişen tehdit algıları — ontolojik güvenlik çerçevesinde ele alınarak — ikili bağları zorlamaktadır. Bu dönüşüm, her iki ülkede yaşanan iç siyasi değişimlerden kaynaklanan farklı dünya görüşleriyle daha da karmaşık hale gelmektedir. Tüm bu zorluklara karşın, NATO içindeki ittifak varlığını sürdürmekte; ancak dış baskılar ve iç dinamiklerin etkileşimi nedeniyle çelişkili bir görünüme sahiptir. Bu makale, Neoklasik Realist bir yaklaşım kullanarak, Ankara’nın değişen tehdit algıları ve ontolojik güvenlik kaygılarının küresel ve bölgesel dönüşümler ışığında Türkiye-ABD ilişkilerini Ortadoğu’da nasıl yeniden şekillendirdiğini incelemektedir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Türkiye-ABD ilişkileri, Orta Doğu, Neoklasik Realizm, İttifak Değişimi, Tehdit Algıları

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## ABD ve Türkiye Dış Politikasının Kurumsuzlaşması: Toplumsal Bağların İkili İlişkilerde Neden Bir Çapa Olduğu

*(The Deinstitutionalization of U.S. and Turkish Foreign Policy: Why Societal Ties Are an Anchor in Bilateral Relations)*

Andrew O’Donohue

### Özet:

Bu makale, ABD-Türkiye ilişkilerinde artan dalgalanmaya dair bir iç kurumsal açıklama sunarak, toplumsal bağları ikili ilişkilerde bir “çapa” olarak kavramsallaştırmaktadır. Böylelikle, ABD-Türkiye ilişkilerindeki değişimi yalnızca uluslararası ya da bireysel faktörlerle açıklayan ve ikili ilişkilerin bütünüyle karamsar bir tablo çizdiğini savunan yerleşik yaklaşımlara meydan okumaktadır. Buna karşılık, makale iki bağlantılı argüman öne sürmektedir. İlk olarak, 2016’dan itibaren ABD-Türkiye ilişkilerindeki istikrarsızlığın temel nedenlerinden birinin, her iki ülkede de dış politika yapım süreçlerinde yaşanan kurumsuzlaşma olduğu iddia edilmektedir. ABD’de kurumsuzlaşma, popülizmin yükselişiyle güçlenen dış politika konusundaki kutuplaşmadan kaynaklanırken; Türkiye’de ise karar verme gücünün Cumhurbaşkanı Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’ın elinde yoğunlaşmasıyla dış politika “kişiselleşme” yoluyla kurumsuzlaşmaktadır. İkinci olarak, bu kurumsuzlaşma ortamında, ABD ve Türkiye arasındaki toplumsal bağların ikili işbirliğinin istikrarlı ve uzun ömürlü bir alanını temsil ettiği gösterilmektedir. Bu iddia, iki alana ilişkin bulgularla desteklenmektedir: (1) sivil toplum ve medya, (2) yükseköğrenim. Toplumsal bağların, iç ve dış politikadan büyük ölçüde bağımsız kalabildikleri için dayanıklı oldukları savunulmaktadır. Dolayısıyla,

bu toplumsal ilişkiler, devletlerarası ilişkileri kökten dönüştüren aktörler olmaktan ziyade, iki ülkenin bütünüyle uzaklaşmasını engelleyen birer “çapa” işlevi görmektedir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Dış Politika Analizi, Bürokratik Siyaset, ABD Dış Politikası, Türk Dış Politikası, Siyasi Kutuplaşma, Sivil Toplum, Medya, Yükseköğretim

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### **Türk Kamuoyunun ABD’ye Yönelik Tutumlarının Çok Boyutlu Bir Değerlendirmesi** (*A Multi-Dimensional Evaluation of Turkish Public Opinion towards the United States*)

Efe Tokdemir, Melike Metintaş, Seçkin Köstem

#### **Özet:**

Türkiye-ABD ilişkileri çok yönlü bir nitelik sergilemekte ve tarih boyunca inişli çıkışlı dönemlere tanıklık etmiştir. Türkiye’nin ABD ile ilişkileri ve bu ülkeye yönelik dış politikası, halk tarafından yakından takip edilmiş ve zaman içerisinde Türk kamuoyunda ABD’ye dair farklı bakış açıları şekillenmiştir. Bu makale, Türk kamuoyunun ABD’ye yönelik tutumlarını etkileyen çeşitli faktörleri incelemektedir. Daha önceki çalışmalar çoğunlukla kamuoyunu “talep tarafı” çerçevesinde ele alarak, halkın hangi özelliklerinin diğer ülkelere yönelik davranışlarını öngördüğünü analiz etmiştir. Ancak bu çalışmada, tam olarak ABD’ye dair hangi unsurların halk tarafından beğenilip beğenilmediği incelenmektedir. Bu makalenin temel araştırma sorusu, “Türkiye’deki bireylerin ABD’ye yönelik dış politika tutumlarındaki farklılıkları belirleyen etmenler nelerdir?” şeklindedir. Bu soruya, 2021 yılında yapılan anket verilerini kullanarak yanıt vermekte ve Türk halkının ABD’ye yönelik olumlu ya da olumsuz tutumlarının ardındaki ekonomik, güvenlik ve siyasi nedenleri ortaya koymayı hedeflemekteyiz. Bulgular, katılımcıların ABD ve Türkiye arasındaki ilişkilere ilişkin farklı boyutlardan etkilendiğini göstermektedir. Katılımcıların demografik özellikleri ile siyasi ve dış politika tutumları, bu çeşitli boyutlar hakkında farklı değerlendirmelere yol açmaktadır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Tutumlar, Dış Politika, Kamuoyu, Türkiye, ABD

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### **Fırtınadaki İttifak: Yumuşama Döneminde Türk Parlamentosunda ABD’nin Jeopolitik Temsili**

(*The Alliance in the Storm: Geopolitical Representation of the United States in the Turkish Parliament during Détente*)

Ayşe Ömür Atmaca

#### **Özet:**

Bu makale, 1960’lar ve 1970’lerde, Kıbrıs meselesi, haşhaş ekimi sorunu ve ABD’nin Türkiye’ye uyguladığı silah ambargosu gibi iki ülke arasındaki derin krizler bağlamında, Türk siyasi söyleminde ABD’nin jeopolitik temsiliyetinin nasıl değiştiğini incelemektedir. Eleştirel jeopolitik kuramı çerçevesinde “jeopolitik temsil” kavramını kullanan makale, Türkiye siyasi hayatında ABD’nin jeopolitik konumlandırılmasındaki dönüşümleri “pratik jeopolitik” yaklaşımı aracılığıyla analiz etmektedir. Bu amaçla, 1964-1979 yılları arasında Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi’nde iktidar ve muhalefet partileri ile hükümet üyelerinin özellikle

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dış politika bağlamında yaptığı tartışmalar, konuşmalar ve yazışmalar değerlendirilmiştir. Makalede, 1950’lerde Türkiye ile ABD arasındaki ittifak ve Türkiye’nin NATO üyeliğinin ülkenin egemenliğinin önemli bir sembolü olarak görülüp güçlü destek aldığı, ancak 1960’lar ve 1970’lerde Türkiye’nin “stratejik ortağı” ABD ile yaşanan gerilimlerin TBMM’deki anlatıda belirgin değişimlere yol açtığı savunulmaktadır. NATO ve ABD karşıtı söylemin öncülüğünü üstlenen Türkiye İşçi Partisi (TİP), bu tartışmaların şekillenmesinde önemli bir rol oynamıştır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Eleştirel Jeopolitik, Kıbrıs Sorunu, Yumuşama Dönemi, Türk-Amerikan İlişkileri, ABD Silah Ambargosu

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**Çapa Nerede? 1927–2024 Arası Amerikan-Türk Ortaklığının Sürekliliğini Açıklamak**  
*(Where is the Anchor? Explaining the Endurance of the American-Turkish Partnership, 1927–2024)*

Onur Erpul ve Kemal Kirişçi

**Özet:**

Bir dönem “model ortaklık” olarak kabul edilen Amerikan-Türk ilişkisi, bugün akademisyenler ve politika yapıcılar nezdinde tereddütle karşılanmakta ve ilişkilerin dayandığı temel çıkarlar ve varsayımlar yeniden sorgulanmaktadır. İlişkilerdeki olumsuz gidişatın çoğunlukla jeostratejik ve değer temelli uyumsuzlıklardan kaynaklandığı ileri sürülse de, bu yaklaşımları ilişkilerin tüm tarihsel dönemlerini kapsayacak şekilde inceleyen çalışmalar nispeten azdır. Bu makale, Amerikan-Türk ilişkilerine dair kapsayıcı bir kuram geliştirmeyi amaçlamamakta; bunun yerine, stratejik, düşünsel (ideational) ve siyasal yapısal faktörlerin, ortaklığın farklı dönemlerdeki bütünlüğünü nasıl şekillendirdiğini gösteren bir çerçeve sunmaktadır. Genel olarak makale, başka ortak paydaların eksik olduğu koşullarda dahi, seçkinlerin ve kurumların bu ilişkide “çapa” işlevi görerek ortaklığı ayakta tutmaktaki olumlu rolüne dikkat çekmektedir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Türk-Amerikan İlişkileri, Dış Politika, İttifak Politikaları, Elitler

